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Courbet's Dirty Feet: The Underside of Modernism

A Thesis Presented

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Abstract of the Thesis

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There is an insistent streak of mud on the foot of the maidservant in Gustave Courbet's *Bather* of 1853. Stubborn, visceral, material, the mud-stained foot draws the logic of the scenario into question. The woman still has one sock on, making this bare foot an aberration, seemingly unveiled solely to present the tactile collision of flesh and filth. Courbet emphasizes the material experience of country life, the sensory performance of daily activities, the intrusion of the bare facts of the physical world into even those instances when we attempt to cleanse ourselves of them – moments of bathing, or art.

I suggest that Courbet's bodily engagement with painting, pushing at the bounds of its sensory potential and the material weight of its affect, is a key site of both Courbet's revolutionary status and his continued appeal. This contention challenges our current definition of Realism as a reflection of social fact and looks to reexamine the Realist propensity to filth as noted by nineteenth century viewers. The relationship between lowly subject matter and brute language is a driving force in the re-evaluation of Courbet's work, and opens other nineteenth century artists to the same line of questioning.

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He felt himself in his whole body dragged – in his whole body, do you understand? – dragged toward the material world that surrounded him, fleshy women and powerful men, fields abundant and plentifully fertile. Thick-set and vigorous, he had the rugged desire to clasp true life in his arms, he wanted to paint in a meat and potatoes way.
- Zola, *Mes Haines*, Paris, 1898¹

There is an insistent streak of mud on the foot of the maidservant in Gustave Courbet's *Bather* of 1853. Stubborn, visceral, material, the mud-stained foot draws the logic of the scenario into question. The woman still has one sock on, making this bare foot an aberration, seemingly unveiled solely to present the tactile collision of flesh and filth. Courbet emphasizes the material experience of country life, the sensory performance of daily activities, the intrusion of the bare facts of the physical world into even those instances when we attempt to cleanse ourselves of them – moments of bathing, or art.

The bare facts of the physical world erupt again in a caricature by Cham, critiquing Realism. Dirty feet are Realism's "final limit," grounded, heavy, and meaningless. This caricature solidifies the rhetoric that surrounded Realist artists, who shocked Paris with their inappropriate subject matter: Victor Hugo had his sewers; Emile Zola wrote of the belly of Paris; Flaubert found in bodily refuse an opportunity to *épater le bourgeois*, explicitly demanding that artists "let diarrhea drip into your boots, piss out of the window, shout out 'shit,' defecate in full view, fart hard... belch in people's faces;"² Baudelaire spoke of spleen and losing his halo

¹ Emile Zola, *Mes Haines*, Paris, 1898, cited in Bernard Goldman, "Realist Iconography: Intent and Criticism," *Journal of Aesthetics*, (Cleveland: December 1959), 187.

² Flaubert, *Correspondences*, 1:97, cited in Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), 219.

in the gutters of the city. This tendency, an under examined characteristic of those figures loosely gathered under the term Realism, deserves greater attention.

The turn to feet takes us to the bottom of some pressing issues in Courbet studies. Why are we still so interested in Courbet? How can we speak of our inexplicable attraction to his work, long after its social and political relevance has faded? On what terms might we account for the vibrant, diverse reactions he continues to generate? I suggest that his bodily engagement with painting, pushing at the bounds of its sensory potential and the material weight of its affect, is a key site of both Courbet's revolutionary status and his continued appeal. This contention challenges our current definition of Realism as a reflection of social fact and looks to reexamine the Realist propensity to filth as noted by nineteenth century viewers. The relationship between lowly subject matter and brute language is a driving force in the re-evaluation of Courbet's work, and opens other nineteenth century artists to the same line of questioning.

Examining Courbet's painting as bodily, weighty and dense requires both historical and theoretical contextualization, and I draw on both nineteenth century sources and recent philosophy accordingly. Part I examines contemporary criticism of Courbet as manifest in caricature, and the role of the senses – smell in particular - in modernity. Part II begins to examine the philosophical significance of the conclusions of Part I, drawing on French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas in turn provokes juxtaposition with Rimbaud, another figure who turned to the low in his quest for sensory extremes. Between Courbet and Rimbaud, however, stretches the gap between painting and literature, and a second philosopher will be

introduced to contend with the particularities of paint. In Part III, Gilles Deleuze's *Logic of Sensation*, inspired by Francis Bacon's painting, is employed to examine the mechanism of sensation Courbet's work employs. The thesis ends with a comparison between Courbet and Francis Bacon, a jarring pairing that demands we discard our previous conception of Courbet and consider him anew, in the darkness of the underside of modernism.

PART I.

The origin of this study is the realization that we have overlooked a crucial aspect of Courbet's painting – that of its peculiar “stench,” as noted by his contemporaries. The rupture between Realism as an objective discourse of sincerity and Courbet's painting as a site of bodily resistance is visible in two caricatures by Cham from 1853. Looking to caricature to re-examine Courbet's reception in his time has some significant benefits. Caricature's popularity rose dramatically with the invention of lithography, and it became a crucial part of nineteenth-century Parisians' cultural currency. Caricature journals distributed daily commentary on politics in a manner that was affordable and accessible to the masses. Caricaturists, in establishing their status amongst great men of letters, recognized the need to engage with the art of their era in order to establish taste and put forth an aesthetic program. Like the famous and reputable men who wrote for large newspapers, caricaturists ‘wrote’ Salons in which they worked out their theories on art and

asserted their preferences.³ Bertall sketched the first *Salon de Caricatures* in 1843 (Figure 3), and the trend soon spread, growing to cover every Salon thereafter. These Salons were doubly favorable to caricaturists, as “a painter of original ideas, introducing new methods and recording a strongly personal vision, almost inevitably meets with ridicule and dislike from a conventional public and he is the best game in the world for the caricaturist, who belongs to his professional family and feels at home with his subject.”⁴ More so than the man of letters, caricaturists were intimately connected to the artist – particularly the modern artist, with his obsession with contemporaneity, particularity, swiftness and temperament. They were able to grasp precisely those aspects of an artist’s work that disturbed the “conventional public,” and to supply the public with the tools with which to mock the artist himself. Courbet was a frequent target, as he unquestionably challenged the conventional public. In contrast to the smooth, legible paintings of the Academy, Courbet offered dark, dense canvases, disjointed compositions and ambiguous meanings.

Courbet had a deep-seated engagement with the media and made constant attempts to gain the attention of the press. His exploits, and their publication, propelled him to celebrity status, and justified his self-nomination as the “most arrogant man in France.”⁵ In pursuit of such status and renown, Courbet gave a *carte blanche* to caricaturists, who were at the time required by censorship laws to

³ Charles Léger, *Courbet, Selon les caricatures et les images*. Paris: P. Rosenberg, 1920, 2.

⁴ “Courbet in Caricature,” Review of Léger’s *Courbet, Selon les caricatures et les images*, *New York Times*, The World of Art, 1920.

⁵ Petra Chu outlines Courbet’s path to fame in *The Most Arrogant Man in France Gustave Courbet and the Nineteenth-Century Media Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

receive permission from their subject before publishing a *charge*. In 1867, Courbet stated “I have always found it supremely ridiculous to be asked to authorize publication of my portrait in whatever way it may be. My mask belongs to everyone. That is why I authorize Le Hanne-ton to publish it, but on the condition that they do not neglect to frame it with a fine halo.”⁶ Courbet’s ostensible arrogance, his eccentricity, and his novelty made him the target of endless caricaturization. These caricatures frequently referenced his socialist tendencies, his boisterous nature, and his Realist associations. Only recently have the specific bodily connotations of Courbet’s image and oeuvre, the connotations that are driving this study, begun to gain attention.⁷ Scholars of Realism have often been drawn to its insight into social conditions, relying on assumptions of authenticity and sincerity.⁸ These biases have neutralized Courbet’s physical engagement with the medium, glossing over the messy qualities of his painting. Whether intentional on Courbet’s part or perceived by the bourgeois, caricatures reveal that for the nineteenth-century viewer, Courbet’s works were often corporeal, invoking an embodied reality that contemporary Parisians were trying to escape.

Disclosing this corporeality are the two above-mentioned caricatures from 1853 by Cham, published in Charles Philpon’s *Le Charivari*. Cham focused for forty years on contemporary ephemera ranging from sartorial fads to his mockeries of

⁶ Cited by Chu, *The Most Arrogant Man in France*, 34.

⁷ See, for example, the unpublished work of Frederique Desbuissons on Courbet and beer, presented in February 2008 at New York University.

⁸ The preeminent study of Realism, Linda Nochlin’s 1971 volume, draws generously on Eric Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1953), a work of literary scholarship that traces a lengthy history of attempts at objective renderings of contemporary society. Nochlin consequently seeks out similar patterns in Realist painting. This conflation of literary and visual Realism has pushed the particularities of paint out of sight.

art, building an extensive visual vocabulary and becoming increasingly perceptive to contemporary tastes. *Caricature of The Spinner* from *Le Charivari*, May 29, 1853 (Figure 4), depicts a bourgeois response to Courbet's sleeping figure. Top-hatted salon-goers stand before Courbet's painting, intimated by a series of hatch marks that place primary emphasis on the disheveled young female worker. Pressed up against the work, suggesting proximal encounters with paintings that extend beyond vision, a bourgeois man and his female companion are forced to plug their haughty noses. A third male figure cowers in the corner of the print, head down, insulating himself from the odor. The caption reads, ironically, "The stench of this village girl proves to us that uncleanliness is not as dangerous to the health as is generally believed in society."

The second caricature of interest is *A Gentleman Asphyxiated by Gustave Courbet's Palette* from *Le Charivari*, June 19, 1853 (Figure 5). A lifeless man, splayed across the floor of Courbet's studio, bisects the image. Courbet is depicted painting in a darkened, blurred corner of the background, and his palette figures prominently in the front. The caption here reads, "A man, having had the imprudence to enter, without precaution, the studio of M. Courbet, was asphyxiated by his palette." The asphyxiation is the result of stench, that villainous and invisible poison that Courbet has been spreading with his thick impasto and dark and murky palette.

This perplexing commentary has had little effect on contemporary Courbet scholarship. In their survey of caricatural critiques of Courbet, art historians Thomas Schlessler and Bertrand Tillier dismiss this commentary as merely the result of "caricaturists exploiting the multi-sensory nature of realism in order to laugh at

it.”⁹ This reductive analysis disregards the highly charged role of smell in nineteenth-century France. Unraveling the particular connotations of smell reveals a complex and nuanced attack on Courbet’s painting. The caricatures are the most visible example of a larger attempt to address the discomfort Courbet’s work continues to provoke. The impulse to ground the “multi-sensory nature” – or, as I will later argue, the sensory extremity – of Courbet’s art in a single sense parallels our scholarly desire to master his work and to capture in a conceptual way the destabilizing experience he generates.

When Courbet arrived from his province in 1839, Paris was in the midst of modernization, working to build an architecturally stratified society with polished streets above and clean sewage below. This cleaning up is often discussed in relation to the increasing visiocentrism of modernity and the changes to Paris are couched in terms of what was visually seen and recorded. The focus on a single sense, however, gives an incomplete and distorted picture of modernization. Modernity was an embodied affair, even as it sought to negate the presence of the body. French authorities worked to overhaul their citizens’ physical relationship to the world, including the way it smelled and how those smells were read. There was a large administrative move to tame any bodily disruptions, and miasmatic odors were the target of fervent scientific investigation. Class biases swayed evidentiary support, leading to loosely evidenced conclusions. It was generally – and usually falsely – assumed that the air surrounding a poor man or a coquettish woman was highly

⁹ Thomas Schlessler, and Bertrand Tillier. *Courbet face à la caricature Le chahut par l'image*, (Paris: Kimé, 2007), 18.

contagious.¹⁰ The “olfactory revolution,” so named by historian Alain Corbin, summarizes the phenomenon by which stench came to play a defining role in the structure and organization of society.¹¹ Smell would serve as a marker of identity and class, and attempts were made to organize the unruly sense into a systematic order.

It was fashionable to despise odor, as we see humorously presented in a caricature of a literal “pince-nez” (Figure 6). Cleanliness verified a bourgeois’ identity the way the dandy’s constantly updated costume confirmed his. The rejection of odor, rather than being part of a universal evolution, was a contrived system, an ideology of hieratic smell. As Corbin understands, “Abhorrence of smells produces its own form of social power. Foul smelling rubbish appears to threaten the social order, whereas the reassuring victory of the hygienic and the fragrant promises to buttress its stability.”¹² Dissenters serve to prove this point. During a period of exceptional foul smell – either constructed or actual – one contemporary Parisian noted, “Without contesting the odors’ unpleasant existence, it seems to me that there has certainly been a healthy dose of exaggeration in the complaints aroused by these infamous odors. It has become, like so many things in Paris, a veritable fashion, and he who fails to hold his nose when passing near a sewer manhole, which happens to be perfectly odorless, shows in the eyes of many people

¹⁰ See David S. Barnes, *The Great Stink of Paris and the Nineteenth-Century Struggle against Filth and Germs*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

¹¹ Corbin, Alain, *The foul and the fragrant: odor and the French social imagination*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986).

¹² Corbin, 3.

an absolute lack of decorum.”¹³ Smell traversed an uncertain boundary between fact and fiction, infiltrating the public *imaginaire* with illusions of scientifically based class determinism, illusions that the administration worked to perpetuate.

Efforts to purge smell from Paris came in both large scale and individual formats. The project of deodorizing the city became the project of modernity. To assure the “victory of the hygienic and the fragrant,” chlorine buckets were dispersed throughout the *arrondissements* and new public bathing houses worked to target localized odors. The large-scale renovation of the sewers proposed under Baron Haussmann aimed to change the flow of odorous excrement throughout the city, forcing it to subsume to modern regime and order. The British sanitary engineer Chadwick said to Napoleon III: “Sir, it was said of Augustus that he found Rome brick and left it marble. May it be said of you that you found Paris stinking and left it sweet.”¹⁴ The renovations of the second half of the nineteenth century concerned social structure more so than architectural, and, according to Barnes, “what emerged from the Second Empire was not so much a capital city physically transformed as an ideology of transformation that held out the prospect of a chaotic, filthy environment ordered and cleansed.”¹⁵ What Haussmann and his era did best was to instill a desire for sanitation, to verify emerging ideology, and to solidify a hierarchy of hygiene that would ensure separation between the bourgeois and lower classes, both physically and metaphorically. In *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes*, Louis Chevalier notably observes: “The respectable Parisian

¹³ Barnes, 248.

¹⁴ From *Le Figaro*, cited in Barnes, 50.

¹⁵ Barnes, 51.

bourgeois in the nineteenth century felt besieged by a filthy, sickly, disgusting army of criminals and vagrants, who represented as much a threat of bodily as of political harm.”¹⁶ Stench was an efficient way to target those who were unwelcome in the new city and to provide a seemingly objective reason for their removal.

While smell was being employed in an attempt to demarcate class boundaries, its danger lay in its very transience, mobility, and inability to be contained. The source of a smell is not always clear. It does not always lead directly to an object (or a person, as the case was); it is an unreliable signifier. Smell moves, creeps, wafts, returns. Smells are inexplicable, their effects immeasurable. They can sneak up on us, unaware, overcome us and affect our mood, or our health, without our being able to identify any rational cause. Accusing Courbet’s paintings of *smelling* bespoke their bodily presence. They affected viewers in a physical way, engaging them in a sensory experience beyond their control. At the time, smell was the foulest sensation, the sense that stood in for the criminals and vagrants who roamed beneath the wide boulevards of Paris. Smell was a metonymic marker for rebellion, for all that was dangerous to the new order. Despite the barriers Hausmann and his era worked to construct, smell remained untamable. Courbet was a pungent example.

The “vulgar painter” and his “dirty colors,” as Théophile Gautier referred to them, made a stink all over Paris.¹⁷ In the complaints book of the 1855 exhibition an anonymous and sanitary bourgeois wittily remarked: “Please, M. Courbet, be so

¹⁶ Chevalier, Louis. *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes In Paris During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: H. Fertig, 1973), 342.

¹⁷ Cited by T.J. Clark in *Image of the people; Gustave Courbet and the second French Republic, 1848-1851*, (Greenwich, Conn: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 149.

good as to patch the shirts and wash the feet of your stonebreakers. Signed, Clean and Fastidious.”¹⁸ Critics went even further in emphasizing the abjection they saw (or smelled) in the artist. In 1871, Alexander Dumas demanded:

From what fabulous crossing of a slug with a peacock, from what genital antitheses, from what sebaceous oozing can have been generated, for instance, this thing called Courbet? Under what gardener’s cloche, with the help of what manure, as a result of what mixture of wine, beer, corrosive mucus and flatulent edema can have grown this sonorous and hairy pumpkin, this aesthetic belly, this imbecilic and impotent incarnation of the self?¹⁹

Dumas emphasizes the *inhumanity* of Courbet, his insistent presence as something other, some hybrid *thing* composed entirely of abjection. There was a kind of *terror* in Courbet’s canvases, the potential for aesthetics to reach out beyond the frame. Socialist politics was one way the power of his painting was put to work. But on a more base level, there is something in the brute force of Courbet’s paint, the sheer weight of his presence, that terrifies. Caricaturists acutely felt this terror in Courbet’s time, and the horror evoked by Courbet’s materiality was recast in the language of smell.

For denizens of Paris, Courbet’s provincial origins inevitably inscribed him in mire. The urban elite deemed provincial filth the most difficult to wash out. In a region where proverbs proclaimed, “the dirtier children are, the healthier they are,”²⁰ one had to be especially wary of miasma. Barnes notes that, “the rural ethos of letting nothing go to waste and the embrace of animal excrement as a vital element in the organic cycle collided head on with the newer, urbane code of

¹⁸ Cited by Clark, *ibid*, 204.

¹⁹ Alexander Dumas the younger, “Lettre sur les choses du jour,” 6 June 1871, cited in Clark, *ibid*, 187.

²⁰ Corbin, 218.

hygienic containment and separation.”²¹ Viewed as a condition of their poverty and lack of education, the civilized urbanites sought to enlighten those outside of Paris, sending in specialists in sanitation whose effects included relocating burial grounds away from urban spaces. *A Burial at Ornans*, of 1849-50, set in one of the new, sanitary burial grounds, demonstrates Courbet’s awareness of these authoritative moves. While much scholarship has been dedicated to the question of *who* is being buried, few have considered the implications of *where* the burial is taking place.

Claudette R. Mainzer has noted the effects of the problematic relocation of the cemetery in Ornans. In an essay entitled “Who Is Buried at Ornans,” she regards *Burial* and other of Courbet’s works between 1848 and 1850 as a form of “personal history painting” that “serves as a pictorial record of Franche-Comtois life and traditions.”²² The *Burial* also serves as a record of precisely those traditions that were being disrupted by the innovations in sanitation. Mainzer sufficiently establishes the “who” of the burial as Claude-Etienne Teste, the first citizen to be buried in the new cemetery and Courbet’s great-uncle by marriage. Ornans had been particularly reluctant to move their burial grounds, resisting it in a formal petition in June of 1821 and protesting on religious and historical grounds. The cemetery had been in the same site since antiquity, and it took thirty-three years before the town relented and relocated it.²³ The presumed possibility of moving a cemetery at all depended on a redefined conception of the body as fundamentally distinct from

²¹ Barnes, 248.

²² Claudette R. Mainzer, “Who Is Buried at Ornans?,” in Font-Réaulx, Dominique de, Tas Skorupa, and Gustave Courbe, *Gustave Courbet: [this catalogue is published in conjunction with the Exhibition Gustave Courbet, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, February 27 - May 18, 2008]*, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 77. Referred to as “Met Catalogue” hereafter.

²³ *Ibid*, 78.

the very earth in which it decomposed. An organic notion of unity with the land, during and after life, was being supplanted by an illusory separateness, a perceived totality that could be unearthed and relocated to cleaner grounds. Tearing apart human and land, flesh and filth, the authorities worked to deny our base, bodily existence as *matter*. Courbet chose to represent a moment of apparent triumph by the authorities, but the uproar caused by *Burial's* reception in Paris proves what a Pyrrhic victory it was. As Courbet declared to his supporter and patron Alfred Bruyas, "The *Burial*... was my beginning and my statement of principles."²⁴ The principles represented in *Burial* were painted as a reaction to enforced cleanliness. While the new grounds were designed to give clarity, rationality and organization to death, Courbet's painting works to negate these very concepts.

Although the placement of the majority of the figures along a horizontal axis suggests a left-to-right reading, as if a story might emerge out of the passage of our gaze, Courbet's composition resists any smooth interpretation. As James Rubin notes, the moment of Courbet's painting acts as a "non-moment," a point outside narrative where actions do not give way to meaning.²⁵ He cites the bewildered look of the altar boy, who turns away from the direction of the procession. This boy's confusion disrupts the movement of the composition, diverting attention away from the filing procession on the right or the grave in the center. Rubin also notes the inept role of the crucifix in the upper left of the canvas. Hovering above the plane of vision without prestige, it is an idol out of place, echoed in opposition by the dog on

²⁴ Courbet, Gustave, and Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 132.

²⁵ Rubin, James Henry, *Courbet*. (London: Phaidon, 1997), 81.

the lower right. Compositionally puzzling, the canvas lacks focus or sense, a criticism that is usually regarded as a consequence of Courbet's employment of sources from popular imagery. The paint is thick, denying illusion. Critics would refer to it as childlike, as the sketchy suggestions of heavy forms lacked the visual sophistication they were accustomed to.

There is a density to *Burial* that makes it difficult to read. T.J. Clark discusses the kind of irrational, bodily materiality that Courbet employed, a materiality that acted in opposition to the sanitation the new burial grounds were intended to evoke. He recognizes the critical role of the dark ground, a choice that forced Courbet to carve out his figures rather than to project a reality onto a white canvas. Clark notes: "painting onto a dark ground is articulation, the articulation of a matter which is already accepted as present."²⁶ This is partly why Courbet's massive canvas is so heavy, so imposing. It is sheer weight, asserting its form, a factor doubled by its lack of narrative or meaning. We cannot escape these figures with an external story or citation. Locating compositional sources in popular imagery does not lessen the material force of these figures. In his excellent, earlier study *Image of the People*, Clark was hesitant about a history of art that tended toward sensation, a history of art that had previously led to troubling notions of Greenbergian purity. He insisted "so far, nineteenth century art history has usually been studied under two headings: the history of an heroic *avant-garde*, and the movement away from a literary and historical subject-matter towards an art of pure sensation. But what a bore these

²⁶ T.J. Clark, "A Bourgeois Dance of Death: Max Buchon on Courbet," *Burlington Magazine* 111 (April-May 1969): 208-12, 282-89.

two histories have become!... and one cannot help feeling that what they miss is precisely the essential. We shall... see the point of an art of pure sensation only if we put back the terror into the whole project.”²⁷ Clark, a social historian of art, resists interpretations of sensation that reaffirm a detached, “art for art’s sake” mentality. Here, with Courbet’s inexplicably thick canvas, Clark puts the terror back into the project: “by the very method of painting we feel the way in which the blackness informs and defines it. This blackness is also its terror. At this point *materiality is not neutral in Courbet. It is taken as the essential, but with a kind of horror.*”²⁸ In the social climate of Paris, materiality was a threatening force that ran counter to the opening up and airing out of modernization. In depicting that very materiality, Courbet unearthed another sense of the term, as a painterly concept. His art, in addressing social issues of filth, became deeply material.

Cham’s caricatures represent Parisian’s attempts to contend with this materiality. As a reaction to sterilization, Courbet’s dense and ambiguous work was an *infection* in the coherent and sanitary salon. In nineteenth century France, smell was being employed as a portent for infection, for criminals, vagrants and the lower orders. What sort of terror was smell foretelling in Courbet’s work? The darkness of *Burial* moves Courbet’s painting beyond our grasp, vividly demonstrating the uncontrollable aspect of art, the suggestive shadows that linger beneath the surface. Courbet’s dark ground contrasts with the illusory purity of the white canvas. It suggests that art never begins out of purity – that it is always tainted and heavy. To

²⁷ Clark, *Image of the People*, 18.

²⁸ Clark, “Bourgeois Dance of Death,” 289.

begin is to step, like the *Bather*, into muddy waters, where we grope, uncertain of what we will find and unable to bring it into the light of day. The terror bourgeois Parisians felt toward their unsanitary counterparts, the smelly vagrants, only begins to address the force of Courbet's art.

Part II.

Art history lacks the vocabulary to contend with the materiality of Courbet's painting. Entire passages and periods of his *oeuvre* have been disregarded, or reduced to social and market forces. The significance of his landscapes, in particular, has not been fully realized. Cast aside as catering to popular demand or woven into Courbet's eccentric, provincial persona, the sheer weight of his forests, without illusion or narrative, has not been appreciated. Courbet's landscapes confront us with the direct application of paint. *The Brook of the Puits-Noir*, 1855 (Figure 7), is a terrifyingly tactile terrain. Moments of carefully articulated branches pass through inexplicably dense facture, the visual weight of the spackled leaves crushing the fragile twigs. Delicate green highlights float atop the thick brown background. The scene oscillates between fields of depth and opaque, impenetrable surfaces. Passages of light simultaneously lead the eye to the background while hovering on the surface, their brightness incongruous with the darkness of the setting. There are moments when one loses the trail altogether, becoming entirely lost in a deep, inviting lacuna. Towards the center-right, a cavernous region of black pulls us into its grasp, interrupting our gaze as the rocky boulders upset the flow of the stream. Laurence des Cars, writing on the recent Courbet retrospective, comments on these

passages, places where “Courbet stripped the composition bare of any picturesque or human touch, daring to place emptiness and darkness at the center of the painting, and only concerning himself with the density of the paint, with the dark and unfathomable waters and the stratified rocks.”²⁹ The landscapes, like *Burial*, were painted on completely black backgrounds, dense and rugged.³⁰ They were borne not of nature but of paint itself, producing entirely plastic compositions. Cézanne would refer to Courbet as “a builder, a rude troweler of plaster, a crusher of colors.”³¹ His utter participation in his paintings, the corporeality of its presence, was a provocative and problematic aspect of their reception.³²

Anne Wagner proposes “the landscape paintings, with their emphasis on *effect* and *facture* – the sensorily perceived materiality of painting – to a large extent sprang from the demands of a middle-class public for a non-tendentious, unproblematic art.”³³ There is, however, something quite problematic about Courbet’s landscapes – they implicate the viewer, drawing her into their world in a visceral way. The *effect* and *facture* are not neutral. Champfleury, Courbet’s early defender, notes that his landscapes “ont la qualité suprême de l’horreur de la composition.”³⁴ The visual brutality of Courbet’s landscapes forces us to consider them aside from the soothing respites of the Barbizon school, his noted predecessors. Cézanne describes Courbet’s landscapes:

²⁹ Met Catalogue, 229.

³⁰ Ibid, 242.

³¹ Ibid, 229.

³² Klaus Herding has treated the landscapes admirably in his work on Courbet. See Herding, Klaus, *Courbet: to venture independence*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

³³ Anne Wagner, “Courbet’s Landscapes and their Market,” *Art History* 4 (December 1981), 423.

³⁴ Met Catalogue, 229.

His great contribution is the lyric entrance of nature into the painting of the nineteenth century, of the smell of wet leaves, of the mossy inner walls of the forest. The murmur of the rains, the shade of the woods, the course of the sun under the trees. The sea. And snow. He painted snow like no one else.³⁵

Cézanne highlights Courbet's entry into nature and his visceral manner of painting as unique, unprecedented aspects of the landscape. Courbet's landscapes were not easy, visual pieces designed to please the masses. They were sensory experiments in the possibility for paint to exceed itself, to build up, to take on the force of nature and to charge the viewer with that same experience. Courbet pushed paint to smell, to sing, to grip you – he painted like no one else. This particular horror, of composition, of perspective, and of paint, has not yet been described. To do so requires an aesthetics that embraces darkness, obfuscation and extreme sensibility – an aesthetics opposed to the lucid history of modernity typically imposed upon Courbet. A twentieth-century philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, offers this alternative vocabulary, a language attuned to the dense ambiguity and disconcerting sensation of Courbet's work. His work on darkness – the space of disorientation, heaviness, and brute materiality – pushes us to acknowledge aspects of Courbet's painting that have been buried beneath the rhetoric of Realism.

Levinas seriously pursues a non-epistemic value of art that most scholars have been unwilling to study. We hesitate to speak of the ineffable, preferring to accord art an almost magical status. Its inexplicable ability to affect us tends to be at odds with our need to master it. Following Baudelaire, for whom “all forms of beauty, like all possible phenomena, contain an element of the eternal and the

³⁵ Ibid, 227.

element of the transitory”³⁶ we split its beauty in two – that which we can speak of, the particular, and the enduring quality that propels us to continue to explore artists long gone. Levinas gives voice to the aspects of art that must necessarily remain ambiguous, gesturing to art’s ineffable value without according it a name, or a definition.

The nineteenth century represents the beginning of artists’ conscious turn to this ineffable value, exploiting the sensorial possibility of art’s material language to address our physical reality. Drawing frequently on nineteenth century sources, Levinas picks up on Baudelaire, Rimbaud and other early modernists’ tendencies towards the elemental, towards the darkness of what he will term the *il y a* rather than the luminous knowledge of the empirical world. He points us to the value of the underside of things, and to the value of artists who address themselves to that which is beneath the form. He gives us a new way to speak of what Courbet was doing, the space in which his art acts and the bodily reaction that it generates.

“Reality and Its Shadow,” written in 1948 for Jean Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s influential journal *Le Temps Modernes*, is Levinas’s most explicit writing on art. He describes the futility of a concept of art that yields to knowledge, asking, “Is not to interpret Mallarmé to betray him? Is not to interpret his work faithfully to suppress it? To say clearly what he says obscurely is to reveal the vanity of his obscure speech.”³⁷ Levinas privileges the *action* of speaking, rather than articulating a meaning. He prefers the movement generated by the act rather than

³⁶ Charles Baudelaire, “On the Heroism of Modern Life,” from *Salon de 1846*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1976), v 2, 57.

³⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux, (Routledge, New York: 2000), 117.

the solidifying of concepts in the “said.” This movement, an unraveling of stability, preserves the ineffable, perpetually evolving value of art while allowing us to gesture towards it.

Levinas also articulates art’s contact with the “exotic,” which will prove to be its danger. The exotic is art’s essential disengagement, the element of completion that removes a work of art from our world. In reference to “things,” which we normally claim as our own, “art makes them stand out from the world and thus extracts them from this belongingness to a subject.”³⁸ The exotic exists apart from the realm of clarity and light, art’s domain since the Enlightenment. Levinas posits instead an alternate reality for art, one that emerges when modern artists forgo an insistence on representation and turn to examining sensation itself. Painting as sensation, rather than representation, paints in the space of the *il y a*. While the Dutch still lives of the 17th century had drawn back the curtain to unveil reality, modern art, according to Levinas, is “the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow.”³⁹ This obscuring runs counter to knowledge and separates art from the intentions of its creator. The obfuscation of Courbet’s work was anathema to the Academic system of meaning, and the modern system of order.

The tension between unveiling and obscuring is the central tension in Courbet scholarship. His work simultaneously alludes to complex social and political issues while in its very structure the intensity of sensation provokes the descent of

³⁸ Levinas, *Existence and existents*, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978, 45.

³⁹ Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” 118.

the night. We are arrested before his paintings, flooded with sensation, rendered anonymous, and unable, finally, to resolve his work into knowledge.

Modern art, in its tendency to abstraction, acknowledges the separation of conceptual knowledge from art. It is consciously situated “outside the world, like the forever bygone past of ruins, like the elusive strangeness of the exotic.”⁴⁰ This exotic realm, which facile criticism preys upon, is “a depth of reality inaccessible to conceptual intelligence.”⁴¹ Art history has not had the resources to deal with this depth of reality, the exoticism of Courbet’s canvases that exists beyond our grasp. Levinas’s concept of the *il y a* opens a dialogue between art’s exoticism and our world.

Levinas suggests that the *il y a* “is like a density of the void, a murmur of silence. There is nothing, but there is being, like a field of forces.”⁴² Nothingness is never empty, for Levinas, and for Modern art. The emptying out of the canvas – the scarcity of figuration in Courbet’s landscapes, for example – still retains the heaviness of being. The gossamer folds of Morris Louis, the hazy clouds of Mark Rothko, and the sharp edges of Ellsworth Kelley similarly evoke the indefinable field of forces of the *il y a*. The *il y a* is what is inescapable, the constant stirring of irrationality that threatens our language, our order, and our selves.

The *il y a* surfaces as a moment in time – or painting – when we lose our ground, withdrawing into the inexplicable heaviness of our existence. We can feel the *il y a* in indolence – Levinas cites William James’s famous example, the *il y a*

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 59.

inserting itself between “the clear duty of getting up and the putting of the foot down off the bed.”⁴³ We feel it also when we gape before a painting, our awareness dissolved within its brushwork, the rigidity of time falling away. In the 19th century, this overflow of sensation and descent into ambiguity was best suggested by *smell*. Smell was the nineteenth century Parisian’s means of dealing with the chaos of the city and its bodily overflow, a sweeping categorization of everything that threatened order. In his own pursuit of the value of disorder, Levinas’s philosophy opens us to a reading of Courbet’s work that can begin to account for its revolutionary status, beyond social and political explanations.

The *il y a* is an essential – but inexplicable – part of our experience, a kind of nascent madness. Painting can generate an awareness of the potential for sensation at its extremes, sensation that reaches toward the pulsing nothingness of the *il y a*. The consequences of this gesture extend beyond aesthetics, pushing at the very boundaries of our existence. It cannot be taken as a coincidence that modern art, engaging with these issues of brutality, materiality and meaninglessness, emerged alongside the nineteenth century Positivist recognition of life as an inexplicable emergence in the darkness of what exists. Science and aesthetics found themselves at a mutual impasse, both frustrated by the struggle for life that remained after the death of the gods. Levinas characterizes this struggle as the relationship between existence and existents, between the field of forces of the *il y a* and humans as particular beings:

⁴³ Ibid, 13.

Already in what is called the struggle for life, over and beyond the things capable of satisfying our needs which that struggle intends to acquire, there is the objective of existence itself, bare existence, the possibility of pure and simple existence becoming an objective. This is in the struggle for life and the primacy this concept has acquired for the interpretation of life a break with the traditional conception of the relationship between what exists and its existence. This concept, supported by the development of biological science in the 19th century, has had an incalculable influence on the whole of contemporary philosophy. New life figures as the prototype of the relationship between an existent and existence. Hitherto a being was taken to have been given existence by divine decree, or to have it by virtue of its very essence; its existence thus was taken to belong to it in a natural and quasi-imperceptible fashion. The new and fundamental idea is that this belongingness is the very struggle for life.⁴⁴

When divine decree was no longer the basis for our existence, a gap opened up in the logic of humanity. The nineteenth century's scientific exploits left us vulnerable to cracks in our link to existence, and a need to reaffirm our presence as individual beings. This "struggle for life" drove developments in aesthetics that have not been accounted for. Modern art is an art of struggle, manifesting an essential tension between anonymity and particularity, between sense and non-sense, between obscurity and revelation. Reducing this tension to the battle between figuration and abstraction loses sight of its original terms, and its original terror. In taking up the possibility of sheer materiality, the formless proliferation of matter, Courbet's landscapes represent art's struggle for life in the face of modernity.

Levinas frequently drew on nineteenth century sources in his discussion. This indicates a reading of the nineteenth century, as noted above, as a moment of fissure, a splitting of our selves. The recognition of our existence as an accident led

⁴⁴ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 10.

to an inquiry into the hither side of the world, not into knowledge but into the materiality of reality as such. Levinas addresses Realist authors including Huysmans, Zola and Maupassant. Their Realism, for Levinas, lies not in any sense of objectivity, but in their quest to move beneath forms and to welcome obscurity. Levinas tells us they “do not only give, as is sometimes thought, a representation ‘faithful to’ or exceeding reality, but penetrate behind the form which light reveals into that materiality which, far from corresponding to the philosophical materialism of the authors, constitutes the dark background of existence. It makes things appear to us in a night, like the monotonous presence that bears down on us in insomnia.”⁴⁵ The critics and caricaturists who accused Courbet of stench, ugliness, and filth sensed the weight of this dark background - the underside - and the danger of being lost in it.

In modern art, Levinas finds an “attempt to preserve the exoticism in artistic reality, to banish from it that soul to which the visible forms were subjected, and to remove from represented objects their servile functions as expressions.”⁴⁶ This provides a more nuanced reading of Realism as an investigation of the external world – not to transform it into concepts, or political ideology, but to grapple with its weight and density. The turn to lowly subject matter, without precedent and without ties to external, conscious concepts, was one manner of achieving this.

A consequence of the turn to the underside of the world is the removal of the veil of truth and perception:

⁴⁵ Ibid, 54.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 48.

The movement of art consists in leaving the level of perception so as to reinstate sensation, in detaching the quality from this object reference. Instead of arriving at the object, the intention gets lost in the sensation itself, and it is this wandering about in sensation, that produces the esthetic effect.... In art sensation figures as a new element. Or better, it returns to the impersonality of elements.⁴⁷

Sensation does not yield to knowledge in a Levinasian aesthetic. Art provokes a return to the space of the *il y a*, where we wander, passive nomads lost in the elemental. Courbet's compositions often leave the viewer 'lost.' I have already discussed the ways in which the processional narrative of the *Burial* is interrupted. The eye is caught between the flux of the movement to the right and the disruption of gazes to the left. No focal point, nor any sense of perspective, provides relief. The lack of organizational clarity, and the pressing weight of the space force the viewer into the only available recess, the empty grave in the foreground. Perspective is dismantled in Courbet's *oeuvre*, composition, in Klaus Berger's words, "having gone to pieces."⁴⁸ In describing the radicality of Courbet's compositions in comparison to traditional, Academic works, Berger explains:

When we are in front of a classical painting, the more we look at the objects, the more their structure becomes simplified and reduced to a few elementary forms... Realism produces the opposite effect: the visible world is broken up into innumerable irreducible particularities, whence Courbet derived what we shall call the principle of diversified units. For him, the world is a kaleidoscope.⁴⁹

This lack of composition, so derided by Courbet's contemporaries, is what Levinas extols in modern art – its refusal to posit an illusory universal order or to impose an

⁴⁷ Ibid, 47.

⁴⁸ Klaus Berger, "Courbet in his Century," in Chu, Petra ten-Doesschate, *Courbet in Perspective*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 39.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

artificial system of meaning. In modern art, “things no longer count as elements of a universal order... fissures appear in the continuity of the universe... the particular stands out in the nakedness of its being.”⁵⁰ The rift between figures and setting, the disruption of the gaze and the lack of focal point arise as fissures in Courbet’s work, which remains grounded in “innumerable irreducible particularities.” Modern art, and Courbet in particular, force us to confront the materiality of being. As Levinas explains, “the discovery of the materiality of being is not a discovery of a new quality, but of its formless proliferation.”⁵¹ Courbet’s paintings, comprised of diversified units, mosaics of texture, and collages of figures, recall the formless proliferation of the universe, and deny an overarching structure.

Levinas, discussing modern art, tells us, “the absence of perspective is not something purely negative. It becomes an insecurity.”⁵² This insecurity is not negative – in forcing us to acknowledge the instability of our world, we feel more strongly the heaviness of our selves. With the loss of perspective in painting, we lose our place, our stable position, the x upon the floor from which the entire *di sotto in su* ceiling dissolves into a magnificent *trompe l’oeil* heaven. With Courbet, art becomes insecure – no longer a window into another world, but not a negation of the world, art wavers in the infinite throbbing of the *il y a*. “It is due just to the fact that nothing approaches, nothing comes, nothing threatens; this silence, this tranquility, this void of sensations constitutes a mute, absolutely indeterminate

⁵⁰ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 51.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 53.

menace.”⁵³ For Levinas, nothingness is always something, a menace that bears down upon a body, rendering it impersonal and anonymous. Smell was the sensation that came closest to describing this indeterminate presence – a consuming, suffocating miasma to the nineteenth century viewer. Deriving from a tradition in which painting was targeted at a single sense – vision – critics attempted to swap out one sensation for another, closer to the experience of terror in Courbet’s work. Levinas gives us the philosophical vocabulary to pursue the consequences of this terror.

The materiality of being reaches a poignant climax in a work often thought to be a self-portrait. In *The Trout* of 1872, Courbet has captured life in its last vestiges, a fleshy fish with a bulging eye caught on a line. Courbet’s hook seems to have seized life itself, but in arresting it found it to be composed of the same thick matter as the rocks upon which it rests. The painting is devoid of context – who, or what, has caught the trout is cut off. Linda Nochlin has described this work as the “sensation of dying itself.”⁵⁴ Courbet does not represent death, nor symbolize our mortality. He forcibly asserts its proliferation. The thin, barely distinguishable line between the trout and its captor can here be read as the tenuous link between an existent and existence. The line raises the trout’s head above the rocky plane, the matter with which it would otherwise merge. But the same line promises its imminent death. Art’s exoticism prevents us from ever realizing the death of the trout, but its materiality assures that we sense its weight. What remains in the image is the hither side of death. Unlike a *vanitas*, this is not the proverbial concept of death at a

⁵³ Ibid, 54.

⁵⁴ Linda Nochlin, *Realism*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 72.

remove – it is the constant presence of death in life. Unable to reduce death to a single, contained form, symbol has been replaced by sensation. Levinas describes the undoing of symbols in modern art:

In the vision of the represented object a painting has a density of its own: it is itself an object of the gaze. The consciousness of the representation lies in knowing that the object is not there. The perceived elements are not the object but are like its 'old garments', spots of colour, chunks of marble or bronze. These elements do not serve as symbols, and in the absence of the object they do not force its presence, but by their presence insist on its absence. They occupy its place fully to mark its removal, as though the represented object died, were degraded, were disincarnated in its own reflection. The painting then does not lead us beyond the given reality, but somehow to the hither side of it. It is a symbol in reverse.⁵⁵

Courbet's painting affirms the value of an art devoid of symbols. This materiality is not counter to, but is an essential part of, Courbet's Realism. Courbet recognized the relationship between materiality and reality, claiming, "painting is an essentially concrete art and can consist only of the representation of real and existing things. It is a completely physical language."⁵⁶ This is a realism in which "beings and things that collapse into their 'materiality' are terrifyingly present in their density, weight and shape."⁵⁷ In Courbet's work, form collapses under the weight of his paint. This "terrifying presence" derives from the embodied process of painting, liberated from rational order.

Frequently employing palette knives and even deigning to use his fingers, Courbet's paint, smeared and daubed across the canvas, retains the visceral quality of his gesture. Paint builds up, betraying its nature as matter, as having weight in

⁵⁵ Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," 122.

⁵⁶ Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 236.

⁵⁷ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 54.

itself. Courbet does not smooth out his lines and does not flatten out his brushwork.

Zola comments magnificently on Courbet's manner of painting:

[Courbet] felt himself in his whole body dragged – in his whole body, do you understand? – dragged toward the material world that surrounded him, fleshy women and powerful men, fields abundant and plentifully fertile. Thick-set and vigorous, he had the rugged desire to clasp true life in his arms, he wanted to paint in a meat and potatoes way.⁵⁸

“To paint in a meat and potatoes way.” The materiality of Courbet's bodily existence and his painted world converge. His body cannot be separated out, and his eye alone cannot support his painting. Levinas describes materiality as “thickness, coarseness, massivity, wretchedness. It is what has consistency, weight, is absurd, is a brute but impassive presence; it is also what is humble, bare and ugly.”⁵⁹ These are the same terms on which critics mocked Courbet: Théophile Gautier specifically accused him of “muddy colors” and a “brutal facture.”⁶⁰ Paint supplants symbolism and illusion to produce a powerful presence, a material reality that challenges our understanding of Realism.

Kenneth Clark comments, in relation to the *Baigneuse*, on this realism:

His doctrine of realism, poor stuff when put into words but magnificent when expressed in paint, was the overflow of a colossal appetite for the substantial. In so far as the popular test of reality is that which you can touch, Courbet is the archrealist whose own impulse to grab, to thump, to squeeze or to eat was so strong that it communicated itself in every stroke of his palette knife.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Emile Zola, *Mes Haines*, Paris, 1898, cited in Bernard Goldman, "Realist Iconography: Intent and Criticism," *Journal of Aesthetics*, (Cleveland: December 1959), 187.

⁵⁹ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 51.

⁶⁰ Cited in T.J. Clark, *Image of the People*, 289.

⁶¹ Kenneth Clark, "Courbet's Nudes," in Chu, Petra ten-Doesschate, *Courbet in Perspective*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 36.

Levinas gives us the vocabulary and philosophical insight to revive this alternate realism. To return to Clark's excellent words on *Burial*:

By the very method of painting we feel the way in which the blackness informs and defines it. This blackness is also its terror. At this point *materiality is not neutral in Courbet. It is taken as the essential, but with a kind of horror.*⁶²

Courbet's materiality leads to ambiguity and obfuscation. Behind or beyond the painting, there is not a higher truth – there is only the darkness of the background, the brute materiality of existence, indifferent, even in the face of death. This horror, the horror provoked by the black underpainting, locates Courbet's work in the space of the Levinasian *il y a*. With Levinas, we can now see that Courbet was engaged in a provocation that was not limited to his social and political commentary. Courbet was consciously engaged with the relationship between the struggle for life and the struggle for meaning, and with the nothingness that threatens both.

Courbet's figures do not *represent* but rather *make present* something before us – the sensation of death, in the case of *Trout*. This sensation is particular to images, as Levinas describes. It is “sensation free from all conception, that famous sensation that eludes introspection...”⁶³ The impossibility of introspection on a cognitive level is the descent of the night, the shadow art casts. The consequences of this shadow extend beyond art, disrupting the stability of our selves and our truth. Art, in denying order or mastery reaches towards a more essential truth. “The idea of a shadow or reflection to which we have appealed – of an essential doubling of reality by its image, of an ambiguity ‘on the hither side’ – extends to the light itself,

⁶² Clark, “Bourgeois Dance of Death,” 289.

⁶³ Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” 120.

to thought, to the inner life.... the discussion over the primacy of art or of nature – does art imitate nature or does natural beauty imitate art? - fails to recognize the simultaneity of truth and image.”⁶⁴ Things are never fully present; there is no singular wholeness. This truth was a terrifying ambiguity in the nineteenth century viewer’s concept of reality. The threat of this lack of clarity caused visceral discomfort in Courbet’s critics, who connected an absence of rational structure to the irrationality of the body.

Beyond the scope of rationality, art opens us to another level of engagement with our bodies. Levinas describes, “before this obscure invasion it is impossible to take shelter in oneself, to withdraw into one’s shell. One is exposed. The whole is open upon us. Instead of serving as our means of access to being, nocturnal space delivers us over to being.”⁶⁵ The thick materiality of Courbet’s paint, his lack of perspective or compositional clarity, and the denial of narrative coherence can be described as an ‘obscure invasion’ into the rational world of the salon. Contact with the *ily a* prompts an engagement with our relationship to being that we do not see in our lived reality. When the whole is upon us, we are forced to open up, to concede our secure position, while simultaneously recognizing “the inalienable possession of oneself.”⁶⁶ We cannot escape from our contract with existence, despite our lack of stability and our insecure position in the world. After facing the exoticism of art, and breaching the walls of our world, we return to our lived reality more vividly.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 122.

⁶⁵ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 54.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 15.

Levinas also finds this exoticism in Arthur Rimbaud's poetry. Born in 1854, when Courbet was on the cusp of Realism, he inherited many of the artistic tendencies Courbet had been grappling with upon his arrival in Paris. He had a keen sense of the possibilities of poetry that had been opened by his predecessors, taking up the ugliness and violence that had scandalized Paris just a few years prior. Rimbaud's later participation in the Commune – an activity that proved disastrous for Courbet – demonstrates their mutual interest in sites of resistance, in an engagement with counter-narratives and disruptive practices. As Courbet claimed "Il faut encanailler l'art," Rimbaud asserted "je m'encrapule le plus possible."

Susan Harrow discusses Rimbaud's interest in "the stubborn, messy qualities of the real, and the capacity of dirt and debris to disrupt every effort to smooth and reify the world."⁶⁷ Like Courbet's stench, Rimbaud's poetry refuses to subsume to modern order and rationality. Both artists disrupt the smoothness of the world and employ dirt to echo the thickness of their material language. Rimbaud wanted his poems to be "smelt, felt, heard."⁶⁸ He used sensory words and made his words sensible, evoking materiality on two levels.

"Venus Anadyomene" is a poem that has been noted as directly engaging with the polished, milky-smooth neo-classical nudes of Bouguereau and Cabanel, the same nudes whose pretension and falsity Courbet was challenging in his *Bather* of 1853. Rimbaud raises the fallen idol of Venus, who had been toppled by his

⁶⁷ Susan Harrow, *The material, the real, and the fractured self: subjectivity and representation from Rimbaud to Réda*, University of Toronto romance series, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 16.

⁶⁸ Arthur Rimbaud, "Letters," in *Art in theory, 1900-2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003).

predecessors, and gives forth an anti-ideal, an ideal that has been dragged through the gutter and emerges reeking, tainted, filthy. Her form, her name, CLARA VENUS, remains tethered to the world of academic tradition, but the very materiality of her body, the very words of her verse, have been infused with the repulsive underside of modernism. His words congeal, form short stanzas of sordid substance: “le tout sent un gout / horrible étrangeté.”⁶⁹ The ambiguity of Rimbaud’s signifiers and the resonance of their sounds disrupt stable meaning. This is the musical aspect of modern poetry, musical in the sense that liberates us from thought, as Levinas describes:

A word cannot be separated from meaning. But there is first the materiality of the sound that fills it, by which it can be reduced to sensation and musicality... And a word detaches itself from its objective meaning and reverts to the element of the sensible in still another way inasmuch as it is attached to a multiplicity of meanings, through the ambiguity that may affect it due to its proximity with other words. It then functions as the very movement of signifying.⁷⁰

Levinas makes clear that we cannot pin our words down, cannot tie them eternally to a singular, fully present meaning. We can never have a word in its entirety, but must contend with an oscillation between sensation and a plurality of meanings. The movement of signifying reveals the decay lurking beneath our words, behind the light, and shows how they can usurp all of our forms, all of our knowledge, all of our sacrosanct beauty. Rimbaud’s work is exemplified in this “belle hideusement” – expectations of beauty, denied by the hideous materiality of tainted flesh.

⁶⁹ Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Schmidt., *Arthur Rimbaud: complete works*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

⁷⁰ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 48.

Like Rimbaud's Venus, rising disfigured from the coffin of beauty, Courbet's bather emerges from a sullied stream. Referred to by critics as a "Hottentot Venus," she drags her feet through the muck, bracing herself with an extended arm against the heavy wall of the lush green forest. She hovers upon a boundary, the bank of the river mediating between the damp thickness of the water and the claustrophobic background of trees. If her pose was based on a photograph by Julien Vallou de Villeneuve's, as Aaron Scharf, notes, the support that made logical sense there has been removed, leaving the bather in a suspended tension between the evident weight of her proportions and the lack of visible support.⁷¹ The smooth flesh of Villeneuve's photograph proliferates in Courbet's work, building upon itself, dimpling and bulging willfully. The bather's sculpted contours echo the boulders to her immediate left, where a triangle recess in the center, with a subtle crack below, strongly echoes the overly-pronounced small of her back. Her discarded clothing, resting atop the pile of rocks, falls like the leaves from the branches above, further elaborating the similarities between woman and matter, flesh and stone. Her servant's body is also suspended in enigma, one foot covered in a tattered sock, the other bearing the filthy traces of the surroundings. One arm rests upon a tree branch, but the other falters as awkwardly as the bather's, indicating her separation from the setting. Delacroix remarked:

I was amazed at the strength and relief of [Courbet's] principal picture -- but what a picture! What a subject to choose! . . . the vulgarity and futility of the idea is what is so abominable. . . what are the two figures supposed to mean? A fat woman, back view, and completely naked

⁷¹ Sarah Faunce, Gustave Courbet, and Linda Nochlin, *Courbet reconsidered*, (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Brooklyn Museum, 1988), 37.

except for a carelessly placed rag over the lower part of the buttocks, is stepping out of a little puddle scarcely deep enough for a footbath. She is making some meaningless gesture. . . . There seems to be some exchange of thought between the two figures but it is quite unintelligible. The landscape is extraordinarily vigorous.⁷²

Delacroix's response was particularly generous, managing to appreciate the vigorous force of the painting despite its apparent meaninglessness. On the level of the "idea," the canvas remains unintelligible, but as a painting "what a picture!" The painting's vulgarity and pointlessness caused a scandal at the salon, however, where it was reluctantly accepted due to Courbet's medal-holding status – giving him a free pass to salon display. Whereas Academic nudes like Bouguereau's and Legrandin's, in Kenneth Clark's words, "glossed over the facts," Courbet's work investigates visual, painterly fact.⁷³ The tactility of the setting, the fleshiness of the body, the traces of dirt from the stream – these visual facts resist assimilation into a system of meaning. The stubborn facts of Courbet's canvas leave the figures in a perpetual state of emergence. In this work, subject matter is pulling apart from narrative, figure from ground, *painting from form*.

Contemporary critics recognized the disjointed materiality of Courbet's paint and were appalled by the *Bather*. Edmond About highlighted the disparity between the parts of the painting, the lack of unity and the refusal of Courbet's work to resolve itself into a coherent image:

She is not so much a woman as a column of flesh, a rough-hewn tree-trunk, a solid... Courbet has constructed this brawny mass with a power worth of Giorgione or Tintoretto. The most surprising thing about it is that his ponderous woman of bronze, articulated in layers

⁷² Met Catalogue, 293.

⁷³ Kenneth Clark, 36.

like a rhinoceros, has faultlessly delicate knees, ankles, and all joints in general.⁷⁴

Modern scholars have been quick to move to issues of class. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau notes, “for Courbet’s contemporaries, not the least of the provocations of the painting had to do with the inscription of class, not just on the level of narrative but on the body itself.”⁷⁵ While the body itself does come to bear the weight of rebellion in this painting, Rimbaud alerts us to another manner of employing filth that does not rely on social history.

In “Venus Anadyomene,” it is not a woman Rimbaud attacks, but the *idea* of woman, the *ideal* of woman – woman as poetry. Rimbaud attacks the poetic ideal itself, using words to pervert past words, remaining within the space of poetry. Courbet, similarly, is not commenting on an actual woman despite scholars attempts to identify the particular woman depicted, or her source in visual culture. These attempts cast Courbet’s work back into the space of knowledge, a space he resists here. He uses paint to paint over the ideal of woman that had been perpetuated in the salons of tradition. He does not paint a new woman, but reduces tradition’s ideal of woman to paint itself, showing us the ideal Venus’ essential painterliness, a painterliness that is just as applicable to a pile of stones.

In moving between thick materiality and representational clarity, Courbet engages with two levels of sensation, examining the possibilities for sensation within paint itself. Courbet tumultuously marries the mechanisms awakened in us for appreciating abstraction, discerning figuration, navigating impasto landscapes,

⁷⁴ Edmond About, cited in *Courbet Reconsidered*, 103.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 114.

and falling prey to convincingly rendered illusion. Edmond About noted the fineness of bather's joints contrasting with the ambiguity of her mass – each mode of representation calling into question the falsity of the painted image. Paint can alternately reveal, articulate, conceal and obscure. It can be, like Rimbaud's words, smelt, felt and heard. Courbet makes us aware of the possibility for sensation in painting beyond the optical. Literary scholars have linked the “messy qualities of the real” to Rimbaud's use of language. Following their example, I here seek to forge the connection between dirt and debris and the material of sensation in Courbet's painting.

There is one more thing to be said about Courbet and Rimbaud. While they were participating in the Commune, Proust was in the womb. He was born out of their strife. The extremities of sensation they unleashed would be made coherent by Proust's sublimation. Proust worked to be both artist and critic, to feel something in the shadows of existence and then draw forth that feeling, to translate a necessary truth out of the obscurity of sensation: "For the truths which the intellect apprehends directly in the world of full and unimpeded light have something less profound, less necessary than those which life communicates to us against our will in an impression which is material because it enters us through the senses but yet has a spiritual meaning which it is possible for us to extract."⁷⁶ We must leave

⁷⁶ Marcel Proust, tr. C. K. Scott-Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin and D.J. Enright, *In Search of Lost Time*, (New York: Modern Library, 2003), v 6 273.

behind the light of the world to perceive something more essential – something comprised of material sensation.⁷⁷

There is something extremely destabilizing in the kind of truth Rimbaud, Courbet and Proust offer. For Levinas, this truth constitutes an alternate reality, which art gives us access to. He explains, “Proust’s most profound teaching – if indeed poetry teaches – consists in situating the real in relation with what for ever remains other – with the other as absence and mystery.”⁷⁸ The *real* exists in the shadows, the realms inaccessible by our conceptual intelligence. Courbet forces us to venture into these shadows, where we may perceive a greater truth, but where we may also abandon the world entirely. In so doing, he opens us to the threat of art that Levinas posits in “Reality and Its Shadow.”

Art’s value, for Levinas, remains uncertain. He tells us “its value then is ambiguous, unique because it is impossible to go beyond it, because, being unable to end, it cannot go toward the *better*.”⁷⁹ Art – particularly the disorienting, exotic, modern art of Courbet – can consume us in its rhythm. “Rhythm represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away by it.”⁸⁰ James Rubin works on the musicality of Courbet’s images, making another attempt at distilling out the proliferation of sensations that erupt from his paintings. Levinas describes the possible musicality of every image. Recognizing this musicality, in Courbet’s work,

⁷⁷ This truth, the truth that emerges from the shadows, also recalls Jean-Luc Nancy’s writing on art. He describes the truth in painting as “such that its truth defies all of our discourses on truth.”

⁷⁸ Levinas, Emmanuel, “The Poet’s Vision,” in *Proper Names*, (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996), 105.

⁷⁹ Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” 118.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 119.

or in a classical statue, “is to see in an image its detachment from an object, that independence from the category of substance which the analyses of our textbooks ascribe to pure sensation not yet converted into perception (sensation as an adjective), which for empirical psychology remains a limit case, a purely hypothetical given.”⁸¹ For Levinas, the rhythmic, debilitating sensation of art constitutes its danger. Art’s exoticism lends it the possibility for escape. Its disorienting qualities tempt us to remain as passive nomads, without ground or meaning. We can become trapped in its materiality, lost in its heaviness.

When faced with the “pure sensation” of Courbet we are cast into dense anonymity, entombed in an earthen grave. Yet, although we are torn away from consciousness, something persists. Art can awaken us to our existence as bodies and connect us to the monotonous presence that underlies our selves: Levinas’s darkness. Levinas calls our attention to the revolutionary aspects of Courbet’s work, the refusal to clarify forms or give a coherent narrative, the conscious acknowledgement of paint’s physical presence, and the modern subject’s palpable struggle for ground or meaning. Invoking the *ilya* provokes a turn to the underside of modernism, the bodily reality of our relationship to painting exceeding opticality. The consequences of that relationship remain fraught for Levinas, but another philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, values painting’s ability to engage with sensory extremes and affect us on a physical level. Deleuze’s investigation into this type of sensation will contribute to an aesthetics that privileges the irresolution of paint and the material quality of Courbet’s work.

⁸¹ Ibid, 120.

PART III.

Levinas's hesitation regarding art's value can be traced back to antiquity. Plato warns of the flight of beauty, telling of the viewer who sprouts wings before a work of art and is lifted, glimpsing a higher plane of existence. This is Levinas's fear, a threat he saw countered by the Realist authors and poets of the nineteenth century – the weight of materiality in their work tugged against the luminous flight of beauty. Gilles Deleuze accords an unambiguously positive value to the heaviness of this sensation, examining moments in twentieth-century British painter Francis Bacon's work when sensation usurps our control, when it becomes inarticulate and overwhelming.

Courbet's work similarly denies the flight of beauty, grounding us firmly within his "meat and potatoes" reality. In his late still lives, paint is almost entirely given over to material sensation. His bizarre, decaying heaps of oversized apples perplex and disorient the viewer (Figure 9). Arranged in domestic clusters, they appear ridiculously out of place in the sketchy, undefined landscapes where Courbet abandons them. There is something jarring in the distinct force of each apple, their weight pressing against the muddy ground, their contours thickly outlined. Each apple is particularly present, as each mourner had been in *Burial*. Courbet is working to give us the force of *things in themselves*, not as representations, prefiguring Cézanne in meticulously building up the "appleyness of the apple." Describing his disposition at this time, Georges Riat noted:

Aujourd'hui, l'idée fixe de Courbet est de marcher, de courir, de respirer à pleine poitrine, de se vautrer dans l'herbe... Il voudrait

prendre la terre des champs à poignée, la baiser, la flairer, la mordre, donner des tapes sur le ventre des arbres, jeter des pierres dans les trous d'eau, barboter à même le ruisseau, manger, dévorer la nature.⁸²

Courbet's painting reeks of his physical desire, a desire to evoke violent sensations, to devour nature and regurgitate it before the viewer. Courbet paints the absolute banality of a pile of apples, rendered excruciating in the weight of their ordinariness. He maintains the gravity of the apples, drawing us in, consuming us in the sensation of their presence. Deleuze's careful, nuanced analysis of the mechanism of painterly sensation gives us a means to address the complexity of Courbet's composition.

In *The Logic of Sensation*, written in 1981, Deleuze uses Bacon's work to explore the dialogue between vision and sensibility and to forefront painting's potential to generate sensation at its extremes.⁸³ He is interested in painting that directly attacks the *body*, rather than passing through the intermediary of the brain. Beyond the cerebral categories of figuration and abstraction (categories which have severely limited our understanding of Modern painting) there is the Figure. As it is traditionally understood, the figure tells a story, providing an invitation to the viewer to enter into the painting and make sense of the scenario. Deleuze's Figure denies this narrative possibility. For Deleuze, the Figure is a visual fact, suspended in isolation. The Figure is not defined in relation to the ground, as it does not engage in a relationship with elements of the composition. The Figure is not necessarily a body, at least not in any recognizable sense. It is a visual element that exists entirely onto itself, without recourse to symbol, meaning or perspective. Acting directly

⁸² Cited in Met Catalogue, 420.

⁸³ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

upon the nervous system, the Figure possesses an immediacy traditionally unavailable to figurative work.⁸⁴ When a painter works with the Figure, painting sensation, “what is painted on the canvas is the body, not insofar as it is represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as sustaining *this* sensation.”⁸⁵ In the intense interdependence between painting and body, there is a breakdown of the distinction between viewer and canvas, an invasion into the subject’s stable self. This disorientation before a canvas, the disorientation Courbet’s work provokes, is the experience Levinas had described of the *il y a* and the discomfort caricaturists had addressed in their accusations of stench.

The gravitas of Courbet’s apples is this turn to the Figure. The apples defy figuration, refusing to behave as domesticated still lifes, asserting their physical presence against the indistinct background. Deleuze describes this tension between form and ground, explaining: “it is the confrontation of Figure and field, their solitary wrestling in *shallow depth*, that rips the painting away from all narrative as well as from all symbolization. When narrative or symbolic, figuration only obtains the bogus violence of the represented or the signified, but it expresses nothing of the violence of sensation - in other words, of the act of painting.”⁸⁶ For Deleuze the act of painting is always violent, a violence mediated by narrative or figuration, but felt in its full force when engaging with the Figure. This violence is not negative – like the insecurity of Levinas, it is a violence that awakens us to the permeability of our

⁸⁴ Ibid, 31.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 32.

⁸⁶ Ibid, xxxii.

selves, an intrusion illogically traversed from a distance, an uncontrollable resonance of body and paint.

Deleuze paraphrases Valéry describing sensation as “that which is transmitted directly, and avoids the detour and boredom of conveying a story.”⁸⁷ We can here consider the breakdown of narrativity in so many of Courbet’s canvases, their teetering somewhere between portraiture and genre, lacking the cohesion of the history paintings Courbet openly challenged. *Burial*, *Stonebreakers* and *After Dinner at Ornans* all provoked outrage for their unjustifiably large scale and unreadable compositions. His later works more explicitly refuse to narrate. The direct conveyance of sensory experience is made explicit in an anecdote frequently employed to characterize Courbet as unthinking and brute: he allegedly saw something at a distance, and began painting without recognizing the form. Machine-like, Courbet recorded the visual fact, only later identifying it as a bundle of fagots.⁸⁸

But Courbet did not just tacitly observe nature. To return to Cézanne’s description, his landscapes provoke a communion between body and nature that demands a multi-sensory response from the viewer:

Son grand apport, c’est l’entrée lyrique de la nature, de l’odeur des feuilles mouillées, des parois moussues de la forêt, dans la peinture due xixième siècle. Le murmure des pluies, l’ombre des bois, la marche du soleil sous les arbres. La mer. Et la neige. Il a peint la neige comme personne.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Ibid, 32.

⁸⁸ Frequently cited, see for example, Rubin, 1998.

⁸⁹ Met Catalogue, 227.

The “sea landscapes” – Courbet’s term, denying the picturesqueness of “seascape”⁹⁰ - especially insist on the sensory materiality of paint, as Cham’s caricature of 1870 suggests (Figure 11). Mocking the heavy-handedness of Courbet’s “lightweight” painting, Cham recognized the thickness of these vast, empty views. The series of waves, the Berlin version of 1969 in particular, are the foremost example. Courbet, as Klaus Herding points out, sculpted the waves with his palette knife, just as he had done with the cliffs in Ornans.⁹¹ The distinction between water and stone is collapsed, both equally present affirmations of physical sensation. There is an immediacy that transpires between palette knife and canvas that circumvents representation. Courbet’s seas consume us in a swirling vortex of forces. The disorientation provoked is mocked in another of Cham’s caricatures, describing the confusion between sea and air, the presence of waves in the sky. There is no distance, no room to gaze.

The violent energy of Courbet’s rhythmic waves engages with the invisible forces of sensation, which paint – paint as pigment, as matter, as having weight in itself - holds the power to address. We too often disregard that paint is a material substance, that flatness is not its only characteristic. In making visible what we otherwise only feel, Courbet reminds us how tactile paint can be. Before his waves, we are drenched, the sea roars in our ears, we are in awe of the deep blue of the water, we taste the salted air. This cacophony of sensation overwhelms us, addressing every part of us. Cézanne again realized this aspect of his work early on,

⁹⁰ Ibid, 229.

⁹¹ Herding, 1991.

noting: “The great Waves, the one in Berlin, is marvelous, one of the important creations of the century... its green is much wetter, the orange much dirtier, with its windswept foam, and its tide which appears to come from the depth of the ages, its tattered sky, and its pale bitterness. It hits you right in the stomach. You have to step back. The entire room feels the spray.”⁹² “It hits you right in the stomach” – there is no better way to describe the experience of Courbet’s sea, as it defies our very concepts of painting. It hits us, as his earlier works had *smelled*. The great irony of Courbet’s legacy is his participation in a modernism that mistakenly believed paintings were made for eyesight alone.

The intense, horrific canvases of Francis Bacon similarly destroy illusions of painting as a purely optical pursuit. Bacon showed Deleuze that paint can make us feel in our stomachs. With Bacon – and I would argue with Courbet – “painting gives us eyes all over: in the ear, in the stomach, in the lungs.”⁹³ This consuming presence alerts us to the unavoidably material reality of our bodies. Through painting, first seen with our eyes, we become aware that we have eyes all over. A movement, a rhythm emerges between vision and the body, a vision *of* the body. This, for Deleuze, is the redeeming possibility of painting: the ability of the painter to “*make visible* a kind of original unity of the senses... [to] make a multisensible Figure appear visually.”⁹⁴ This unity – a kind of synaesthesia – undoes the stability of our selves as viewers.

⁹² Paul Cézanne and P. M. Doran, *Conversations with Cézanne*. Documents of twentieth-century art. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 144.

⁹³ Deleuze, 45.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 37.

We cannot point out the places where Courbet addresses individual senses – the nineteenth century viewer failed when he addressed only the scent of his paintings, the twentieth when he saw only their opticality. Before his paintings, our power to discern sense is disarmed, and a different power takes over. Artistic rhythm, a rhythm that goes beyond musicality, seizes hold of us, as Levinas acknowledged. For Deleuze, this rhythm holds the power to give unity, a unity we can encounter only when “rhythm itself plunges into chaos, into the night, at the point where the differences of level are perpetually and violently mixed.”⁹⁵

Tactility, sonority, opticality, stench, even taste merge violently in Courbet. He plunges us into an abyss of sensation at its extremes where we experience an “original unity of the senses.”⁹⁶ Courbet awakens us to something throbbing on the limits of our awareness, a rhythmic pull, a troubling heaviness that cannot be broken down, rendered discrete or managed. Transcendence without escape, there is a density of being that counters the fractured nature of our selves. It seizes all of our organs, yet is made sensible by none of them. This manner of painting demands a complex interplay of our organs that reaffirms the presence of our bodies. Through our eyes, we feel an impossible desire to sense Courbet’s work at a level beyond our means. We do not possess an organ with which to properly assess the weight of his painting. Proust again describes a similar frustration, borne out of a desire for a complete sensory experience:

Man... lacks a certain number of essential organs, and notably possesses none that will serve for kissing. For this absent organ he

⁹⁵ Ibid, 39.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 88.

substitutes his lips, and thereby arrives perhaps at a slightly more satisfying result than if he were reduced to caressing the beloved with a horny tusk... Besides, at such moments, at the actual contact between flesh and flesh, the lips, even supposing them to become more expert and better endowed, could taste no better probably than the savour which nature prevents their ever actually grasping, for in that desolate zone in which they are unable to find their proper nourishment, they are alone; the sense of sight, then that of smell have long since deserted them.⁹⁷

One sense alone cannot give the satisfaction that desire seeks. But painting, paradoxically, invokes all of our senses through the complexity of its opticality. It is not eyesight alone, but eyesight first, vision unlocking our capacity to feel the painting beyond reason.

Bacon paints the deformity of overwhelming sensation, the contortions of his howling figures visually manifesting the invisible forces his painting makes us feel. Michel Leiris, writing on Bacon, emphasizes the physical reality of the desire his painting generates: "Through the agency of the figures, the spectator who approaches them with no preconceived ideas, gains direct access to an order of flesh-and-blood reality not unlike the paroxysmal experience provided in everyday life by the physical experience of love."⁹⁸ Love, a kiss, horror, a smell: sensations that refuse our reason and defy our intellect.

Deleuze notes Bacon picked up where Cézanne left off, but in many ways his work follows Courbet's. Bacon enters the discussion here as another figure who explores the visceral power of paint, a second example of this rewritten Realism of the underside. Leiris notes Bacon's exploration into "the appalling dark side of life,

⁹⁷ Marcel Proust, tr. C. K. Scott-Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin and D.J. Enright, *In Search of Lost Time*, (New York: Modern Library, 2003), v 3 498.

⁹⁸ Francis Bacon and Michel Leiris, *Francis Bacon*, (Paris: Michel, 1987), 14.

which is the reverse of its bright surface.”⁹⁹ This underside, which Courbet unearthed, holds a more authentic reality, a truth in the shadows, undeterred by rationality. Bacon and Courbet both give us a Realism of the Figure, a plastic exercise in sensation that affects us on a physical level. While figuration and abstraction both engage with light, issues of knowledge and purity, the Figure descends into a Levinasian realm of shadows, a diffuse, pungent realm. The congruence of Courbet and Bacon’s painting defies a linear history of art. The visual juxtaposition of Bacon’s *Two Figures*, 1953, and Courbet’s *Wrestlers*, 1853 has surprising resonance, the span of a century elided by a logic of sensation that denies temporality.

Courbet’s *Wrestlers*, painted in the same year as the *Bather*, was detested by his contemporaries. Deemed dirty, poorly drawn, repugnant and ugly, the work remains disturbing. There is something odd, something extremely disconcerting in the intertwined bodies of these two men, almost entirely divorced from their setting. The wrestlers struggle against one another, pushing endlessly apart yet trapped eternally together. Their bodies quiver, pulse, distort with effort, but remain firmly grounded, lending the pair a stability that defies the scene’s momentum. The pair’s features recede beneath their strain, exertion itself becoming the central focus of the composition. The spectators in the background seem to be an afterthought, sketchily filling in the rational behind the painting. Delacroix complained, “the two wrestlers are deficient in *action* and confirm [Courbet’s] inability to *invent*. The background overwhelms the figures; the canvas ought to be

⁹⁹ Ibid, 46.

cropped three feet all round.”¹⁰⁰ This commentary affirms Courbet’s wrestlers as Figures, in Deleuze’s sense. They consume us in the mere fact of their presence, embroil us in the power of their embrace, overwhelm us in the pulsing rhythm of visual sensation. The action surges from within, erupting as a physical spasm. There is an untenable tension to the pair, unmitigated by story or surrounding.

Bacon’s *Two Figures* repeats Courbet’s composition, as if it were possible to reenact an event of such extreme singularity. Two bodies intersect against a blank, gaping background. His coupled Figures, two visual facts colliding, spill over their allotted space, overflowing the narrow bed. Their forms are wrought not of illusion but of association, sketchy patches of paint creating the sensation of a body without its representation. Bacon paints in quick, evocative strokes, smearing away his forms whenever they become too clear. Friction builds up between the marks, generating a palpable energy, visually searing. The top figure’s sharply defined left leg, highlighted with a thick, black shadow, painfully contrasts with the limp, formless limbs of the bottom figure. His back arches, animal-like, as if to create a space between the two bodies – but there is no relief, only the heavy presence of indistinct flesh. This is an entirely bodily union, reaching an unbearable intensity somewhere beyond pain or pleasure, emotionally illegible, the faces tragically wiped away. There is a cavernous depth to the coupling, as if it could go on forever, the bodies becoming more and more entwined, a visual Gordian knot. If Courbet’s figures explode outward, Bacon’s collapse infinitely inward; yet both artists render the distinction between inward and outward meaningless. Both Bacon and Courbet

¹⁰⁰ Cited in Herding, 16.

create a central moment of such extreme force, such inescapable visual density, as to suggest simultaneously an infinite velocity and an intrinsic stability: a black hole, hurling through space. Their paintings devour our presence, and then spit us back out.

We can fully experience Bacon and Courbet's work only with our bodies. Letting go of perception, we give way to the overwhelming sensation paint can offer, an experience of materiality only possible in art. This is the unique, redeeming quality of painting. In addressing its pull on our embodied selves, Deleuze compares painting to music: "[Music] is lodged on lines of flight that pass through bodies, but which find their consistency elsewhere, whereas painting is lodged farther up, where the body escapes from itself. But in escaping, the body discovers the materiality of which it is composed, the pure presence of which it is made, and which it would not discover otherwise."¹⁰¹ Michael Fried has worked significantly on Courbet's corporeal entry into his work, the communion between bodily gesture and painterly mark, and the visceral materiality of his painting. Courbet *became* his painting, as Jules Troubat noted: "these marvelous sea views in which it seems that the painter so identified with nature that one could say he is a part of the elements that surround him, before he has a human form."¹⁰² It is in the land and seascapes especially where we recognize Courbet's work as a *painter*. Aside from the political and social complexities of Courbet's world, we can see his revolutionary turn to the *stuff* of painting, the messy qualities of life. As he declared: "To each his own: I am a

¹⁰¹ Deleuze, 47.

¹⁰² Met Catalogue, 272.

painter and I make paintings.”¹⁰³ Courbet calls for us to identify him with *paint*, and it is here that we find his greatest contribution.

Paint – as used by Courbet, and Bacon, paint that asserts its presence and compels us to feel with our whole bodies - forces us to confront the materiality of our existence. It puts us in touch with the stubborn facts of life, the insistent physicality of our bodies, the formless proliferation of matter that upsets our illusions. It addresses itself to a kind of death, a death that is ever-present, a death we feel before art. Courbet takes up this power, engaging directly with the terror of painting and the alterity of art’s truth. We have begun to sketch out the alternate Realism that Courbet’s painting itself – rather than the discourse surrounding it – affirms. He addresses a disconcerting social reality in Paris, the corruption of the senses, in a manner that surpasses his political affiliations or socialist subject matter. His art moves us into a reality of ambiguity and obfuscation, emphasizing the truth in shadows. The proliferation of paint on his canvas draws out the physical reality of our existence as evidenced by an extreme, disorienting event of sensation. These layers are interwoven and interdependent, mutually reinforcing each other in Courbet’s *oeuvre*. His work can now be read on its own terms, the terms Courbet was consciously engaging with as the nineteenth century struggled to define the self and to recognize the role of art. Courbet asserts – for his contemporaries and for us – the ineffable value of art, its enduring power, its continual allure. The mechanism of confrontation Courbet’s paint demands – with social reality, with uncomfortable ambiguity, and with ourselves as bodies- is its modernity. Painting itself – not the

¹⁰³ Cited in Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 77.

subject matter, but the structure, the dignity and terror of paint - is ultimately how
«*Courbet sauvant le monde.* »¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Charles Baudelaire, "Puisque réalisme il y a," *Salon de 1846*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 57.

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Appendix



Figure 1: Gustave Courbet, *Les Baigneuses*, 1853, oil on canvas, 227 x 193 cm, Montpellier, Musée Fabre.



Figure 2: Bertall, *Salon de Caricatures*, 1843.



Figure 3: Cham, *Caricature of the Spinner* from *Le Charivari*, May 29, 1853.



Figure 4: Cham, *A Gentleman Asphyxiated by Gustave Courbet's Palette* from *Le Charivari*, June 19, 1853.



Fig. 13. "On the necessity of inventing a new system of pince-nez to combat the odors of Paris." *Le Charivari*, September 20, 1880.

Figure 5: *On the necessity of inventing a new system of pince-nez* from *Le Charivari*, September 20, 1880.



Figure 6: Gustave Courbet, *Burial at Ornans*, 1849-1850, oil on canvas, 515 x 669 cm, Paris, Musée d'Orsay.



Figure 7: Gustave Courbet, *The Stream of the Puits-Noir*, 1855, oil on canvas, 104 x 138 cm, Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art.



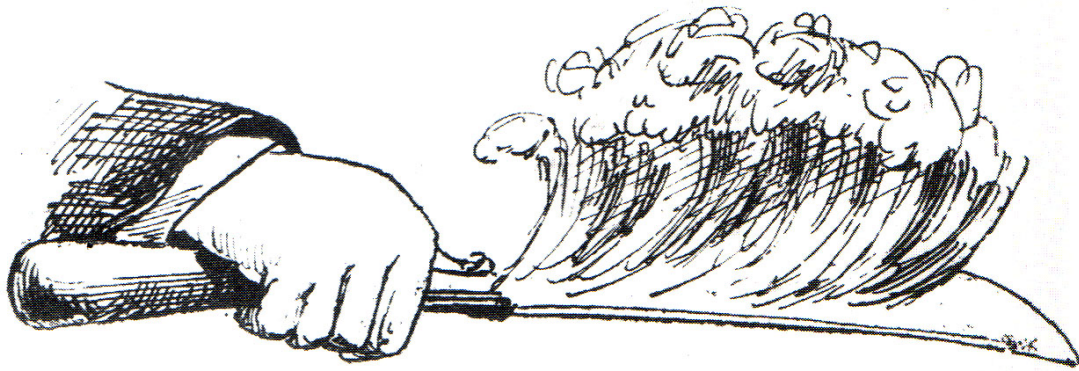
Figure 8: Gustave Courbet, *Trout*, 1872, oil on canvas, 52.5 x 87 cm, Zurich, Kunsthaus.



Figure 9: Gustave Courbet, *Still Life with Apples*, 1871-1872, oil on canvas, 59 x 73 cm, La Haye, Museum Mesdag.



Figure 10: Gustave Courbet, *The Wave*, 1869, oil on canvas, 112 x 144 cm, Berlin, Nationalgalerie.



671. — LA VAGUE, PAR COURBET.
Permettez-moi de vous offrir une tranche de cette peinture légère.....

Figure 11: Cham, *Permettez-moi de vous offrir une tranche de cette peinture legere*, Cham au salon de 1870.



Figure 12: Cham, *Gustave Courbet Proves that the Sea Is Made of the Same Stuff as Boats*, from *Le monde illustré*, 1870.



Figure 13: Francis Bacon, *Two Figures*, 1953, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 116.5 cm, private collection, England.



Figure 14: Gustave Courbet, *Wrestlers*, 1853, oil on canvas, Budapest, Szepmuvezeti Muzeum.