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3 Max Buchon (c. 1819–1869) on Courbet's *Stonebreakers* and *Burial at Ornans*

Courbet grew up in the Franche-Comté in South-western France, and came to Paris in 1839. Ten years later the reception of his *After Dinner at Ornans* at the Salon encouraged him to see himself as the potential leader of an emerging tendency. In the following year, at the combined Salon of 1850–1, he showed the *Stonebreakers* and the huge *Burial at Ornans* together with the *Peasants of Flagey*, three uningratiating paintings based on scenes of rural life, all executed in a style which was clearly intended to appear 'post-Romantic'. These new works did indeed serve to establish the character of Realism as an artistic movement, both for those hostile to all it implied and for the few sympathetic writers grouped around Champfleury. The *Burial* in particular served as a focus for controversy. Buchon was a friend of Courbet's from his youth and is depicted among the mourners in the *Burial*. Like other members of the Realists' circle he was interested in the vernacular culture of the French countryside, and he shared with Champfleury a specific concern with the survival of folk-songs and stories. He was briefly imprisoned after the 1848 revolution and went into exile to escape arrest after the coup d'état of 1851. A first draft of the present essay was written to publicize an exhibition of the *Stonebreakers* and the *Burial* in Besançon, and was published in *Le Démocrate Franc-Comtois* on 25 April 1850. The present revised version was used for a similar exhibition in Dijon in the following July, and was originally published as 'Annonce', in *Le Peuple, Journal de la Révolution Sociale*, no. 18, 7 June 1850. Our text is taken from the translation in P. Ten-Doesschate Chu (ed.), *Courbet in Perspective*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1977, pp. 60–3. The *Burial at Ornans* is now in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. The *Stonebreakers* was destroyed during the Second World War, though a smaller and reversed version survives in the Oscar Reinhardt Collection in Winterthur.

The painting of the *Stonebreakers* represents two life-size figures, a child and an old man, the alpha and the omega, the sunrise and the sunset of that life of drudgery. A poor young lad, between twelve and fifteen years old, his head shaven, scurvy, and stupid in the way misery too often shapes the heads of the children of the poor; a lad of fifteen years old lifts with great effort an enormous basket of stones, ready to be

measured or to be interspersed in the road. A ragged shirt; pants held in place by a breech made of a rope, patched on the knees, torn at the bottom, and tattered all over; lamentable, down-at-heel shoes, turned red by too much wear, like the shoes of that poor worker you know: That sums up the child.

To the right is the poor stonebreaker in old sabots fixed up with leather, with an old straw hat, worn by the weather, the rain, the sun, and the dirt. His shaking knees are resting on a straw mat, and he is lifting a stonebreaker's hammer with all the automatic precision that comes with long practice, but at the same time with all the weakened force that comes with old age. In spite of so much misery, his face has remained calm, sympathetic, and resigned. Does not he, the poor old man, have, in his waistcoat pocket, his old tobacco box of horn bound with copper, out of which he offers, at will, a friendship pinch to those who come and go and whose paths cross on his domain, the road?

The soup pot is nearby, with the spoon, the basket, and the crust of black bread.

And that man is always there, lifting his obedient hammer, always, from New Year's Day to St Sylvester's; always he is paving the road for mankind passing by, so as to earn enough to stay alive. Yet this man, who in no way is the product of the artist's imagination, this man of flesh and bones who is really living in Ornans, just as you see him there, this man, with his years, with his hard labour, with his misery, with his softened features of old age, this man is not yet the last word in human distress. Just think what would happen if he would take it into his head to side with the Reds: He could be resented, accused, exiled, and dismissed. Ask the prefect.

From this scene, which, in spite of its fascination, is merely imperturbably sincere and faithful [to reality], from this scene, in front of which one feels so far removed from whimpering tendencies and from all melodramatic tricks, let us turn to Mr Courbet's principal work of this year, *A Burial at Ornans*.

Twenty-odd feet wide and twelve feet high, with fifty-two life-size figures . . . such a crowd, so much material, so much work!

For those who, like us, have the honour of knowing those good people of Ornans to some extent, it is at first an encounter with a rather naïve effect to see that painting in which are grouped, in several rows, all those persons whom you have just greeted on the road and who are assembled there by the master's brush in such a natural, intelligent, and simple manner. The priest, the mayor, the deputy – nobody is missing. They are there, as I said, fifty altogether – all with their individual characters, their traditional outfits, and their own personal worries.

And yet, when, after a glance at that large composition in its entirety, the eye is drawn to the gravedigger who sits there on his knees on the edge of the grave into which he is to let down the corpse, some indefinable austere thought is suddenly aroused by that yawning hole. It is a thought that seems to suddenly illuminate these faces as by lightning, and that makes the painting into a veritable synthesis of human life, especially because of the wide landscape background, that sombre and grey sky, and the atmosphere of contemplation that envelops everything.

Formerly, in the old dances of death, Death in person forced kings, popes, emperors – all the great of the world and all the oppressors of the poor – to dance around, whether they liked it or not.

It seems to us that Mr Courbet, with his gravedigger, has obtained an equally powerful and significant effect, and has done so without departing from that absolute realism which, from now on, is indispensable in painting as well as in politics; a realism appreciated in advance by the good women of Ornans, in the same way as the *Presse* and the *National* will be able to appreciate it at the forthcoming exhibition.

In fact, that man, that gravedigger, shows no meanness in his robust posture. He is even the only one in that immense reunion who kneels, and yet, look! he alone carries his head high, he alone commands.

Tomorrow that man, who is in his prime, will return quietly to his vinegrower's cottage which he left yesterday; today only he feels as if he is the last link with earthly matters, the gatekeeper of the hereafter.

And yet, must it be said? through the vague oppression caused by his contemplation, one returns unconsciously – no doubt through the idea of compensation – to our poor stonebreaker. In the mind of the painter he might well be nothing but the psychological antithesis, the counterpoise – I would almost say the revenger.

In fine, before going to Paris, two paintings will be exhibited in the coming days in Dijon, as they have been in Besançon. I hope that the artists, the loafers, and, above all, the ordinary folks will go to judge the paintings for themselves. Their colossal dimensions are unusual, no doubt, for these so-called genre paintings that are the specialty of Mr Courbet. Yet who would dare to complain of the big size of the bottle, if the wine inside is of good quality?

Mr Courbet paints as he feels, and does not imitate this master or that school, nor is he out for applause. The painting that he wants is neither Italian nor Flemish: It is the painting of Ornans, the painting à la Courbet.

From his free and frank demeanour, which he will justify more and more every year, it is easy to recognize the true son of the Franche-Comté, the veritable child of that rugged country, where those three impetuous rebels of the philosophical and literary world were born: Fourier, Proudhon, and Victor Hugo. That method, though, appears to us the only true, the only rational, and the only acceptable one; therefore, we don't hesitate to wish him all sorts of appreciation.

14 Jules-Antoine Castagnary (1830–1888) 'The Three Contemporary Schools'

Castagnary began his career as an art critic in 1857. Like Champfleury, he saw late Romanticism as the established and dominant tendency in French painting of the mid-century, and was looking for an art with the potential to supplant it. And like both Champfleury and Thoré, he looked outside the established classical canons of art history for precedents, to artists of the Dutch and Spanish schools in particular. He became a faithful supporter of Courbet after first visiting his studio in 1860. His concept of contemporary Naturalism owed much to the rural themes of the Barbizon painters, Millet and Rousseau among them, though like Baudelaire he was also convinced that 'the life of the cities' must furnish the principal themes for a properly modern art. But where Baudelaire had seen art as balanced between the values of the 'transitory and contingent' and those of the 'eternal and immutable', Castagnary conceived of Naturalist art as unreservedly 'a part of social consciousness'. The text that follows was included under the title 'Les Trois écoles contemporaines' as the opening section of Castagnary's review of the 1863 Salon, originally published as 'Salon de 1863' in *Nord*, Brussels, 14 May–12 September 1863. (Castagnary published a second review of the 1863 Salon in the *Courrier du dimanche* in Paris.) The present text was reprinted in Castagnary, *Salons: 1857–1870*, Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1892. This extract is taken from pp. 102–6 of that edition, translated for this volume by Christopher Miller.

What is the purpose of painting?

'To express the Ideal', a chorus of enthusiasts cries out, 'To represent the Beautiful'.
Empty words!

The Ideal is not a revelation from on high, set up before humanity, which must ever approach but can never attain it; the Ideal is the free product of the conscience of each and every person placed in contact with external realities, and thus an individual concept varying from artist to artist.

The Beautiful is not a reality which exists outside man, which imposes itself on the mind along with the very form or aspect of objects: the Beautiful is an abstract word, an abbreviation, under the label of which we group a mass of different phenomena which act in a certain way on our organs and our intelligence; consequently, it is an individual or collective concept which varies, in a given society, from age to age, and, within a particular age, from man to man.

Let us place our feet a little more firmly on the ground, for it is there that the truth is to be found.

The purpose of painting is to express, according to the means at its disposal, the society that produces it. In this way, then, a mind free of the prejudices of education must conceive of it; in this way the great masters of all ages have understood and practised it. Society is a moral being which does not directly apprehend itself, and which, if it is to become aware of its reality, needs to exteriorize itself, as the philosophers say, to put its faculties to work and to see itself in their combined product. An age knows itself only through the exploits that it performs: political, literary, scientific, industrial and artistic achievements, all of which are marked with the stamp of its genius, carry the imprint of its particular character and distinguish it from the preceding epoch and the epoch to come. Consequently, painting is not an abstract concept, raised above history, alien to human vicissitudes, to the revolutions in morals and notions; it is a part of social consciousness, a fragment of the mirror in which each generation in its turn contemplates itself, and as such, it must follow society step by step and describe its incessant transformations. Who would be so bold as to deny that, if each civilization, and, within each civilization, each epoch, had thus set down its own image on canvas and revealed, in passing, the secret of its genius, we should possess, for the whole duration of its history, the successive aspects that humanity presents to art? Who would deny that the destiny of painting would then have been fulfilled?

This first point about the destination of painting once established, where do we in France stand today as regards the realization of this destiny?

Here, I cannot conceal the fact, I am in almost complete disagreement with my best friends and colleagues in criticism. Where they cry decadence, I, for the very same reasons, announce progress. It is, then, vital that my pen should not stumble, and that I set out my idea with the utmost clarity.

However radical and profound the differences that separate our artists, however complete the antagonism of their theories and manners, however vigorous, lastly, that precious individuality to which everyone now lays claim, and which is so dear to their hearts, one can, without doing excessive violence to temperaments and tendencies, place all painters in three main groups: the classics, the Romantics and the Naturalists.

The classics, through Louis David, their Saint John the Baptist, and Ingres, their Messiah, supported on the left by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and on the right by the Ecole de Rome, having on their side, moreover, the protection of the establishment, the awards and the commissions, seem, despite repeated warnings from the public, unwilling to give ground or give the game up.

The Romantics, decimated by mortality, abandoned by the literature that once raised them so high but has since turned to other glorifications, discouraged by the general defection of minds, shaken in their own esteem, have fallen silent, and already dream of a capitulation whose terms would allow them to emerge, arms and belongings intact, from a citadel that they can no longer defend.

The Naturalists, young, ardent, full of conviction, careless of the blows to be given or taken, are mounting the assault on all sides; and already their enterprising heads are to be found at all the summits of art.

Two schools, then, under threat; one on the attack. This is the position in the citadel that we have just inspected. At this year's Salon, the three flags are still present. Let us salute in them the past and the future, and before proceeding to enumerate their strengths, let us ponder a while the distinctive characteristics of each army.

Classic school, Romantic school, Naturalist school, all three are in agreement about the point of departure: nature is the foundation of art.

But:

The classic school states that nature must be corrected under the guidance of antiquity or the masterpieces of the Renaissance. Reality alarms and frightens it. Claiming to purify and idealize, it weakens or deforms; when it is not merely conventional, it invariably diminishes.

The Romantic school states that art is free; that nature must be interpreted freely by the liberated artist. It is not afraid of reality, but escapes reality by travesty it as the whims of imagination dictate; when it is not mere sleepwalking, it is invariably rather hit and miss.

The Naturalist school states that art is the expression of life in all its forms and all its degrees, and that its only goal is to reproduce nature by bringing nature to its maximum power and intensity; it is truth counterpoised by science.

And the results are what you might expect from these tendencies.

The classical school, with its elevated ideal, its delicate choice of models and constant quest for noble outline, has maintained the dignity of art in France. But because it imposed on the groups and combinations of groups presented by the external world certain preconceived attitudes and traditional forms, because it neglected colour which is, of all painting's resources, that which gives the most immediate sense of life, it extinguished the artist's spontaneity, ossified the imagination, sullied naivety and grace, those two wings of genius, and finally constituted the negation of its own origins and aim.

The Romantic school, with its thoughtless individualism, its exclusive preoccupation with colour, its ophthalmic derangements, its incessant incursions into the domain of literature, threw art off course and led it into anarchy and disarray. By its adoration of the accessory, of furniture, arms, costumes, antiquarianism and bric-à-brac, by its subordination of character to the picturesque, it created a class of

superficial and turbulent collectors whose noxious influence persists today, and opened the door to the most shameless commercialism; in short, it is to this school that must be ascribed the main causes of the degradation of painting that we have observed over the last twenty years.

The Naturalist school re-establishes the broken relations between man and nature. By its dual focus, upon the life of the fields, which it already interprets with such agrestic power, and the life of the cities, whence its greatest triumphs will come, it tends to embrace all forms of the visible world. Already it has ended the separation of line and colour, and restored them to their true role. By returning the artist to the centre of his epoch and obliging him to think, it determines the true utility, and thus the morality, of art. These few words are sufficient to give us confidence in its destination. What the artistic curiosity of the Valois, the refined taste of the Medici, the aspirations and pomp of Louis XIV, and the onerous protection of the academic establishment could not accomplish, the simple development of liberty, the awakening of decentralizing instincts, will be produced in France.

For the first time in three centuries, French society is giving birth to a school of French painting that is in its own image, and no longer in the image of peoples now extinct; a painting which describes its own appearance and way of life, and no longer those of civilizations long vanished; which in its every facet bears the imprint of that society's luminous grace and clear, lucid, penetrating mind.

May it weigh equal in the balance of posterity, some centuries hence, with the fiercely energetic painting of Spain, the familiar and intimate scenes of the Dutch, and Italian painting, the most pure, harmonious and radiant that ever flourished beneath a blue sky!