ART AT THE BARRICADES: COURBET AND PROUDHON, THE
TRAJECTORY OF AN ASYMMETRICAL RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Nineteenth century French painter Gustave Courbet was instrumental in the founding of the modern Realist school of painting and created great art in his youth, his larger-than-life manifesto paintings being regarded as the earliest socialist art. Over the course of his career he came to be powerfully influenced by anarchist philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, whom he greatly admired. Driven by this influence, Courbet changed from an artist totally consumed by his work, to a politically active revolutionary, which culminated in his actions during the revolt of the Paris Commune in 1871, followed by trial, imprisonment and exile. Utilizing extensive archival research of Courbet’s writings, this thesis argues that his relationship with Proudhon was instrumental in this change. The Courbet-Proudhon relationship was characterized by asymmetry of power and emulation of Proudhon by Courbet. Courbet, as a devotee of a man who distained intimacy, attempted to create a personal relationship which Proudhon would not allow. Detailed analysis of Courbet’s
correspondence, compared with that of Proudhon, clarifies the nature of their association and suggests a new interpretation of it, that it was not the generally portrayed, close, socially intimate one of personal friends, but one of distant prophet and spurned acolyte.

This abstract accurately represents the content of the candidate’s thesis. I recommend its publication.

Signed

Margaret Woodhull
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Leta Mae, my wife and my muse, who has constantly, and in every way, supported my efforts in this project.
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A debt of gratitude is owed to Dr. Chad Kautzer who first introduced me to graduate study at U.C.D. and who constantly encouraged my work, to Dr. Gabriel Finkelstein who consistently aided me in refining my ideas and balancing my perspective, and to my advisor and Committee Chair, Dr. Margaret Woodhull, who never stopped teaching me how to write a good academic paper.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“This revolution is all the more just as it originates with the people. Its apostles are workers, its Christ was Proudhon.”

“The sage of his time and the man of genius.”

“He is the only man who stood both for my country and for what I think.”

Gustave Courbet, 1865

“Visited the Courbet exposition. An artist of great talent, but lacking, I think, true genius, and with too much self-admiration.”

(1855) “Courbet is in anguish...He assassinates me with letters of eight pages – you know how he writes, how he wrangles!”

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

It takes only a careful juxtaposition of two disparate sets of nineteenth century writings to have reason to doubt the canonical tale of a close, personal friendship between French artist Gustave Courbet and the anarchist philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.

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1 Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, trans., ed., The Letters of Gustave Courbet (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 409. In a review of this work by Timothy Raser of the University of Georgia which was published in The French Review he characterizes this volume as “the reference work for Courbet scholars for years to come” and “an invaluable reference-work for the Courbet scholar.” This translation of 571 of Courbet’s letters, some previously unpublished, provided the basic primary material for this thesis, as is reflected in the quantity of citations.

2 Chu, The Letters of Gustave Courbet, 256.

3 Ibid, 260.

4 Alan Bowness, “Courbet’s Proudhon,” The Burlington Magazine 120, no. 900 (Mar. 1978): 124. Bowness makes numerous observations regarding the Courbet-Proudhon relationship and characterizes it as not being the close friendship which it is often said to have been. This thesis is significantly informed and inspired by Bowness’ work.

Proudhon. A tale of the mutual affection and length of their relationship has been created through books and journal articles dedicated to each of these figures such that it has become a commonplace among art historians, and has been maintained by Proudhon biographer George Woodcock, art historian James Henry Rubin, and even the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as late as 2008. Yet, a differing perspective can be offered, for a review of their respective correspondence indicates little of such reciprocity between the two men.

There is no question that Proudhon significantly influenced Courbet. However, the relationship was that of remote visionary and committed acolyte, not that of close, personal friends. This paper will analyze the extent to which Courbet’s artwork reflects his socio/political commitment at a time of revolution. More specifically, it will consider to what extent Courbet’s dedication to what he understood to be the political and artistic philosophy of Proudhon undermined his dedication to his art, resulting in what some scholars identify as a deterioration of the quality of his work as his life became a caricature of political engagement.

Most importantly, this study will dispute the myth that the Courbet-Proudhon relationship was close and mutually fulfilling and will show that the Courbet-Proudhon relationship was essentially an asymmetrical power relationship in which Courbet was an impassioned and dedicated disciple of a distant and reserved man who did not desire to have such a relationship. Proudhon was recognized by his

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contemporary, the utopian Socialist Victor Considérant,* as “that strange man who was determined that none should share his views.” The result of this association was that Courbet came to emulate his hero’s activities, taking positions and engaging in actions which he was ill equipped to handle.

Courbet attempted to become an intimate of a man who disdained intimacy, a man who, while an admirer of the artist’s work, particularly that which Proudhon considered to be “socialist”, seemed to distance himself from Courbet at every opportunity. During the revolutionary year of 1848 and immediately thereafter Proudhon published inflammatory essays, served in public office as a socialist, and made himself a public enemy. Meanwhile, also in 1848, Courbet announced that he was too busy painting to involve himself in politics and that he had little interest in the political world.

A little over twenty years later, during the Commune days of 1871, Courbet published his own public letters, served in public office, and also made himself into a public enemy. For Courbet, political action replaced revolutionary art. His work turned to society portraits and derivative landscapes, the marketability of which was far greater than that of socialist art. He bragged repeatedly in letters to his family that his backlog of commissions was growing to be almost unmanageable. His art became commercial, his politics, radical.

The focus of this research is on primary materials, including correspondence, paintings, photographs and caricatures. The first two chapters will set the scene in

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mid nineteenth century France, discussing the socialist writings of the day and contrasting the views of Proudhon with those of Marx (the two men being exemplars of their respective positions, centralist and decentralist) and also addressing their perspectives on each other. Chapters three and four tell the story of Courbet’s artistic and political trajectory, bringing to light the man, his art, and his public statements. Each of these chapters also includes brief biographical material on Proudhon intended to familiarize the reader with his life during the years in question. In chapter three we will see that Courbet created his greatest works, those that appear in art history classes up to this day, during the years prior to 1853. During those years, his interest in political office and overt activism was minimal and his interest in socialist art dominated his life. His revolutionary zeal was, from birth, emotional rather than intellectual. As noted by Camille Lemonnier in 1878, “Courbet was an instinct more than a brain.”

Chapter four will discuss the changes that took place for Courbet in the years between 1853 and his death in 1877, including his political radicalization, his published statements, his running for political office, and finally his activities during the uprising of the Paris Commune of 1871. Here we will also discuss whether or not the fact that Courbet’s political positions were left wing accorded him different treatment from that accorded to other artists who maintained more conservative positions. Evidence points to the fact that Courbet was not

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9 Courbet was neither educated formally nor was he an autodidact. By comparison, others referenced in this thesis had educational credentials or were powerfully self-educated. Marx held a PhD., Baudelaire studied law and held a baccalaureate, Castagnary and Chaudey were attorneys, and Proudhon was renowned for his self-taught mastery of theology and multiple languages.

representative of the French artists and writers of the day who largely took more moderate, republican perspectives. We will also consider other possible reasons for the changes in his work, such as market influences and ageing. The fifth chapter will draw examples from the narrative chapters of the work to explicate in detail the thesis of asymmetry and emulation in the relationship between Courbet and Proudhon.

There are three clear aspects of Courbet's life which are descriptive of asymmetry and three more which are indicative of the emulation. Finally, chapter six will draw conclusions based on the information explored in the body of the work.

The key themes are based on Courbet's correspondence and that presents an issue for the researcher. In this thesis we will take particular care in conducting research of Courbet's letters, because so much of what he writes is exaggeration and hyperbole, in his own opinion, "everyone agrees that I am the foremost man in France."\(^{11}\) Although the researcher makes a conscious effort to maximize objectivity, pure objectivity is not possible, and simply taking Courbet's words at face value is disingenuous. This thesis is informed to a large extent with respect to methodology by the work of Keith Jenkins whose *Rethinking History* points out the pitfalls of the historian bringing his or her own "viewpoint and predilections"\(^{12}\) into the analysis. Care must be taken in the framing of the relevant issues. Although this thesis deals essentially with primary materials such as personal letters, this research will bear in mind the fact that, although contemporary letters are absent later-day interpretation and opinion, even the selection of the materials themselves can betray objectivity.

\(^{11}\) Chu, *The Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 382.

This caveat is even more important in consideration of the fact that some of his more articulate letters were either edited or actually written by literary friends like Baudelaire*13 or Max Buchon.*14

There is another significant methodological consideration. An important analytical tool which is included in this research has largely been ignored in the existing literature. This research contains a quantitative analysis of Courbet’s correspondence as well as a qualitative one. Accordingly, this thesis addresses three key elements in Courbet’s correspondence. The first qualitative component is a consideration of what he says, putting his words into context with respect to the recipient of the letter, the time at which it was written, and what was going on in Courbet’s life when he wrote it. The second, equally important qualitative element is that which Courbet did not say. Omissions can sometimes be as germane as inclusions. As important as it is to note what Courbet says, it is equally important to take note of what he does not say. In some instances the silence speaks volumes as will be explored in chapter four. The third analytical element is the quantitative. In this element we take notice of the quantity of letters written to certain people at various times as this is an indication of the nature of the relationship. We also note the timing of key correspondence. Finally, we analyze the repetitiveness of certain Courbet requests for meetings, travels, and sittings.

Eventually, Courbet’s unrequited devotion to Proudhon and his political ideals led to suffering, imprisonment, derision, and exile. As noted by Karl Marx, great

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13 Chu, The Letters of Gustave Courbet, 82.
personages and actions occur twice, "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."¹⁵ This was the case with the relationship of Courbet and Proudhon. Proudhon was the exemplar of the gifted, persecuted political philosopher. Courbet, the spurned acolyte, made himself into an exemplar of the less gifted follower for whom tragedy became farce.

CHAPTER TWO: THE DISCOURSE OF REVOLUTION IN ART AND LITERATURE

"We should not put forward revolutionary action as a means of social reform, because that pretended means would simply be an appeal to force, to arbitrariness, in brief, a contradiction." 16

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, 1846

"Indeed, is it at all surprising that a society founded on the opposition of classes should culminate in brutal 'contradiction,' the shock of body against body, as its final dénouement?" 17 "Monsieur Proudhon has the misfortune of being peculiarly misunderstood in Europe. In France, he has the right to be a bad economist, because he is reputed to be a good German philosopher. In Germany, he has the right to be a bad philosopher, because he is reputed to be one of the ablest of French economists." 18

Karl Marx, 1847

"I have received a libel by a Doctor Marx...it is a tissue of abuse, calumny, falsification and plagiarism." 19 "Marx is the tapeworm of socialism!" 20

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, 1847

The middle of the nineteenth century in Europe was a period of intense revolutionary discourse, during which even art was subject to social critique, as it often has been at such times. The period witnessed the secularization of religiosity, the spread of Darwinism, the second Industrial Revolution, and continental revolutions. France was a major center of reformist thinking and publishing, and the

20 Ibid, 102.
French revolutionaries were happy to argue among themselves and largely ignore the “solemn German doctors of philosophy” who flocked to Paris seeking safety from their own repressive governments. According to Marx biographer Francis Wheen: “All the best known political thinkers of the age were Frenchmen,” foremost among them, Pierre Joseph Proudhon. According to art historian James Henry Rubin, Proudhon was “more notorious in the 1850’s than any other radical thinker.”

Wheen was considering “the age” somewhat more broadly than we do in this thesis, reaching back in time to add such luminaries as Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Considerant. A notable exception to these two broad generalizations was Karl Marx, who contributed to the dialogue to an extraordinary extent and spent a total of seventeen months living in Paris and Brussels himself. The most significant French social philosopher of the era, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, was to have close contact with Marx, as well as an acerbic, contentious relationship. The disagreements between Marx and Proudhon were significant in that they would later lead to the greatest divisions among elements within the Paris Commune.

Proudhon and Marx first met in July of 1844, when Marx was living in the Faubourg St. Germain in Paris, and where Marx introduced Proudhon (already

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22 Wheen, Karl Marx: A Life, 61.
24 The observation that the “solemn German doctors of philosophy” were largely ignored is not inconsistent with the significance of Marx to this work. At the time of the Marx/Proudhon contact, Marx was relatively unpublished, with his most significant publishing to come later.
famous in socialist circles for his 1840 work *What is Property?*) who could not speak German, to the work of Hegel. At the time Marx was, along with Friedrich Engels, contributing to the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbucher*, (German-French Annals) a periodical devoted to socialist communication between French and Germans. This time and place was critically important as it was then and there that Marx and Engels, after having spent ten straight days in constant contact, begin their collaboration in earnest. Over the course of slightly more than a year, Marx and Proudhon engaged in the regular, all-night discussions for which Marx became so well-known later in London. In view of Proudhon’s notable lack of formal education, it is likely that this was his first exposure to Hegel, and that exposure was coming directly from the lips of one of the Young (Left) Hegelian’s most influential thinkers.

The leftist philosophers were in agreement on only one thing: revolution against the existing bourgeois society was a must. Within that overall dialogue however, great debates raged about means to this goal. For Marx, whom posterity has shown to have had the most significant, long term, worldwide effect on society, revolution by the proletariat was an absolute necessity. "The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions." For Proudhon, violence was not needed, and was in fact to be scrupulously avoided, but eventual anarchy was the

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26 Ibid
27 Ibid
28 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848)
29 Ibid
ultimate state of society, a society which would consist essentially of “a loose
confederation of independent patriarchal peasant and artisan households.” 30

Prior to 1840, Proudhon’s literary career was essentially that of an essayist,
submitting articles in which he began to offer rudimentary philosophical insights
mainly dealing with language and occasionally with religion.31 He published What is
Property? in 1840, adding his voice to the chorus of socialist thought. He took the
perspective that property was, theft,32 asking the question and then telling the world,
“What is property?...Property is robbery.”33 In this work, he even predated Marx in
propounding a labor theory of value.34 The debates and dialogues between advocates
of Marx’s version of communism, and advocates of Proudhon’s version of anarchism
were spirited. Each accused the other of error with regularity.

For writers of the left, the revolutionaries of 1848 and the Communards of 1871
were to become martyrs to a great cause. From the perspective of the political right,
the forces of order, an entirely different characterization emerged. The revolt of the
Paris Commune of 1871 was described by the right as “the most formidable and
criminal the world has ever seen,”35 contrived by “the ruthless desperadoes of

30 J.W. Burrow, The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914 (New
32 This is the most common, modern translation of Proudhon’s wording.
34 Woodcock, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: His Life and Work, 47. This was not original
with Proudhon, Smith and Ricardo had also advocated such theories.
35 W. Pembroke Fetridge, The Rise and Fall of the Paris Commune in 1871: With a
Full Account of the Bombardment, Capture, and Burning of the City (New York:
Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1871), 15.
Each of these perspectives is more polemical than explanatory. Rather than realistically describe the situation, their authors chose to attempt to score political points with the readership.

There existed a great number of issues on which Marx and Proudhon were in disagreement and which could be the subject of entire theses on their own. However, for the purposes of this work, we can concentrate on those points of contention which affected the decisions and actions of Courbet, Proudhon and the Commune.

Essentially, the disagreements between Marx and Proudhon concerned two key areas which would be manifested among the members of the Commune; the need for violent physical revolution, and centralization versus decentralization. Ultimately, the rift between Marxists and Proudhonians, Communists and anarchists, was to become the defining issue in the constant squabbling of the International Working Men’s Association in France. This was not the only group for which this was the defining issue. In his introduction to the twentieth anniversary German edition of Marx’s *The Civil War in France*, Friedrich Engels described the fierce divisions among the members of the 1871 Paris Commune as being between those Communards who were essentially Communists, and those who were “adherents of the Proudhonian School of Socialism,” the same division manifested in the International Working Men’s Association debates.

These disagreements were handled in a civilized, academic manner from 1844 until 1846 when Proudhon seemingly rejected an overture from Marx, resulting in the

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36 Ibid
flurry of dialogue noted in the opening of this chapter. In 1846 Marx set about creating an international group of correspondents dedicated to keeping the socialist activists across Europe aware of each other’s activities. The “tapeworm of socialism” reached out to Proudhon, the “bad philosopher,” to engage in that series of communications. On May 5, 1846 Marx invited Proudhon to join in his efforts to “put the German socialists in touch with the French and English socialists; to keep foreigners constantly informed of the socialist movements that occur in Germany and to inform the Germans in Germany of the progress of socialism in France and England.”

At this point in the relationship, Marx tells Proudhon that “we all of us believe that we could find no better correspondent than yourself,” high praise indeed from a man who rarely saw virtue in the work of others, even those who agreed with him.

Proudhon rejected Marx’s overture. The rejection was equivocal, not even complete. He did not reject Marx out of hand; he merely set conditions on his acceptance. Proudhon was happy to “gladly agree to become one of the recipients of your correspondence, whose aims and organization seem to me most useful.” However, then came the caveat which Marx found unacceptable. Proudhon went on to say “but let us not, merely because we are at the head of a movement, make ourselves the leaders of a new intolerance, let us not pose as the apostles of a new

39 Ibid
40 Op Cit, Proudhon to Marx
religion, even if it be the religion of logic, the religion of reason...on that condition I will gladly enter your association. Otherwise - no!"41

Was this a conditional acceptance, or a conditional rejection? It made no difference to Marx. The early academic dialogue degenerated into *argumentum ad hominem*, as did Marx’s commentaries on Lassalle* and a host of other socialist luminaries of the day who held perspectives which differed, even slightly, from his own.42 Marx, having had the benefit of outliving Lassalle, Bakunin* and Proudhon, published an extremely negative obituary of Proudhon in the German press.43

With respect to the desired revolution, Marx held that the uprising of the proletariat in the streets was an absolute necessity. “They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions.”44 Proudhon strongly disagreed, contending that “the working class should attain to revolution not by political action but by economic means only.”45 This struck to the heart of the divergence of the two men’s actions during the revolutions of 1848. While Marx helped to raise funds to arm insurgents in Brussels and participated in the preparations for the violence,46 Proudhon, the advocate of non-violent, economic actions and ever the pacifist, during the violence of 1848 was

41 Op Cit, Proudhon to Marx
42 For Marx’s observations of a seriously ad-hominem nature, see Raddatz (1981) which contains numerous examples of ad-hominem commentary in Marx/Engels personal correspondence.
“the great non-participant, wandering from street to street, ‘a gentleman in a frock-coat, a wearer of our decoration’, talking things over with the rebels,” but hardly participating in any violence.

Secondly, for Marx, the centralized, communal dictatorship of the proletariat was an absolute necessity, at least prior to the withering away of the state which would precede the age to come. Proudhon would have none of that. Centralization of authority, in any form, was anathema to him as it was to other influential anarchists such as Bakunin. For Proudhon, total and as complete decentralization as possible would create the desired result. He was, in Berlin’s memorable phrase an advocate of “crypto-individualism”, but truly not as “crypto” as Berlin would have us believe. His advocacy of individualism in lieu of the more authoritarian Communist vision of society was quite open. His view of authority, even authority of the people was clear. “Once in power all men are the same. Always there is the same zeal for authority, the same distrust of the people, the same fanatical attachment to law and order.”

Rather than placing his faith in any form of centralized rule or centralized ownership of property, Proudhon advocated what he referred to as Mutualism, an economic system in which free men, without recourse to government in any manner would band together in mutual ownership of business, mutual labor efforts, and mutual management and extension of credit. This system of social economy was

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49 Hyams, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: His Revolutionary Life, Mind and Works, 123.
50 Ibid, 120.
expected to come into being with little or no oversight by any government, and with no centralized ownership of the means of production. Capitalism as it existed was to be overthrown, but not to be replaced by any version of central management or even planning. Proudhon, in contrast to the Communist left, offered a version of utopian socialism which was based essentially on moral principles, doing what was right, not what was historically inevitable. He claimed in his *Systeme II* that “man in his development progresses incessantly from fatality to liberty, from instinct to reason, from the material to the spiritual.”

**Courbet and the Socialists**

The revolutionary rhetoric was in the air, popular not only among philosophers, but among all members of intellectual society, reacting to the failed revolutions of 1848. “A remarkable concourse of poet, painter, musicians, writers, reformers and theorists had gathered in the French capital” A congregation of philosopher-poets filled the tables of the cafes and bistros, explaining, debating and pontificating. Courbet reveled in his participation in this world of bohemians and dandies, rubbing elbows with Baudelaire and Champfleury, the founder of the realist school of literature, as he “held court” Thursdays at the Brasserie Andler.

**Literary Realism** followed a parallel path to artistic Realism. The Romantic pre-1848 Revolution works such as Dumas père’s *Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three

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51 In this he was part of a school of thought with roots going back as far as Thomas More’s *Utopia*, and continuing through the work of Fourier, Saint Simon, and even to the U.S. in Robert Owen’s “New Harmony” Indiana.
*Musketeers* can be read as the literary equivalents of the painter David's depictions of equally swashbuckling heroes. In Realist novels Flaubert's urban clerks turned rustic experimenters replaced the pre-revolution heroes of the nobility. In other novels, as in paintings, the common man of France with dirt on his hands replaced the heroes of Romantic fiction whose hands never touched anything so common.\(^{55}\)

Under this influence, Gustave Courbet considered himself to be a revolutionary, socialist, and realist, "a partisan of all the revolution,"\(^ {56}\) all of which, he claimed to have manifested in his art. Additionally, between the years of 1848 and 1871 Courbet became increasingly radicalized in his politics, from mild interest at best, to active participation in the uprising of the Paris Commune of 1871. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon played a key role in this transformation, profoundly influencing Courbet on a personal level\(^ {57}\).

Between 1848 and 1853 Courbet created some of his greatest art, which was clearly revolutionary in the artistic sense of promoting Realism and placing everyday events in the lives of everyday people into monumental art of the kind previously restricted to great moments in history. Prior to Courbet, the hierarchy of artistic genres as articulated by the Académie Française\(^ {58}\), placed history painting at the apex of the artworld, with portraits, landscapes, and still-lifes in descending order. Courbet paid homage to the ranking, but to the chagrin of the critics, placed contemporary French citizens into the representations previously reserved for the historical and

\(^{55}\) As exemplified by the contrast between Edmond Dantès and the Count in *The Count of Monte Cristo.*

\(^{56}\) Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet,* 103.

\(^{57}\) Mack, *Gustave Courbet,* 53.

\(^{58}\) The *Académie Française,* semi-governmental arbiter of all things artistic in France
mythological elite. In doing this Courbet was quite open about his intent, telling the artworld that “every age should be represented by its own artists...the artists of one century are totally incapable of representing the things of a preceding or subsequent century.”

For Courbet, the idea that a nineteenth century artist should attempt to portray the past, whether real or mythological was futile. Realism could only represent what was, not what had been.

Academic art was meticulous in execution, romantic in subject matter, and catered to an artworld in which the government may have replaced the Church as the main sponsor of art, but that change in patronage did not eliminate the essential dignity of the subject matter portrayed. The new Realist art, of which Courbet was to become known as the father, and in which dignified portrayal of subjects was largely irrelevant, would eventually cater to a new market-driven class of buyers.

In this atmosphere politically oriented art was a mainstay of the artworld. As such, it was constantly critiqued from political perspectives. T.J. Clark has observed that “for a while in the mid nineteenth century, the State, the public and the critics agreed that art had a political sense and intention. And painting was encouraged, repressed, hated and feared on that assumption.” Courbet’s art was characterized by contemporary critics as “an engine of revolution,” and in 1851 at the time of the Salon, he was called the “Proudhon of painting.” Yet, the realm of political art was

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62 Ibid, 134. Quoting Salon critic Louis Peisse
63 Ibid, 134. Quoting Salon critic Enault
not just revolutionary or socialist, such as the Courbet works which we will look at in chapter three. The forces of order were well represented by artists like Horace Vernet and Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier whose paintings of revolutionary death, such as Rue-Soufflot - Juin 1848 and La Barricade made clear that “death [was] the only victor at the barricades.” In their works the viewer sees the reality of death in the streets, the blood and destruction which were the inevitable result of revolution.

Fig. 1: Rue Soufflot Juin 1848, Horace Vernet, 1848

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64 Rubin, *Realism and Social Vision in Courbet and Proudhon*, xvii. Rubin is quoting art historian Meyer Shapiro
In French art of the nineteenth century, heroism or despotism were all in the eye of the social group for whom the work was intended, as were the heroics or the depravities of the 1848 revolutionaries and the 1871 Communards. The intellectual turmoil in philosophy, literature and art was central to Courbet’s life, art and actions.
CHAPTER THREE: COURBET – THE MAN, HIS ART AND HIS ACTIONS, 1848-1853

“I am so busy with my painting right now that it is very difficult for me to write, for once I am doing something it is impossible for me to think of anything else at all.”

(1847) “Anyhow, I am not getting involved in politics, as usual, for I find nothing emptier than that.”

Gustave Courbet

“The social revolution was rising up, without anybody, high or low, appearing to be aware of it.” “It is necessary to give a direction to the movement.”

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon 1848

These were the sentiments of Courbet and Proudhon just prior to and during the revolution of 1848. We see one man, Courbet, who is consumed by his art, considers himself a revolutionary perhaps, but is unwilling to act on those revolutionary impulses, other than through his art, at this time. This is not to say that revolutionary art is not impactful, it certainly can be. Additionally, it is not to infer hypocrisy on the part of Courbet. Rather, it is to point out the manner in which Courbet expressed himself and his socialist views, which was to change dramatically over the course of his life. That change is at the core of this discussion. We also see another man,

65 Chu, Letters of Gustave Courbet, 75.
66 Chu, Letters of Gustave Courbet, 77.
68 Ibid, 119.
69 As indicated by not running for elective office, engaging in violence, or issuing public proclamations.
Proudhon, who was dedicated to revolutionary action, but “exhorted his friends not to fight.”

As we review the personal history of Courbet in these years we will see a man maturing as a painter, becoming accustomed to bohemian life in Paris and creating the first great socialist works of art. During this period Courbet’s revolutionary instincts were sharpened as he changed from a relative unknown to a painter who had the attention of the public, the critics, and the government.

The Man

Gustave Courbet came by his revolutionary perspective from the very beginning of his life. Born on June 10, 1819 in the small town of Ornans in the Franche-Comté region of France to Régis and Suzanne-Silvie Courbet, he was the grandson on his mother’s side of Jean-Antoine Oudot (Jean-Antoine Oudot, January 23, 1768 – August 13, 1848), a fierce republican who had fought in the French Revolution. As part of a large immediate family consisting of himself and four sisters, and a close extended family (in over a dozen letters written to his family between November of 1837 and May of 1840 he makes a point of giving his very fond regards to his grandfather and grandmother, as well as assorted uncles, aunts, and cousins) he first

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70 Woodcock, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: His Life and Work, 118.
71 Located in the far eastern, alpine geography of France, only miles from the Swiss border.
encountered radical republicanism and anti-clericalism at an early age, an influence which was to remain with him well into his young manhood. In this sense, as it was to be for his entire life, Courbet’s political and philosophical perspectives, absorbed around the dinner table, was intuitive and emotional, as evidenced by his lack of higher education and poor performance in the schooling that he did receive.

The family was prosperous, with father Régis owning sufficient lands and vineyards to be a registered voter in the days prior to French universal suffrage. As rural bourgeois, it was accepted that young Gustave should be sent to school and prepare for a profession suitable for the son of such a family; law, teaching, the Church perhaps, but certainly not painting. Despite his parent’s wishes for professional training, his schooling was minimal and his performance unremarkable, with bad grades and worse attitude.

Sent in 1831 at the age of twelve to the Ornans petit-seminary, a small, local academic institution, he struggled for six years with poor grades and an equally poor attitude, particularly towards the required religious instruction. Not many of the students failed to complete their First Communion for year after year, as did Courbet, brimming with his early anti-clericalism. Although referred to as a petit-seminary, the school was intended for the education of secular youths as well as aspiring religious. At eighteen, his family enrolled him in the nearby Collège Royal at Besançon, intending that he study law, a profession deemed to be appropriate for a young man of his class and geographic location. This effort at education was as

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74 Ibid, 10.
disastrous as his earlier attempts. A constant complainer, he threatened his family time after time with running away from the school and from them. "I absolutely want to leave my classes for I'm here perforce...if you insist on forcing me to stay, I will soon no longer be here."75 In November of 1840, Courbet finally got his wish and, never having taken his examinations, he left school for Paris and the life of a painter, sans baccalaureate.

In 1848, the first revolution broke out in Sicily, followed by the French mobs storming the Chamber of Deputies and proclaiming a Republic,76 an act which ultimately led to the bloody June Days in Paris. Proudhon ran for the French Constituent Assembly and Courbet began to reinvent himself and prepare to paint his socialist works, truly a momentous year. Again, there was a political component to each action. The failure of the revolutions of 1848 affected the course of society and intellectual activity in France for a generation and more.77

According to Rubin, it was about 1848 that the first of Courbet's reinventions of self took place as he left the world of bohemian dandyism "in favor of his Franc-Comtois roots."78 This change in behavior and language was what Clark referred to as "camouflage...obstinate patois, provincial manners,"79 a mask which Courbet put on at will, designed to create the persona which he wished to show the world. By then, at age twenty eight, Courbet had been living in the Left Bank of Paris for eight

75 Chu, Letters of Gustave Courbet, 16.
76 Mack, Gustave Courbet, 47.
77 For an extensive discussion of the changes in European society and intellectual activity in the wake of the failures of the revolutions of 1848 see J.W. Burrow's The Crisis of Reason: European Intellectual Thought, 1848-1914 (1980)
78 Rubin, Realism and Social Vision in Courbet and Proudhon, 53.
79 Clark, Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution, 82.
years, finally settling at 32, rue Hautefeuille in the sixth arrondissement in the converted apse of a chapel which had been secularized during the suppression of the Catholic Church during the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{80} His studio and lodgings were situated above the appropriately named Café de la Rotonde.

In contrast to the family situation of Courbet, Proudhon was born into a poor family in Besançon on January 15, 1809, having to attend school on scholarship. His early works of political and economic philosophy such as What is Property?, published at the young age of thirty one, were written while he worked long, hard hours at a variety of manual labors, primarily typesetting and printing. His interest in political economy was intellectual, if unlettered.

By October of 1846 when he published The Philosophy of Poverty, Proudhon was arguably the most influential socio-political thinker in France. His reputation was also growing in Germany, as the book was published in three translations by 1847.\textsuperscript{81} Strongly anti-communist as well as anti-clerical, it was this work which occasioned the skewering delivered by Marx noted in the opening lines of chapter one. Proudhon's riposte was never published, it exists only in his personal notes. Inasmuch as at that time, Marx was a relative unknown in France compared to Proudhon, it would appear that Proudhon's lack of published response was one calculated to ignore the man. Proudhon's political stances reflected his theories, and he put those political positions into writing in Le Representant du Peuple, a left wing political journal.

\textsuperscript{80} Mack, Gustave Courbet, 25.
\textsuperscript{81} Woodcock, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: His Life and Work, 100.
In 1848 the political journals were the strongest manifestation of opposition to the government of Louis-Phillipe, the last Orleanist king of France. Papers such as *Constitutionel*, and *Courrier Français* represented liberal interests, *La Reforme*, socialist, and Proudhon’s *Le Representant du Peuple*, anarchist. Proudhon, taking every opportunity to place his theories before the public, utilized the banner headline to make his point. *Le Representant du Peuple*, in its first issue of February 2, 1848, at the very beginning of the uprising during the second day of fighting in the streets, proclaimed “What is the Producer? Nothing. What should he be? Everything.” His rhetoric was exhilarating, his circulation soared, breaking records. In April of that year, after the abdication of Louis-Phillipe and amid Proudhon’s rising popularity with the masses in the streets for whom his words resonated, Proudhon was put up for election, an election in which 1.2% of the population of France was eligible to vote.

Elected to the National Assembly in April of 1848, he quickly took his ideas out of the realm of theory and agitation and put them to the test of parliamentary government. Proudhon advocated creation of a non-profit citizens bank, an imposed reduction on all current rents and bills owed by one-third, and that creditors surrender to the government one-third of all they had been owed over the previous three years. Those sums to be redistributed by the government back to the debtors, basically a tax on unearned income, an idea common today but outrageous by 1848 French standards. Not one of the measures which he advocated regarding taxes, property or

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83 Ibid, 106.
84 Ibid, 105.
banking was adopted by the Assembly, and in a show of immense displeasure, the Assembly voted to censure Proudhon by an astonishing vote of 691 to 2, with only Proudhon and a single ally dissenting.

By July of 1848 *Le Representant* was suppressed by the government due to Proudhon’s continuing agitation. Despite the fact that the new government was republican in nature, Proudhon’s positions, such as calling for the previously noted forcible reduction in rents, were too extreme for its taste. The suppression lasted briefly with publishing beginning again in August. Resorting again to the banner headline, Proudhon brought the paper back with: “What is the Capitalist? Everything! What should he be? Nothing!” which resulted in the final elimination of the paper in September.

Not to be outdone by the government, Proudhon struck back in November with the creation of his newest effort, *Le Peuple*, in which he continued to antagonize the government for another six months. When he referred to the popularly elected president, Louis Bonaparte as “a bear or an ox, a poor beast of Circus or Carnival,” he encountered the personal enmity of the head of state. On March 22, 1849 he finally published the words which were to result in the demise of the paper. On that day he called for the people of Paris to rise in civil disobedience, refuse to pay their taxes, and refuse to serve in the military. This was ultimately too much for the establishment to accept. In March of 1849 Proudhon was arrested and imprisoned in

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89 Ibid, 151.
Sainte Pélagie prison for a term of three years, during which time he was to have his fateful first meeting with Gustave Courbet.

The Art

Prior to 1848 Courbet’s art was maturing and beginning to show the signs of the artistic genius which was to come. He produced a large number of self-portraits, depicting himself in all manner of clothing and with all manner of accoutrements (carving tools, musical instruments, books) most of which show him as a handsome, introspective young man, who was growing comfortable with himself, and often accompanied by his small black spaniel.

Beginning in 1848 Courbet produced his greatest signature paintings, those that formed the basis for his being considered to be a revolutionary artist. Three works in particular are such strong statements of the significance of the working and rural classes that they can be considered to be manifestos of socialist perspective. Paintings such as The Stonebreakers, which shows the unrelenting labor of the working class, The Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair, in which we see a fundamental part of the life of France’s rural population, and Burial at Ornans, depicting the ceremonial life of villagers, all painted between 1849 and 1850, were revolutionary in their time and place, more as a matter of content than of form, although the formal element was not ignored. Unlike so many of the academic artists who preceded him, Courbet embraced the paint. Rather than seeking to eliminate from observation

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90 Although Courbet’s content was his most radical departure from previous schools of art, he also substantially differed in formal elements such as application of paint by palette knife in bold swatches of color.
the matter of which the painting is constructed, Courbet was eager to show that paint was a physical substance which was placed upon another physical substance, the canvas. As Fried notes, “the thick impasto is extremely apparent; the paint is often laid down with a palette knife rather than a brush, so that it becomes a tangible, built up crust that arrests the eye...we are forced to remember that we are in front of a solid work of art, a painted object, a representation.”

Fig. 3: The Stonebreakers, Gustave Courbet, 1848

In The Stonebreakers we see a somber vision of an ageing worker and, as noted by Courbet, his rapidly ageing, younger companion engaged in a meaningless and futile task that exposes the misery and poverty of the working class, what “Marx

92 The observation that the young man would eventually become like the old man has been remarked on previously, see Clark (1973), 30, and Courbet’s own description of the piece in his letter to Francis Wey of November 26, 1849. Wey was eventually to use this description as part of his novel Le Biez de Serine.
would have called alienated labor." As Courbet himself observed, "in this occupation you begin like the one and end like the other." In this early example of his socialist work, Courbet clearly privileges manual labor. Michael Fried in *Courbet's Realism* considers this to be "the (sic) image of alienated labor in all Courbet’s art." This form of labor, which, in addition to being alienated in itself, is alien to the bourgeois observer, such as Courbet. We can read his version of Realism here as unmediated and observational. His work is the result of direct, personal observation, not the creation of some idealized vision and not enhanced or minimized by any mediating influences. Courbet claimed to have come across these laborers along a road, bringing them later to his studio to pose for the portrait.

In *Burial at Ornans*, which was Courbet's home town, we see country folk in their Sunday best. Among the faces are those of his relatives, his father and his sisters, possibly, his grandfather Oudot as well. Born into a family of rural, landowning bourgeois, his father, Régis, was reputed to be the richest man in Flagey. In this painting we see how Courbet brought impressive size and interesting composition to the depiction of daily life in a country village. Prior to *Burial at Ornans*, this scope was restricted in academic art to history painting, canvases like David's *Oath of the Horatii*, *Death of Socrates*, or *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*. The essence of history painting was depictions of great moments in history or mythology, rendered with

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93 Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, 262.
94 Ibid, 262.
95 Ibid, 261.
96 Ibid, 102.
98 Ibid, 114.
impressive majesty. Accordingly, the Académie was outraged by these stylistic elements being brought to the lives of country provincials.

Fig. 4: Burial at Ornans, Gustave Courbet, 1849/50

Courbet painted this work during the winter of 1849-50, in Ornans, and it may have a significance that is sometimes speculated on, but not yet confirmed. This may well be the funeral of his grandfather Oudot,99 who died in 1848, or of his grandmother Saulnier-Oudot, who had died in 1847. Although it has been speculated before now that this may represent the funeral of his grandfather, an alternative reading of the picture can be offered. The well dressed man with top hat and blue stockings is arguably the most significant character in the painting, both in position and size, at least equal to that of the priest. He has long been interpreted as one of the

"republicans of 1793." Grandfather Oudot was a republican of 1793, suggesting that this may, in fact, be the burial of Courbet’s grandmother, with grandfather Oudot in attendance. The man in question is certainly painted as a significant and strong character. The size and positioning of the characters in Courbet’s works are purposeful. One need only review the locations and sizes of the characters portrayed in *The Studio* for this to be seen. Once it is understood that the character’s size and location are germane to the reading of the painting, the logical next step is to read that figure as much more than simply a “republican of 1793.” Courbet, even more of a dedicated family man than a revolutionary, could be seen as recording the recent death of a close family member, with his beloved and admired grandfather Oudot in attendance, either literally or symbolically. The best reading of this painting as more than a family funeral, containing artistic significance beyond simple representation, is that of Courbet himself who said in Antwerp in 1861 that *Burial at Ornans* was “...in reality, the burial of Romantic art.” In his 1861 *profession de foi*, Courbet took this position regarding *The Burial* in his explanation of Realist art, particularly with respect to his own art, as will be discussed in detail in chapter five.

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100 Ibid, 174.
101 The painting could also be read as the final laying to rest of the revolutionary ideals of 1848.
In *The Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair*, Courbet again uses the tropes of history painting and applies them to the lives of the villagers. He shows us the sturdy livestock and equally sturdy peasants in all their rustic glory, an historical equestrian piece in many ways, but one in which the tropes have been turned on their head. In lieu of nobles and warriors of the past, typically depicted in heroic style, we see that convention modified to signify the importance of the great masses of the rural population rather than a single, individualized personality. The great man of the past is replaced by the common man of contemporary life.

Addressing these three manifesto works is key, as they were among the group which Courbet sent to the Salon of 1850/1851 and were the ones commented upon in particular by Proudhon on the occasion of their first meeting. According to Clark,
that Salon was particularly political\(^{103}\) in nature, with several of the works representing the forces of order. Meissonier’s *La Barricade* and Muller’s *Roll Call of the Last Victims of the Terror* provided illustration of the “horrors of revolution and the necessity of moderation.”\(^{104}\)

In one small way Courbet did allow his art to come to the support of the revolutionary cause for which so many of his friends fought. When Baudelaire, Champfleury and Charles Touban\(^{*}\) mutually conceived of a revolutionary paper to be published during the early days of the uprising, Courbet was willing to sketch the frontispiece for them, a fighter atop the barricades waving a musket and the tricolor flag, clearly reminiscent of Delacroix’s\(^{*}\) *Liberty Leading the People* of an earlier generation. The publication, *Salut Public*, lasted two issues.

The victors of 1848 continued to control the official artworld of France as sanctioned by the Académie.

**The Actions**

During the great revolutionary year of 1848 Courbet took no overt political or revolutionary action at all, and Gerstle Mack reports in his biography of Courbet, that “the commencement of the revolution disturbed (him) very slightly.”\(^{105}\) This relative indifference to the bloody actions in the streets and the politics surrounding them, which was similar at the time to the initial indifference of his friend Baudelaire,\(^{106}\)

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\(^{104}\) Ibid, 131.


was to change dramatically by the time of the Commune. It is yet one more example of the corrections in the trajectory of Courbet’s life.

Courbet’s activities during the revolution of 1848 are difficult to assess, particularly in view of the difficulty of accepting his letters at face value. As Mack further observed in his definitive biography: “Even in his calmest moments Courbet never allowed factual precision to hamper his inclination to overstate and dramatize.” However, those activities must be assessed in order to have a full understanding of the change which took place in Courbet’s approach to revolution over the twenty three years between the uprisings of 1848 and 1871. One of the key pieces of evidence speaking to this observation is his letter to family of April 17, 1848. When addressing the actions of the National Guard and the people of Paris he told his family “I will wear my National Guard outfit every day. I will look splendid in it, and they will take me for an enraged citizen.” Yet contrary to Courbet’s remarks in this letter, there is absolutely no evidence that he ever joined the Guard or took part in any other proactive revolutionary activities. In his authoritative work *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, T.J. Clark confirms that fact and adds the observation that “hardly a trace of political involvement in the streets...he did not fight on the barricades; he avoided claiming that, (italics in original) even in 1871,” a clear reference to Courbet’s self-reinvention while campaigning for political office with the Commune. We will argue later in this thesis

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that Courbet’s claims in his 1871 *profession de foi* were exaggerated. Clark’s observation indicates that he concurs that the *profession* was revisionist, but that even with a certain level of exaggeration, Courbet did not go so far as to claim actual experience at the barricades.

His early apathy turned to shock when two months after the April 17th letter, Courbet again wrote to his family, during the bloody June Days, describing events in the city, and now telling them that he was most definitely not involved in the fighting. “We are in (the middle of) a terrible civil war...I don’t fight for two reasons. First, because I do not believe in wars fought with guns and cannon, and because it runs counter to my principles...The second reason is that I have no weapons and cannot be tempted.”111 Compared to the seemingly jocular remark in the earlier letter, this comment is in accordance with the pacifist principles of Proudhon, and would seem to carry more weight in assessing the reality of the situation.

As violence continued in the capital into 1849 Courbet again reassured his family that he was not involved, telling them that “as for me, in this business I wage my fight entirely with words.”112 It is fortunate for both Courbet and the artworld that such was the case. This letter was written two days after the opening of the Salon of 1849, which gave Courbet what may be his greatest recognition from that institution. Among the twelve canvasses which he submitted was *Dinner at Ornans*, which won him his only gold medal and which is his only major work to have been purchased by the government, truly an exceptional year for Courbet. This painting, which has been

112 Ibid, 83.
described by art historian Michael Fried as the first of Courbet’s “breakthrough pictures” was honored by the Salon which the Metropolitan Museum of Art considered to be “exceptionally liberal” in its views. The portrayal of rustics in a homely atmosphere was quite acceptable to that particular jury as it compared well formally to the works of great Dutch masters. As written by Champfleury at the time, “yesterday no one knew his name...today, his name is on everyone’s lips.”

Up until this time in his life, Courbet’s emotionally founded revolutionary perspective had been largely a result of his grandfather’s influence. Not only had grandfather Oudot been a revolutionary republican, but the family, particularly Gustave, regarded that fact with pride. His influence extended through the generations. “There are certain laws of birth that are difficult to break. My grandfather, who was a 1793 republican, adopted a maxim that he always repeated to me: ‘Shout loud and walk straight.’ My father has always followed it and I have done the same.”

His devotion to his grandfather extended as far as his refusal to spend the summer of 1845 in Flagey with his parents, so that he could live with his grandfather in Ornans. He even wrote to his parents that he wished to spend the time with his grandparents “because they raised me and have always been very good to me, I want to live with them as much as possible,” certainly a testament to affection and devotion coming from a young man of twenty five living in the bohemian atmosphere of Left Bank Paris. Grandfather Oudot, the family’s

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117 Ibid, 56.
revolutionary hero, died in 1848, leaving the artist without his guidance, the revolutionary traveler without his compass. For the first twenty nine years of his life, Courbet had the benefit of a strong advocate of revolutionary progress in a man whom he greatly respected and admired. That voice was now silent.

But, on Friday, April 11, 1851 a new personal influence came to bear on Courbet, and the seeds that had been planted by his family began to flower under the warmth that he soon felt for Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, despite the notable lack of reciprocal warmth from the philosopher. As Proudhon recorded in his diary for that day “April 11. – Went out, lunched with Richardet...the artist Courbet, Professor Bonvolot...”

We note that the journal entry does not refer to “my old friend Courbet”, “my associate Courbet”, or anything of that nature which would indicate anything other than a first meeting of celebrities. Proudhon’s note is crisp, clear and emotionally uninvolved. He goes on to note several of Courbet’s works, including Burial at Ornans, Return from the Fair, and The Stonebreakers, observing that the artist’s work depicts the “ugliness of reality, but with great power.”

Proudhon’s diary record of this meeting, first noted by Bowness, is the earliest written indication that Courbet and Proudhon actually met. The scholarly literature typically indicates the supposed earlier meeting date, generally given as 1847 or 1848, which has become canonical. However, this later date (April 1851) is the only one supported by documentation. This meeting has all the appearances of being

119 Ibid, 124.
120 For the earlier date see Rubin (1980), Crapo (1991), Metropolitan Museum of Art (2008), Mack (1951).
an arranged meeting of celebrities as suggested by Bowness.\textsuperscript{121} Proudhon, already the famous philosopher, plays host to the more recently famous painter. The meeting occurred just eleven days after the closing of the Salon for that year. This timing is significant but previously unremarked upon, likely due to the fact that the dates of these two occurrences (the closing of the Salon and the documented meeting) are found in totally unrelated databases, the records of the Salon and Proudhon’s \textit{Carnets}. It was at this Salon that Courbet exhibited, among a total of nine paintings, the three paintings mentioned by Proudhon in his journal. There was at the time lively debate in French intellectual circles about Courbet and his work, particularly the three works mentioned by Proudhon, none of which were to receive a medal at the award announcement of May 3. In his \textit{Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution}, T.J. Clark characterizes the critical reaction to Courbet’s entries in this Salon as “equivocal and uncertain.”\textsuperscript{122} He says that “I judged the overall reaction of eight critics to be one of outright fury, of eighteen to be unmistakable hostility, of five to be criticism without rancor, of seven to be some kind of equivocation…and of three only to be outright admiration.”\textsuperscript{123}

All three of these paintings had been included in the Salon, not due to election by the selection committee, but because Courbet had been awarded a gold medal at the 1849 Salon, for \textit{After Dinner at Ornans}, (which, in a rarity for Courbet, was

\textsuperscript{121} Bowness, “Courbet’s Proudhon,” 124.
\textsuperscript{122} Clark, \textit{Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution}, 133.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid, 133.
purchased by the French government) and therefore, could not be denied\textsuperscript{124} under the rules in effect in 1851. Lack of medals awarded by the Salon jury was nothing new to Courbet. In fact, over several years of submissions, paintings such as \textit{Return from the Conference}, \textit{Burial at Ornans}, \textit{The Studio}, and \textit{The Awakening} were rejected in their entirety either by the Salon or the Exposition Universelle.

There is little evidence to support the contention that Courbet and Proudhon had met in 1848, and even less to suggest that they were “constant companions”, an assertion made in 1956 in the George Woodcock biography of Proudhon which is largely hagiographic\textsuperscript{125} in nature. It remains a distortion of the relationship which has been maintained until very recently,\textsuperscript{126} and is still maintained by many scholars. This distortion has created the incorrect inference that the relationship was mutually sought and mutually enjoyed. Such was not the case as will be discussed in depth in chapter five. Prior to May 25, 1863, when Courbet wrote his first extant letter to Proudhon, he had written extensively to friends like Francis Wey (9 letters), Max Buchon (9 letters), Alfred Bruyas\textsuperscript{*} (11 letters), Champfleury (8 letters), and Amand Gautier\textsuperscript{*} (7 letters), but not a single letter to Proudhon. The bulk of this correspondence with friends dated from 1849, prior to which he had communicated almost exclusively with his family, his most prolific correspondence reserved for family members, with an impressive eighty letters written to them in the years from 1837 to 1863.

\textsuperscript{124} Metropolitan Museum of Art, \textit{Gustave Courbet}, 432. Notes. The Salon changed its rules from time to time, resulting in the inclusion or rejection of various works, depending on the rules in effect for any particular Salon.

\textsuperscript{125} This work, while often cited, itself lacks much in the way of citations and is filled with praiseful observations.

\textsuperscript{126} Bowness, “Courbet’s Proudhon,” 124.
The meeting mentioned by Proudhon was in Sainte Pélagie prison, where the philosopher was jailed for his rhetoric which was officially deemed to be sedition. Ironically, it would be the same prison in which Courbet served the bulk of his sentence in 1871 for his actions during the period of the Commune. The incarceration of political prisoners in Sainte Pélagie was quite civilized by general prison standards. Built in 1665 as a hospice for retired prostitutes, it had no cells at all, most prisoners being housed in military style barracks. The more significant of the political prisoners, like Proudhon and later Courbet, had private rooms with doors which were kept unlocked other than at night and were allowed visitors at the prison and even home visits with their families. Additionally, they were allowed the benefit of living à la pistol, which meant that they could have their meals delivered (at their own expense) from Parisian restaurants, a benefit which Courbet was quite happy to take advantage of.

In one of his minimal written references to Courbet, Proudhon notes that upon his release on June 4, 1852, “June 4, 1852 – Walked to the Meudon with Darimon, Bouteville, Courbet.”127 The artist was one of the people who met Proudhon upon his release, when they strolled to the Meudon forest for what T.J. Clark regarded as “an orgy of beer and song,”128 an attribution typical for Courbet, but frankly suspect with respect to the prudish and unsociable Proudhon. In contrast to the ebullient and hard drinking Courbet, Proudhon was noted for his abstemious nature. In his biography of

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127 Ibid, 124.
128 Clark, Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution, 156.
Courbet, Mack notes that Proudhon was “like most zealots, somewhat narrow minded and self-righteous. His moral code was rigid, his personal life irreproachable.”

Throughout the years leading up to 1853 Courbet’s art was foremost, his family was his greatest influence, and his political activities were minimal. That changed with his meeting of Proudhon in 1851, his upcoming turn from socialist art to commercial art, and his soon to be increasing level of political activism. By 1851 it had become clear to friends and family that Courbet was now becoming a serious socialist. Nine months prior to Courbet’s public proclamation of same, Cuenot* wrote to Courbet’s sister Juliette in February of 1851 that her brother, “is a terrible socialist, that he is the leader of a band of conspirators. This, they add, is obvious in his painting. The man is a savage,” a bit of an exaggeration to be sure, but not far off the mark. The changes first mentioned in the beginning of this chapter had now become apparent to friends and family, as well as the public.

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130 Ibid, 52,53. Here Mack quotes from a letter from Cuenot to Juliette Courbet.
CHAPTER FOUR: COURBET – THE MAN, HIS ART AND HIS ACTIONS, 1848-1877

“Realist stories, laced with philosophy and socialist politics, will be a positive substitute for the worthless hackneyed novel. I could do ten books like this, if someone helped me.”¹³¹ (1868) “I am not only a painter, but a man; I can give my reasoned opinion in morality, in philosophy, in politics, in poetry, as in painting.”¹³² (1853)

Gustave Courbet

“he has the mind of a man of the world; nevertheless he is nothing but a painter; he can neither talk nor write; classical studies have left few traces on him...though he talks a great deal, his thoughts are disconnected.”¹³³ Yes, decidedly, he is stupid!”¹³⁴

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon 1863

“If Courbet, who is said to be very conceited, derives his conceit from the lessons he thinks he is teaching us, I am tempted to send him back to school. He should know that he is nothing but a poor, great, and very ignorant man”¹³⁵

Victor Hugo 1866

Raconteur and reprobate, a Rabelaisian character with truly gargantuan appetites, in the years leading up to his participation in the Paris Commune of 1871, Courbet became a caricature of himself.

¹³¹ Chu, Letters of Gustave Courbet, 325. In this letter to Buchon, Courbet is referring to a pamphlet, Une election au grande-duche de Gerolstein, by Ordinaire.
¹³² Rubin, Realism and Social Vision in Courbet and Proudhon, 79. Here Rubin cites Courbet per Silvestre, Histoire des artistes vivants. This reference has the appearance of being Silvestre’s interpretation of Courbet’s words in his letter to Alfred Bruyas of October, 1853.
¹³³ Mack, Gustave Courbet, 184.
¹³⁴ Rubin, Realism and Social Vision in Courbet and Proudhon, 160.
¹³⁵ Mack, Gustave Courbet, 185.
The Man

The personal myth which came to consume the man was that of the rustic cavalier; the hearty, hard drinking Franc-Comtois peasant-philosopher, capable of swapping stories and drinking until dawn with the best of the Parisian bohemians, as well as the sturdy tradesman. In that time and place there existed a literary/artistic convention to which Courbet subscribed. In literature, the form of this convention was the slightly veiled autobiography, created by George Sand and other authors. For Courbet, the convention manifested itself in his numerous self-portraits, which Chu refers to as "posing". She tells us that his self-portraits in a variety of poses create a "visual, partly fictional autobiography." This is shown in his portrait of himself and Bruyas, *The Meeting*, in which he posits himself as a traveling artisan, a worker with tools, the equal in every way of his rich patron.

The slim dandy of 1852 was gone, that phase having passed, replaced by the sturdy provincial-come-to-town, continuing to be concerned with cutting a dashing figure, but now becoming robust after years of excess. His drinking and womanizing were beginning to take a toll. Even when he was visiting his family in the supposedly restorative environs of Ornans, he told art critic and friend Champfleury, "In Ornans I frequent a café of poachers and outlaws. I screw a waitress. None of that cheers me

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137 Ibid, 19.
Champfleury clearly took notice of his friend’s dissipation. In his April 1865 letter to close mutual friend Max Buchon he told him, “I have come to realize that, gifted with great talents as a painter, he has let them drown in beer.”

“Neither doctrines nor explanations of his system can alter the fact that Courbet has gone off the track since The Burial and After Dinner at Ornans. Ever since he painted those two pictures I have regarded him as a man gone astray.”

Figs 6 and 7: Le Fils de Père Duchene and Souvenirs de La Commune

He had finally come to be the man so savagely caricatured in Souvenirs de La Commune and Le Fils de Père Duchene, personally toppling the Vendôme column, destroying it in the guise of the old Stonebreaker himself. He had become, in the seemingly uncharitable and somewhat subjective words of historian Alistair Horne “gross and heavily bearded and also sodden with drink...noisy and drunken old

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138 Chu, Letters of Gustave Courbet, 132.
139 Mack, Gustave Courbet, 198.
140 Ibid, 140.
The years had not been kind to Courbet, both with respect to his physical health and to his art.

The years from Proudhon’s release from prison in 1852 and his death in 1865 were difficult as well; filled with writing, family problems and legal issues for the anarchist, leaving little time or energy for the interaction with Courbet which is so often erroneously cited. The documentary evidence does not support high levels of interaction.

Fig. 8: Nadar photo of Proudon, circa mid 1850s

On April 22, 1858 Proudhon published his most powerful anti-Catholic Church work, *De la Justice dans la Revolution et dans l'Eglise*, in which Proudhon proclaimed that "the object of philosophy is to teach man to think for himself."\(^{142}\)

Within a week the work was suppressed by the French authorities and banned by the Prussians. Charges were brought, and on June 6\(^{th}\) Proudhon was in court defending himself against claims of "reproduction in bad faith of false news...Excitement of hatred among citizens...(and) Outrage to public and religious morality."\(^{143}\) In a one day hearing, Proudhon was convicted and sentenced to three years in prison and a fine of four thousand francs. Even his publisher and his printer were convicted, imprisoned and fined. In this atmosphere intended to suppress his writing by convicting all who assisted him, Proudhon saw no alternative than to flee the country, leaving for Brussels by the following month.

From 1858 to 1862 Proudhon remained in Brussels, his wife and family accompanying him for short periods, during which they suffered various illnesses and endured domestic strife,\(^{144}\) but then returning to France and leaving him periodically alone in his exile. This state of affairs, during which Proudhon continued to write, lasted for four years until his return to Paris following a declaration of amnesty.

For his remaining years in Paris, Proudhon continued to work as best his declining health would allow him. Worsening asthmatic conditions accompanied by what might today be diagnosed as congestive heart failure caused a rapid physical deterioration, as he told his friend Delhasse in 1864, "My eyes see the letters dancing


\(^{143}\) Ibid, 216.

\(^{144}\) Ibid, 226.
on the books I read, my hand trembles in writing, and I can collect my thoughts only with difficulty.”

In November of 1864, Proudhon’s old friend, ally, and fellow anarchist Mikhail Bakunin abandoned a journey to Florence to travel to Proudhon’s bedside for one last good natured all-night debate, just as in the old days. On January 19th, 1865 Pierre-Joseph Proudhon died at age fifty-six. His burial at the cemetery of Passy was attended by six thousand mourners. Gustave Courbet was not among them.

The Art

In these years Courbet’s artistic output registered a significant change in subject matter as well as a deterioration in quality. With a single exception (*The Beggar’s Alms*, universally disliked by the critics), the early socialist and monumental canvases were gone, replaced by his more marketable portraits, landscapes, hunting scenes, and nudes. As he channeled his revolutionary impulses into direct political action, he channeled his muse into becoming a commercial success. None of this work would approach the quality of his earlier efforts, and almost all of it was derivative and uninspired.

Art critics and historians have typically countenanced those efforts by attempting to insert a critical gloss on the work. Even Wagner, in her excellent piece on

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145 Ibid, 263.
146 Courbet’s letters indicate that he was in Ornans the day of Proudhon’s death but was made aware of it by the next day. There was time to go to Paris.
147 This painting, done in 1868 was Courbet’s final serious attempt at socially conscious painting. It was roundly criticized by the commentators of the day as his final degeneration into ugliness for the sake of ugliness.
Courbet’s landscapes, while acknowledging the financial aspects of the work, tells the reader that “they represent an idealization of the natural world,” and this may well be accurate. Yet, in a free market economy, marketability is key, the simple answer is best, Occam’s Razor holds. Merchantability and quality are not mutually exclusive, but as noted elsewhere in this thesis, Courbet himself downplayed the significance of these efforts, and art historian T.J. Clark considered Courbet’s landscapes to be formulaic and “the weakest part of Courbet’s art.”

Although, as always with Courbet’s letters, care must be taken to avoid blind acceptance of his exaggerations, it is clear that his portraiture was becoming increasingly in-demand. By 1865 he was writing to family and friends that “I am gaining a matchless reputation as a portrait painter. The ladies I won’t be able to do here will have themselves done this winter in Paris.” “I have received over two thousand ladies in my studio, all wishing to have their portraits painted after they saw the portrait of princess Karoly.” It is arguable, and probable, that the actual number of ladies may have been between one or two hundred, rather than the two thousand claimed, but his output of canvases was impressive compared to his days of manifesto paintings during which his output consisted of a few monumental paintings per year.

By the mid 1860’s Courbet’s art began to distance itself from the teachings of Proudhon, for whom art demanded social accountability. “Art, like liberty, has as its

150 Clark, Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution, 132.
151 Chu, Letters of Gustave Courbet, 267.
152 Chu, Letters of Gustave Courbet, 268.
subject man and things;...as its goal it has justice,” declared Proudhon. But, Courbet became less interested in social justice, at least insofar as his painting was concerned. He even went so far in 1866 as to paint an idealized portrait of the finely pedigreed dogs of the Comte de Choiseul, a patron of Courbet’s in the 1860’s, and a member of the French aristocracy at whose estate he visited in the fall of 1866, a canine depiction far removed from the simple inclusion of the farmer’s dog in The Burial. With a lingering trace of his bourgeois roots, and the associated fascination with his “betters”, he informed his sister when describing the count, that “he has the truly great, distinguished manners of France’s best-bred ages,” a singularly descriptive remark from the self-proclaimed revolutionary. He waxes eloquent in his description of the white tie dinner parties, the ocean view, and the helpful domestic servants. In a theme that Courbet was to express for years, aristocracy that criticized him for his socialist paintings was essentially evil and doomed “they have only one or two years left,” while the aristocrats whom supported his lifestyle were distinguished and well-bred.

In addition to his portraiture, his output of landscapes was prodigious. Of the sixty-plus paintings which he submitted to the Salon up to 1853, only fifteen were landscapes. But by 1862, when Courbet was visiting the Saintonge region in the west of France and staying at the chateau of his wealthy friend Etienne Baudry, he

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153 Rubin, Realism and Social Vision in Courbet and Proudhon, 66.
154 Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gustave Courbet, 316. Laurence des Cars.
155 Chu, Letters of Gustave Courbet, 298.
156 Ibid, 298.
157 Rubin, Realism and Social Vision in Courbet and Proudhon, 8.
was able to send thirty three landscapes to the dealer Luquet. This transition has been characterized as being “a more effective, if more subtle, social tool” by Rubin, and as “an implicit challenge to governmental power” by Klaus Herding. But another, more mundane, reading offers itself. Rather than being any kind of subtle social tool, this transition in interest is better explained by basic marketing issues.

Courbet turned to the creation of quantities of lesser genre art as a response to his inability to find financial success in the sale of socially activist art. In the bourgeois art market of the 1860’s in France, moderately successful merchants were more likely to purchase landscapes and still-lifes than was the government to purchase monumental paintings for museums or palaces. By mid-summer of 1861 Courbet was bragging to his family about the amounts of money his paintings were beginning to realize, all of which were landscapes or hunting scenes of one sort or another. This trend towards financial gain rather than socialist commentary in the art itself continued, and was even magnified after his participation in the Commune which led to an unanticipated increase in the value of his paintings (which he was more than happy to acknowledge) as will be discussed later in this chapter.

This was remarkably different from his attitude as a young man of twenty seven, when he told his family with respect to the commercial aspects of portraiture, that “there is no way around it, if you have to earn money with stuff like that (portraits)

159 Rubin, Realism and Social Vision in Courbet and Proudhon, 72.
161 Chu, Letters of Gustave Courbet, 197.
you would be better off turning a wheel, at least you would not have to give up your convictions."\textsuperscript{162} However, convictions are mutable things, they change with time and circumstances, and so they did for Courbet.

Evidently, Courbet himself was aware that these paintings were less desirable aesthetically than were his previous monumental works and his significant figure paintings. In 1861 he told Auguste Poulet-Malassis that "as I did not want to send only animals and landscapes to the Universal Exposition, I began a figure painting that I hope to finish."\textsuperscript{163} This change to a market driven strategy was encouraged by Champfleury when he told Max Buchon that "Courbet should paint simple subjects, landscapes of his own province; these are his true vocation; but great gods! Let him avoid symbolism and satire for which he has no talent!"\textsuperscript{164} Champfleury’s comments were borne out by the market. Upon Courbet’s death, great paintings such as \textit{Burial at Ornans} and \textit{The Studio} remained unsold and had to be auctioned or donated by his family.

It is here that we see the beginning of Courbet’s move from artistic activism to political activism. In the post 1848 political climate in France, Courbet knew that while works like \textit{Return From the Conference} (his savage anti-clerical satire) would never be accepted by the Salon, \textit{The Battle of the Stags} and \textit{The Fox Hunt} would be quite politically acceptable.

\textsuperscript{162} Chu, \textit{Letters of Gustave Courbet}, 58.
\textsuperscript{163} Chu, \textit{Letters of Gustave Courbet}, 189.
\textsuperscript{164} Mack, \textit{Gustave Courbet}, 186.
In his letter of June 1861 to his family, he goes to great lengths describing the prices he was receiving for these sort of pieces. The paintings became, at best, decorative, but decorative art is rarely good art. The resistance by the regime, and hence, the artistic establishment, to acceptance of Courbet’s critical work is, in fact, what led to the deeper cooperation between Courbet and Proudhon which would come with their mutual interest in *Return from the Conference*.

Courbet’s hunting scenes are notably derivative. Capitalizing on the great popularity of the English painter Edwin Landseer and that artist’s success at the Exhibition Universelle of 1855, Courbet created his large hunting canvases. This was a natural direction for Courbet to proceed as he had a great love of hunting and the outdoors. Ever the studio painter, and working not from life but from carcasses found in Paris, he created works which too often reflect those of the English master of the genre, but reflect that master’s work poorly. It is true that Landseer’s work is more Romantic than Realist, and in his hunting scenes, Courbet transgresses his Realist code and indulges himself in a bit of Romantic art, his homage to Landseer. But, Courbet’s work pales in comparison to *Deer and Deerhounds in a Mountain Torrent, Study of a Dead Stag*, and certainly in comparison to Landseer’s 1851 magnum opus, *The Monarch of the Glen*. Courbet’s kills, painted from taxidermy specimens in Paris, are stiff and unconvincing.

One important facet of Courbet’s hunting scenes has been overlooked by every major commentator for over a hundred years. Courbet’s paintings are actually not about hunting. They are about killing, very much a different thing. As Fried noted in

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Courbet's Realism, Courbet, who painted himself into The Quarry, was essentially an "agent of pain and death." Courbet had a propensity for mass slaughter, "I have gone hunting about ten times. I killed this magnificent stag, four or five bucks, about thirty hares," reciting a litany of death. By 1867, when Courbet painted Death of the Stag, the viewer can see that, as Fried put it, "the depiction of pain and violence becomes increasingly explicit, with disturbing consequences for Courbet's art."

There is nothing honorable about abuse of the prey, nothing honorable about savagery among the hounds as depicted by Courbet. The true hunter relishes the spirit of the chase, the work of a good dog, the beauty of a fine firearm, the feeding of a family through the hunter's own efforts, and most importantly, the spirit of the hunted animal itself. Courbet's work memorializes none of these things. He memorializes death, the kill, the corpse of the animal, his work is not an homage to Lanseer. It is an homage to death. In fairness to Courbet, this reading of his work brings the sensitivities of the twenty-first century practices of hunting to bear on a nineteenth century hunter and painter.

A review of his paintings of nudes indicates that, in these years, Courbet's relationships with women colored his artistic efforts. Like Proudhon, who firmly believed that women were meant to be subservient to men, "woman, who has neither

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166 Fried’s work in Courbet’s Realism has been criticized significantly by Roger Kimball. In his Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008) he points out that Fried’s reading of The Quarry presents an overly “self referential” vision of the painting. Additionally, Fried’s interpretation is held by Kimball to be too Freudian in nature, inserting sexual issues into a work which, according to Kimball, have none. For an in-depth discussion of this subject, see Roger Kimball, Tenured Radicals, 88-94.

167 Fried, Courbet’s Realism, 174.


169 Fried, Courbet’s Realism, 184.
aesthetic nor dialectic faculties, must be subject to and faithful to man,”¹⁷⁰ Courbet accorded women a status that allowed for them to be little more than a sexual convenience for men, or at the very least, for him.¹⁷¹ As he wrote to the man who was arguably his closest long time friend, from whom he had almost no secrets, Max Buchon, “knowing there are women all over the world, I see no reason to carry one with me.”¹⁷² He considered himself to be quite handsome still, yet as he had for many years, he preferred the attentions of prostitutes to meaningful relations with women. “I am as inclined to get married as I am to hang myself”¹⁷³ Despite his disinclination to marry, or perhaps because of it, he did manage to sire an illegitimate son from one of his liaisons, a son with whom he had little contact and who died young.¹⁷⁴

As he recounted to Buchon in the same letter, “here are the setbacks in my love affairs...Jealousy on the part of Camelia...Rose in prison; Blanche will replace her...mere Cadet in love with me”¹⁷⁵ All of whom are considered by Chu to be ladies of a local brothel. By the early 1870’s Courbet considered the keeping of a mistress to be a simple affair of economics and convenience in which, due to his immense ego, he could not conceive of rejection. Regarding his offer of same to a local woman, “It is impossible that Mlle Leontine, despite the stupid advice she may receive from the peasants, may not accept the brilliant position that I am offering her. She will be indisputedly the most envied woman in France and she could be reborn another three

¹⁷⁰ Chu, Letters of Gustave Courbet, 231.
¹⁷¹ Mack, Gustave Courbet, 39.
¹⁷² Chu, Letters of Gustave Courbet, 126.
¹⁷³ Ibid, 52.
¹⁷⁴ Mack, Gustave Courbet, 86.
¹⁷⁵ Chu, Letters of Gustave Courbet, 126.
times without ever coming across a position like this one, "a heady offer indeed for a woman of the provinces. Nevertheless, an offer which was rejected.

Although there may seem to the twenty first century observer to be a strong Proudhonian influence in Courbet’s treatment of women, the influence, like much of Proudhon’s influence on Courbet, was misunderstood by the painter. Siegel represents in his 2008 essay *Ambition, Commitment, and Subversion in Courbet’s Realism*, that “there seems little reason to think that his views about women were very far from those of his misogynist friend Proudhon.” But, Proudhon’s attitudes, although flawed and clearly misogynist, were intellectual in nature. He too treated women with serious disregard, but his approach strongly differed from the objectification which was the hallmark of Courbet. Proudhon’s relationship with women in general was that of an intellectual superior to his intellectual inferiors. He contended, in his posthumously published *La Pornocratie, ou les femmes dans les temps moderns*, that female Parisian society, in its attempt at securing sexual as well as intellectual equivalency with men, was a precursor of societal devolution.

It is easy to see Courbet’s attitudes reflected in his nudes. He managed to slip away from any artistic reference to the classic nudes of the past, no echo of the *Venus of Urbino* in his work. Instead, Courbet took the painting of women away from the classic to what can only be called erotic art, depictions with significant lesbian overtones, to women objectified in the extreme. It would be difficult to find a more

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176 Ibid, 466.
objectified treatment of a woman's body than we find in *The Origin of the World*, a headless female torso bearing neither arms nor legs, but exposing clearly defined genitalia and done in a style evocative of modern photo-realism. Unlike Manet's *Olympia*, which broke from the traditional model of the nude, and is considered by T.J. Clark to be "the founding monument of modern art," Courbet's work was not notably new with respect to formalistic aspects such as flatness of the scene, outlining of the body, or frankness of the gaze, all of which differentiated *Olympia* from nudes of the past. Art historian Michael Fried in *Courbet's Realism* points out that this change in the aspect of the gaze in *Olympia* actually puts the beholder at the command of the subject, reversing the traditional power relationship. Courbet's *Origin* could not do the same. It privileges and empowers the masculine beholder at the expense of the subject. As Fried put it with reference to *Young Women*, Courbet has rendered the woman as an "object (s) of masculine sexual possession." A comparison of *Origin* with *Olympia* is particularly germane as Courbet took Manet to task over that work, referring to it as "formless and flat." Admittedly, *Origin*, along with the lesbian inspired *Sleep*, was done on commission for Kalil Bey, a wealthy patron of the arts with exotic tastes, who had been the Ottoman ambassador to the

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180 Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, 201.
181 Ibid, 197.
court of the Czar at St. Petersburg, and who kept the paintings in an enclosed space for his private viewing. Still, for a painter who was justly famous for allowing no one to define his art for him, ever, the treatment had to have come from within, as he accepted no dictates from his customers, the government, or anyone else. Up until the 1960's the painting entitled The Origin of the World was generally referred to as an unnamed painting for a private collector, and never reproduced. Origin and Sleep provide examples of what art historian Frederick Hart referred to as Courbet’s “often provocative nudes.” Overall during these years, we see a movement away from socially conscious art to art of a clearly mercantile nature, uninspired daubing which sold well into the new bourgeois artworld which was growing in France.

It is difficult to determine precisely to what extent his political actions contributed to this change in his art, and it would be imprudent to suggest that they were the only causative factor. It can be argued that the marketing issues were significant, as were the social conditions in France. The landscapes and portraits which Courbet created did have a stronger market among the emerging middle classes who were now purchasing art. These growing classes bought art that reflected their lives. The transformation of art at this time can be viewed as representative of the Hegelian model in which artists first represent a prior universal, transitioning to a particular form of that universal, finally resolving into Realism.

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Additionally, the suggestion could be made that the deterioration in his art was simply a natural effect of ageing. However, although that hypothesis is interesting, it is difficult to either prove or disprove. Too many artists have created some of their best works at advanced ages for that argument to be accepted without significant research into a large number of artists and the work they produced at various times in their lives, which is outside the scope of this thesis. Michaelangelo painted his *Last Judgment* at age sixty six and was appointed to be the architect of St. Peter’s Basilica at age seventy four. Monet painted his great series of the Houses of Parliament at sixty four and Rembrandt was creating brilliant self portraits in his fifties, so there is at least anecdotal evidence that age was not a significant factor for several notable artists. Any of these forces could have contributed to the deterioration noted, but the deterioration itself is evident. Fried observes in *Courbet’s Realism* that his work had become “relatively undistinguished well before his establishment of a workshop for producing mediocre landscapes”\(^{185}\) which occurred in the 1870s. Whether the changes in his art were due to politics, markets or ageing, the deterioration of the art itself is evident.

The Actions

There is only one documented case of a meeting between Courbet and Proudhon subsequent to Proudhon’s release from prison in 1852. That meeting was on the occasion of Courbet’s personally mounted exposition *G. Courbet. Exposition de quarante tableaux de ses oeuvres* (1855). This exhibition, a commercial and critical

\(^{185}\) Fried, *Courbet’s Realism*, 2.
failure, presented Proudhon with his opportunity to make his previously noted observations regarding Courbet's gifts as a painter as well as his notable ego. Any other assertions regarding time spent together by these two men are strictly anecdotal in nature and are assumed to exist only by those who presume unrecorded interactions at bohemian haunts. Did both men patronize the Brasserie Andler? Certainly, it was famous among the Parisian literati and both men are named as regular patrons in the literature. Is it valid to deduce from that fact that the two men were in personal contact? Certainly not, Proudhon's attentions were involved elsewhere.

By 1863 Courbet and Proudhon were becoming closer, at least according to Courbet, with respect to the sense of collaboration, if not intimacy, as it was then that Proudhon began work on his posthumously published work Du principe de l'art. This extensive philosophical essay had begun its life as a brief pamphlet intended to defend and explain Courbet's scandal plagued Return from the Conference (a depiction of all seven deadly sins being committed by a troop of Catholic priests) which had been rejected by the Salon of 1863 at the direction of the Ministry of the Interior, and was destined for an exhibition in London.

Inasmuch as Proudhon had himself been jailed by the government for works like What is Property?, De la Justice, and his essays in Le Representant du Peuple and other anarchist publications, it is not surprising that he would be willing to undertake such a task, especially since it was initially intended as a four page pamphlet. Prior to

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186 Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gustave Courbet, 434. Notes.
187 Mack, Gustave Courbet, 59.
188 Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gustave Courbet, 436. Notes.
1863, in all his correspondence, Courbet mentions Proudhon only three times, mainly having to do with his intended depiction of the philosopher in *The Studio* (or, its notably more cumbersome full title, *The Painter's Studio, A True Allegory Summarizing a Period of Seven Years in my Life as an Artist*).

Few records remain of Courbet's "assassinating" Proudhon with letters, possibly due to purposeful destruction of them. But one extant letter, that of the summer of 1863 may stand as representative of what Proudhon meant. In that letter Courbet imparts his pearls of wisdom to Proudhon in the form of forty six aphorisms concerning all manner of subjects, "The man who spends his life amassing a fortune has no business in the intellectual world...The sons of (rich) families have no idea how to use their money...One must become a millionaire...The extreme love one may feel for a woman is sickness...Work requires the domination of the senses and the preservation of one's authority over the woman." Given some uncertainties regarding exact dates, this may well be the letter which occasioned Proudhon's outburst. Proudhon's deteriorating health in these final years of his life kept the work from being published until after his death.

Three years after the death of Proudhon, Courbet began his era of public political commentary with the publishing of two pamphlets attacking the Catholic Church, *Les Cures en goguette, and La Mort de Jeannot: Les Frais du culte*. These pamphlets were meant to accompany his paintings of the same names during their exposition at

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the 1868 Ghent Salon.\textsuperscript{191} He also wrote, but failed to publish, his first written, public social commentary \textit{Opinions et propos d'un citoyen d'Ornans}.\textsuperscript{192}

The political myth that Courbet created in 1871 was a reinvention of himself in the form to which he aspired: dedicated socialist, man of action, man of the people. In his \textit{profession de foi} which he publicly announced in his open letter to the editor of \textit{La Rappel} while campaigning for political office in the Commune, he overstated his contributions to the rising of 1848, claiming that in 1848 he “hoisted the flag of Realism (and) …started a socialist club, as opposed to the clubs of the Jacobins, Montagnards, and others, whom I called ‘republicans without natures of their own.’”\textsuperscript{193} “The republic – one, indivisible, and authoritarian – was frightening.”\textsuperscript{194}

The term republican in early and mid nineteenth century France represented parties which espoused a progressive agenda. In the heady days of the French Revolution, the Jacobins and Montagnards were considered to be left-leaning affiliations which opposed the French monarchy, and fought, often with extreme violence, to create the First French Republic. Even in 1848, the Jacobins and Montagnards (the social-democrats of their day) opposed the right-leaning Parti d’Ordre (the Party of Order).

In his manifesto of 1871, Courbet attempts to give the impression that even such leftist groups as these were insufficiently socialist, insufficiently activist, insufficiently revolutionary to merit his participation with them. Paris of 1848 was

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid, 341.
\textsuperscript{192} Metropolitan Museum of Art, \textit{Gustave Courbet}, 437. Notes.
\textsuperscript{193} Chu, \textit{Letters of Gustave Courbet}, 413.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid, 413
filled with underground societies, the Rights of Man, The Families, the Central Republican Society, the Revolutionary Club, all socialist, some revolutionary, none of which claimed Courbet as a member. According to Courbet in 1871, the descendents of the sans-culottes of 1793 had become for Courbet too soft to merit his attention. This is a strong denunciation of the republic to be sure, seemingly necessary for election to the Commune, which speaks to the radicalism of the Communards. In point of fact, prior to his efforts at this 1871 reinvention of self, Courbet had very little to do with the rising of 1848. As T.J. Clark discusses in his *Image of the People*: “Not a trace of activity in the clubs, Socialist or otherwise, has come down to us; hardly a trace of political activity on the streets.”195 In ’48, Courbet was much too concerned with his own affairs, as we have seen from his letters, to involve himself in radical, activist politics. That would have to wait until 1871.

Unlike his friend Baudelaire, who had fought at the barricades in February of 1848 as well as during the bloody June Days,196 Courbet was a non-combatant during the fighting of both 1848 and 1871. In this, he mirrored the position of his idol, Proudhon. During the siege of Paris by the Prussians, Courbet was reported to have been seen “most frequently...at the famous tavern of Père Laveur”197 according to Courbet associate and medical officer Dr. Pierre Boyer. This lack of combat service

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197 Ibid, 247,248.
(on either side of the struggles) was significant to the artists of the day and is noted, with examples of each course of action, in the literature.\textsuperscript{198}

While on the one hand, Manet defended Paris during the siege, Delacroix, with respect to the French Revolution, felt compelled to explain to his brother, General Charles Delacroix,\textsuperscript{*} that “if I have won no victories for my country at least I can paint for it.”\textsuperscript{199} Willingness to face the danger of armed combat was either a source of pride or of regret and stilted explanation for the men of the era.

Courbet had always gone out of his way to avoid serving in the military his entire life. At age twenty one, after being assigned a low conscription number, he contrived to be found unfit for duty. “I must tell you that I appeared before the (military) examining board on the morning of Saturday the 20\textsuperscript{th}. I played my role so well that these gentlemen were unable to reach a decision\textsuperscript{200}...I really don’t know how I was able to stutter like that, for I did not say a single word properly...Well, now, I have to tell you that I made fantastic preparations for it. First, I did not go to bed, then I had a bottle of cognac sent up to my room and I drank it in a punch; I also smoked twenty pipes and drank two or three cups of coffee,”\textsuperscript{201} behaviors practically guaranteeing that he would fail the examination.

\textsuperscript{198} Observations on the combat activities of numerous intellectuals of the era can be found in Mack (1951), Woodcock (1956), and Boime (1995).
\textsuperscript{199} Jean Stewart, tr., ed., Eugene Delacroix, Selected Letters 1813-1863, (Boston: MFA Publications, a division of the Museum of Fine Arts, 2001), 162. Here he was commenting on his famous Liberty Leading the People. His brother, to whom the letter is addressed was a General and French war hero.
\textsuperscript{200} He was referred for a second examination and was eventually ruled unfit for military duty.
\textsuperscript{201} Chu, Letters of Gustave Courbet, 35.
But, by the time of the elections to the Commune, to be seen as having been as active as possible in the revolution of 1848 was required for aspiring politicians, which Courbet now was. His reinvention appears to have succeeded, he was elected to represent the sixth arrondissement.

1871 was the decisive year for Courbet and his actions, not his art, were destined to change his life in the most significant manner. 1871 was the year of turmoil, war, revolution, and the Commune. In 1871 Courbet put his paint brush aside and, in emulation of his philosopher-hero became completely involved in revolutionary politics to the exclusion of all else. Writing and politicking became the order of the day. The events of 1870 were the genesis of the Commune of 1871.

On July 19, 1870, Louis Napoleon of France declared war on Prussia and within less than two months was captured, along with his entire army, at the Battle of Sedan (Sept. 2, 1870). Quickly acting to reconstitute a government, on September 4th, the new French Republic declared the existence of the Government of National Defense, continuing the war into 1871. Within two days Courbet assumed the first of his political positions, that of president of the Art Commission, tasked with preservation of the great artworks of France.202 In a significant change for the man who would previously have nothing to do with government in any form, Courbet was now an agent of the government. The final act of the conflict was the siege of Paris which began on September 19, 1870, and which ended on January 1, 1871 when the Government of National Defense, represented by Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jules Mack, Gustave Courbet, 243.
Favre, sued for peace. To the people of Paris, the Government of National Defense had become a Government of National Surrender, which Paris refused to do.

In the nationwide elections of February 8, 1871 the French electorate as a whole brought to power a moderate to conservative republican regime which was unacceptable to the Parisian Deputies. The French vote as a whole was clearly “a vote for peace” according to Simpson and Jones, but peace was not to be for some time. The people of Paris took to the streets and Gustave Courbet took to his pen and to his committees.

March 19, 1871 saw the issuance of the *Communard’s Manifesto of the Twenty Arrondissements of Paris*, which declared that they were reviving the “tradition of the Communes of old and of the French Revolution”, and blood was soon to run in the streets of Paris, just as it did in 1793. As in 1793 and later in 1848, moderate elements deserted the cause quickly, leaving the field to the radicals as Parisians took to the barricades. Communists and anarchists, Marxists and Proudhonians, all took aim at the elected French government. Much as German nationalists in the 1930’s denounced the newly organized (post Kaiser) German government which had surrendered to the French in the Great War as the “November Criminals”, the leftists of the Commune in 1871, with equal imprecision and unfairness, denounced the

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204 Ibid, 341.
French government which surrendered to the Prussians as the “Government of National Defection.”

For Courbet, the Commune was his opportunity to issue public statements, participate in bureaucratic commissions and run for political office, all of which he took to eagerly. As opposed to his inaction in 1848, when he found “nothing emptier” than politics, now politics was to become his métier. The “Bonapartist cut-throats” now ruled France, and it was the duty of the diligent revolutionary to take them to task.

He began his politically significant public correspondence just prior to the outbreak of the war, and it was the letters that he wrote prior to the existence of the Commune that helped to convict him of his actions during that later period. Finally having been offered the Legion of Honor after many years of denial by the government, Courbet took the opportunity on June 23 of 1870 to publicly renounce the honor and denounce the government which offered it to him. Taking the government to task in his open letter of renunciation, Courbet declared that his “opinions as a citizen do not allow me to accept a title that derives essentially from a monarchical order. My artist’s feeling also goes against my accepting an award that is

205 Max Eastman, ed., Capital, The Communist Manifesto and Other Writings by Karl Marx (New York: The Modern Library, 1959), 382. rl Marx, The Civil War in France (1871) This text of The Civil War in France (1871) was written by Marx and read by him to the General Council of the International Working Men’s Association on May 30, 1871.

206 Eastman, Capital, The Communist Manifesto and Other Writings by Karl Marx, 383.
granted to me at the hand of the state," a truly Proudhonian remark. This letter marks the onset of his public political posturing of the 1870's.

By the time of the siege of Paris and the initiation of the Government of National Defense, Courbet wrote the letter which was to doom him in the eyes of the government upon the suppression of the Commune. On September 14, 1870 Courbet first publicly demanded the destruction of the Vendôme Column, the act which was to result in his trial and imprisonment. The letter became the subject of much legal wrangling during his trial, at which he claimed to have not been, technically, involved in the destruction. He wrote to the Government of National Defense under the aegis of his position as the president of the Parisian Artists Committee. In it he declared that the Vendôme Column was “...a monument devoid of any artistic value, tending by its character to perpetuate the ideas of wars and conquests [and, that he should be] authorize[d] to unbolt that column, or to take itself [the government] the initiative thereto.” This letter was to be his undoing.

He followed up his request with another letter to the government on October 5, 1870 in which he described the column as being “as out of place as a howitzer in a lady's drawing room," a commendable remark from a man who was much more articulate as a painter than as a writer. He even admitted to his wish for the column's destruction in correspondence to his father, when he told the family that “I wanted to have the Vendôme Column demolished. I could not get the government to grant it,

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208 Ibid, 388.
209 Ibid, 392.
though the people were for it."\textsuperscript{210} Although the elected government of France would not accede to the demand, the organizers of the Commune were happy to oblige.

During the long days of the siege of Paris Courbet produced a public letter to the Prussian army and to the artists of Germany, in which he espoused the socialist perspective of an end to all nationalism, dissolution of the border between France and Germany and the creation of a replacement for the Vendôme Column in the form of a monumental column, composed of the melted down remains of both party’s cannons. His new, borderless Europe would be created when together they would “throw down the bleeding boundary stones...that severed groups of people of the same stock.”\textsuperscript{211}

Nine days after the official proclamation of the Commune on March 28\textsuperscript{th}, Courbet wrote his famous open letter to the artists of Paris. “We are avenged! Paris has saved France from dishonor and humiliation...Today Paris is free and its own master while the provinces are in bondage...The cruelest Prussians, those who exploited the poor, were at Versailles.”\textsuperscript{212} In this letter, published in the \textit{Journal officiel de la Commune}, the letter in which he referred to Proudhon as the “Christ” of the revolution, Courbet took the step of equating the elected national government of France with the Prussian oppressors, the victors in the recent war who had besieged Paris.

There was considerable controversy at the time with respect to the legitimacy of that government. On February 8\textsuperscript{th} 1871 nationwide elections were held in order to select a government which would be in a position to either accept or reject the French

\textsuperscript{210} Ibid, 405.
\textsuperscript{211} Ibid, 399.
\textsuperscript{212} Ibid, 408.
surrender to the Prussians. According to historian Alistair Horne, Parisians believed themselves to have been effectively disenfranchised, at least insofar as not having been given the freest choice of candidates, due to the nature of the election rules. The French election rules at the time were based on the 1849, Second Republic rules. These electoral regulations allowed for universal suffrage, but mandated voting methodology in the precincts of Paris which the left found objectionable. The forty three seats allocated to Paris were all at-large seats, not allocated by arrondissement, keeping the Parisians from voting into office all of their favorite leaders. Yet, the nationwide elections were relatively free of compulsion despite the fact that electioneering itself was banned in certain departments occupied by the Prussians. In Paris itself, vigorous electioneering took place for eight days with what Horne characterizes as “great heat and confusion...with an impressive multiplicity of programs.”

The result of that election was an “overwhelming victory” for the more conservative, rural provinces, which was, as previously noted, a “vote for peace.” According to historian Robert Tombs, the Franco-Prussian war had greatly exacerbated the long-standing division between the urban centers and the rural areas of France. The delegates at the National Assembly voted 546 to 107 for the resulting government, in which Adolphe Thiers was named as Chief of the Executive

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Power. In this vote, 37 of the 43 Parisian deputies voted on the losing side, and six of them resigned in protest.

There resulted a series of actions which compounded the disenchantment of the Parisians. These moves consisted of overt changes in the law, a decision on the new location of the National Assembly, and a significant inaction on the part of the Thiers government. The National Assembly first proceeded to vote new laws imposing *ex post facto* death sentences, suppression of leftist journals, disbanding and ending the pay of the National Guard, and ordering the repayment of debts over the next three months, which essentially would reduce much of the population to penury. In addition to the new ordnances, the government moved from Bordeaux to Versailles on March 20th, rather than to Paris, considered to be an insult by the Parisians. Horne offers the observation that, considering the “inflamed” and “disordered” state of affairs in Paris, the move to Versailles may have been prudent. Robert Tombs notes several circumstances that possibly contributed to that decision. On February 24th a policeman was caught by Parisians, “beaten, thrown into the Seine and pushed under with boathooks until he drowned.” On March 18th the attempt by the Thiers government to secure the cannons on Montmartre resulted in violence which culminated in the executions of generals Lecomte and Thomas. Overall, several of

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218 After the establishment of the Commune, the Communards in turn suppressed the right wing papers *Le Figaro* and *Le Gaulois*. Horne, 304.
219 Tombs suggests that the Parisians, similar to some later historians, misunderstood the debts to be repaid immediately, contributing to their ire.
221 Ibid, 261.
222 Tombs, *The Paris Commune 1871*, 64.
223 Ibid, 1.
the parts of the city became “no-go areas, from which police and regular troops had to be withdrawn.”²²⁴

Perhaps the most significant decision by the Thiers government was the previously mentioned inaction. The vote of March 26th was very specifically not endorsed by the National Assembly, resulting in a boycott by many of the more moderate voters and additional anger among the Parisians who voted for the Commune.²²⁵ Although this decision may have been a poor one and contributed greatly to the ensuing violence, like the choice to move to Versailles, it had some measure of rationality behind it. On March 3rd the Central Committee of the National Guard had an “influx of revolutionary socialists,” one of whom, named Varlin, claimed that “in two or three weeks the city will be controlled by socialist battalion commanders...Another week and we shall be masters of 17 arrondissements (sic) out of 20...the three others will do nothing to stop us. Then we shall chase the prefecture of police out of Paris, overthrow the government, and France will follow us.”²²⁶ It is difficult to ascertain how much of that statement was factual and how much was theatricality. However, the fact that assertions such as that were being made indicates that Thiers’ decision had some basis in reason. These considerations regarding the election, the vote for peace, the new laws and the onerous choices by the Thiers government contributed to the fact that to Courbet and his fellow Communards, their own national government was the oppressor, as much as the Prussians.

²²⁴ Ibid, 64.
²²⁵ Ibid, 69.
²²⁶ Ibid, 65.
To put Courbet's perspective into context we may ask what positions were taken by other French intellectuals towards the Commune? According to Henrietta Psichari in her review of the actions of French intellectuals, the revolt of the Communards was viewed with disdain by many of them. Flaubert considered their actions to be "stupid convulsions from a destructive mob." In response to the Commune's actions to eliminate the payment of rents he wrote to George Sand that "now government meddles in Natural Law and interferes in contracts between individuals...It seems to me that we have never sunk lower." Similar feelings were expressed by George Sand and Edmond de Goncourt. George Sand remarked that "we are threatened here by bandits and stealthy people who are more to be feared than the German soldiers." For Taine and Renan, the "less inventive and creative but infinitely brainy contemporaries of Flaubert and Baudelaire," their prior political antipathy was replaced by a regret at the fall of the Empire. Not all intellectuals shared the feelings of Courbet and his fellow Communards.

The period of the Commune was marked by violence on both sides of the barricades, neither Communards nor Versaillese (the nomenclature for the elected French national government) being adverse to indiscriminate killing. Unlike modern asymmetrical warfare, in which one side has notable military superiority over

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227 Henrietta Psichari, "French Writers and the Commune," *The Massachusetts Review* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1971): 537.
229 Ibid, 536.
231 Ibid, 529.
232 This nomenclature is due to the fact that the French government moved itself to Versailles, considered by Parisians to be an affront.
the other, both Communards and Versaillese used cannons and the early predecessor of the machine-gun, the *mitrailleuse*,\(^{233}\) to great effect. The violence commenced on the night of March 17, 1871, when the government at Versailles attempted to confiscate the artillery on Montmartre which was in the possession of the National Guard.\(^{234}\) Elements of the government army mutinied, refusing to obey the commands of their officers, and executing generals Lecomte and Thomas.

The fighting in the streets was to continue until *La Semaine Sanglante* (Bloody Week), ultimately terminating on May 28\(^{th}\). The final days of the violence ending with the Communards executing their hostages, including Archbishop Darboy, the Archbishop of Paris, and torching the Tuileries as they retreated from the oncoming government troops. Reprisals followed, with trials, executions, and deportations of captured Communards.

Just two weeks prior to *La Semaine Sanglante*, the Commune ordered the destruction of the Vendôme Column, the act which would ultimately result in Courbet’s incarceration. His participation, despite his later denials at his trial, was clear. It was reported in the *Journal Officiel* of the Commune that on April 27\(^{th}\) “Citizen Courbet demanded that the decree of the Commune with respect to the demolition of the Vendôme Column be put into effect.”\(^{235}\) Yet, it is also clear that

\(^{233}\) An early version of the machine-gun, of roughly the same era as the more famous Gatling Gun, but operated without the need for rotating barrels. It was a devastating anti-personnel weapon in close quarters.

\(^{234}\) Mack, *Gustave Courbet*, 252.

\(^{235}\) Ibid, 267.
Courbet was not a signatory of the order of destruction. In an article safely written six days after Courbet's death when it could do him no further harm, fellow Communard Jules Valles, writing under the pseudonym Jean de la Rue while in exile in England, said that “The day that the column was toppled, he was there, at the Place, with his twenty-sou cane, his four-franc straw hat, his ready-made overcoat... ‘It’ll crush me when it falls, you’ll see!’ he said, turning to a group of friends.” By June 7th Courbet was arrested while hiding at a friend's apartment and brought to trial before the Third Council of War, convicted, and sent to Sainte Pélagie prison. In a largely ineffective defense, his lawyer Lachaud could offer no more compelling reason for exoneration than to tell the jury that “he is a big child who is incapable of putting together two political ideas,” a characterization which would follow Courbet for the rest of his life and which had some degree of merit, despite its failure to free him. Courbet had accomplished much by this time, so in context, his lawyer’s remark seems to be patronizing.

Compared to the death sentences and deportations to New Caledonia in the South Pacific which his compatriots suffered, Courbet was sentenced to the relatively short prison term of six months, the last two of which he served in the hospital due to a bout with hemorrhoids.

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In his rehabilitative defense of Courbet, *A Plea for a Dead Friend*, published in 1882 well after Courbet’s death, his ever faithful friend Jules Castagnary* made the claim that the monument, which was (according to Castagnary) more Napoleonic than French National, was destroyed on the orders of “a government which gives orders and finds the agents to carry them out,” a disingenuous remark at best. Castagnary attributes the destruction to what he perceives to be the legitimate actions of a legitimate government. The Commune was nothing of the sort. It was a revolutionary construct which was against the wishes of the vast majority of the people of France who had spoken clearly in the elections of February of 1871.

The disingenuousness of the observation is no less than that exhibited by Courbet in his defense at trial when he observed that the order for the destruction of the column was issued on April 12, 1871, and he was not formally elected to the body until four days later. An assertion which would have the jury ignore the fact that he had been publicly calling for the destruction to be carried out since September 14, 1870. In his journal entry of September 18, 1870 Edmond de Goncourt recorded that “in a public meeting the painter Courbet advocated the destruction of the column.” By April, of 1871 events had simply provided him with the political entity required to have his wishes carried out.

Subsequent to his conviction, public opinion in literary circles, even among his close associates, changed regarding Courbet. Alexandre Dumas fils indicated serious

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contempt for the painter in his 1871 remarks. “What mythological coupling between
a slug and a peacock, what genetic antithesis, what sebaceous oozing, for example,
could have produced this thing that one calls Monsieur Gustave Courbet?” 241 Not to
be outdone in the condemnation of the Communards, Flaubert, his one time associate,
wrote to George Sand that “we should have sent the entire Commune to the galleys
and forced these bloody imbeciles to clean up the ruins of Paris.” 242 Theophile
Silvestre, the art critic, in a letter to Alfred Bruyas, Courbet’s greatest long time
patron, told Bruyas that Courbet was a “parricidal, flatulent, bestial, fat,
vulgar…walking beer barrel…a Communist Falstaff.” 243 And finally Manet, the only
one of the literati who attended the trial in person, wrote to Theodore Duret that “He
behaved like a coward in front of the Tribunal and is no longer worthy of any
interest.” 244 Courbet’s larger than life persona and significant body of work no longer
dazzled even his close friends and fellow artists.

These literary daggers, however much they may have stung Courbet’s immense
ego, could not match the damage to Courbet caused by Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier,
head of the jury for the 1872 Salon, who totally banished him from the Salon,
claiming that “we must reject M. Courbet from our midst; for us he must be
considered dead,” 245 which amounted to the requiem for the painter’s career as a
serious artist. He would never again participate in the great French Salon. Courbet,

241 Change, “Rewriting Courbet: Silvestre, Courbet, and the Bruyas Collection after
the Paris Commune,” 109. Here Chang cites Alexandre Dumas (fils) Une lettre sur
les choses du jour (Paris 1871).
243 Ibid, 111. Chang cites Theophile Silvestre, letter to Alfred Bruyas.
in his desire to emulate the personal political activism of Proudhon had inextricably associated his art with his politics for the last time, and now he would forever live with the consequences of that act.

It could be argued that Courbet's leftist positions were more the source of his problems than the mere fact of taking political positions in general. Other artists took strong political positions and fared much better at the hands of the government and the viewing public. Meissonier, who was sufficiently powerful to ban Courbet from the Salon, supported the forces of order in both 1848 and 1871. During the revolution of 1848 Meissonier was a captain of artillery in the National Guard, defending the Hôtel de Ville against attack by what he referred to as the "insurrection."\(^{246}\) It was that experience which caused him to create *La Barricade* (Fig. 2), his depiction of death in the streets. The painting, also known as *Souvenir de guerre civile*, shows what art historian Constance Cain Hungerford refers to as "the grim outcome of resistance to established order as a fearful reminder to those who might contemplate such actions in the future."\(^{247}\)

Meissonier's pro-government, anti-insurgency perspective continued well into his later life, resulting in his creation of a substantial body of military themed works, particularly representing the triumphs of Napoleon. This conservative political position espoused by Meissonier was "hardly unique to the period"\(^{248}\) according to Albert Boime, who considers the depictions in paint and photography of the


\(^{247}\) Ibid, 284.

destroyed Tuileries to be a “warning against future revolution.” He observes that “with few exceptions, the painters, their patrons, and their contemporary apologists belonged to the moderate republican faction.” The list of artists who took the more conservative perspective includes Degas and Renoir, who served in the French army against the Prussians and acquired important patrons for his later work. Boime further argues that the defeat of the Commune, the victory of the forces of order, and the support by Degas and Renoir for those forces, was significant in the genesis of the Impressionist movement. He suggests that “the killings and the deportations, the immense toll of human suffering” led these and other impressionists to commit themselves to “the erasing of its memory.”

This is not to say that the Impressionist movement was composed entirely of the more politically conservative artists, Monet and Pissarro were both sympathetic to Courbet and the Communards. However, it is arguable, as articulated by Boime, that the overall perspective of the artists of France in the wake of the destruction was that of a return to normalcy and an eradication of the physical memory of the Commune. “This was the mandate to the Impressionists during a period of conservative political backlash. Impressionism retraces the damaged sites of the Commune, urban intersections, parks, and streets and represents them as bright, flourishing spaces.

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249 Ibid, 64
250 Ibid, 12, 13.
251 Also according to Boime, Renoir was at one point nearly shot by the Communards as a suspected spy. Boime, 51.
252 Ibid, 51.
253 Ibid, 45.
Courbet was not politically representative of the majority of French artists and intellectuals of the time. Although some of them took political positions, they were relatively mild in comparison to those of Courbet. Courbet was unique among significant French artists in his level of political activism as evidenced by his active participation in the Commune and his insistence on the destruction of the column. Only Pissarro exhibited similar feelings but he sat out the Franco-Prussian War and the time of the Commune in London, as did Monet. Rupert Christiansen in his history of the Commune suggests that the perspective “Law against Crime,” was held by most French intellectuals. As Flaubert put it; “As for the Commune, which is in its death throes, it’s the latest manifestation of the Middle Ages. Will it be the last? Let’s hope so!” Edmond de Goncourt offered that the Parisians were “the most abominable moral cowards that I have ever known.”

However, the intellectual voices were not universal in their condemnation. Victor Hugo, arguably the most significant French intellectual to sympathize with the Communards, helped to inspire the Parisians. Yet, he chose not to go so far as to actually join them, relocating to Brussels for the duration. These decisions regarding support or criticism of the Commune were to play out to the assistance or injury of the various writers and artists. The more conservative went on to continue with successful careers. The nine contemporary French artists considered by Boime to be the initial core of Impressionism all took the opportunity after the fall of the

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254 Ibid, 50.
256 Ibid, 330.
257 Ibid, 335.
Commune to court favor with the national government and to “seize (d) the moment to establish their careers.” Courbet was not in a position to do so. He was a victim of having chosen the losing side.

On May 30, 1873, two years after the excesses of the Commune, the French Assembly passed a bill authorizing the restoration of the column, the bill to be sent to Courbet, a move which he fought in court for four years. Final judgment was rendered by the court on May 4, 1877, charging Courbet to pay 323 thousand francs, an impossible sum. A ruling forcing confiscation of his property followed on June 19th. In this atmosphere of unrelenting criticism, and fearing further imprisonment, Courbet fled to Switzerland, crossing the border by way of Fleurier and settling in La Tour-de-Peilz, at a rented lakeshore home called Bon Port. These final days in Switzerland witnessed Courbet’s deterioration, both physically and artistically, his waistline having grown to an astonishing sixty inches. According to Mack “he had been a fairly heavy drinker of beer and wine all his life, but never before had the compulsion to drink been irresistible.” His evenings were spent in great bouts of drinking, the effects of which he slept off the next day in lieu of painting.

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259 Ibid, 8. Those nine contemporary artists, per Horne, were Manet, Degas, Pissarro, Monet, Renoir, Sisley, Bazille, Cézanne, and Morisot.
260 Ibid, 314.
261 Ibid, 356.
262 Ibid, 325.
It was bad enough that he had spent years generating redundant canvases of dubious distinction, now he did not even paint them himself. In an act which he would have abhorred in his socialist glory days, he hired three assistants, allowing them to paint works which would be sold as “Courbets”. And this was not just the long-time practice of allowing assistants to paint certain figures or insignificant portions of background as had been traditional in “schools” of painting for centuries. According to Mack, “he was willing to palm off on unsuspecting purchasers” works to which he had only added a few daubs of paint, or perhaps, only signed. He told his sisters Juliette and Zelie in April of ’73 that “I pay them (his assistants) a percentage on the paintings they prepare for me,” adding in an interestingly

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263 Ibid, 312.
capitalist aside that "the Commune would have me be a millionaire." An interest which is not surprising when one considers that he had been investing on the Bourse since 1856.  

It would seem that, although he had entered into the activities of the Commune for the most altruistic and political of motives, he claimed that the effect on the marketability of his later work was substantially positive, as he wrote to Castagnary; "had I become a member of the Commune for the express purpose, I would never have been so successful." This remark, like so much of Courbet’s writings, must be taken with some measure of skepticism as he was in significant financial difficulty up to the end of his life and there is no record of any substantial sums earned either through his own efforts of those of his surrogates.

In his final years, Courbet himself was to realize the amount of time he was spending on an inferior genre, telling Castagnary: "We have done many landscapes, one cannot do anything else in Switzerland." Chu observed that during the final years of life, Courbet "awash in alcohol" produced nothing of real merit. The notable, and sole, exception to this litany of dismissible art being a wonderful portrait of his father in his old age, which is reminiscent of Courbet’s early efforts at portraiture. Somehow, Courbet managed to find the skill and the will to create a work of beauty and affection, worthy of the 1848 Salon, depicting his aging father as a man still filled with a powerful dignity.

265 See Mack (1951) 124, and Chu (1992) 149.
266 Chu, The Letters of Gustave Courbet, 493.
During his time in prison and all the years thereafter in Switzerland, Courbet only painted one canvas representative of the Commune, his *Self Portrait in Sainte Pélagie* prison. In it, we see a man who has lost a great deal of weight, was in poor health, and shares with his earlier portraits not too much more than the pipe and the vaguely distant expression. His only nod to revolution is his red scarf.

Gustave Courbet died in self imposed exile on December 31, 1877, one day before his first payment on the rebuilding of the Vendôme Column was due. His sister Zoe, who assisted him so greatly during his imprisonment and hospitalization told a friend
in a letter that he should “never have held public office, never have presided over a meeting, never have joined the Commune.”

Fig. 11: Self-Portrait at Sainte Pélagie, Gustave Courbet, 1871/72

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\[Mack, Gustave Courbet, 291.\]
CHAPTER FIVE: COURBET AND PROUDHON – ASYMMETRY AND EMULATION

"She (Madame Proudhon) knows how close her husband and I were, she knows the limitless devotion that I had for him."

"The end of the nineteenth century has there its beacon, which will rise above the masses, ever brighter."

"The nineteenth century has just lost its guiding force and the man who embodied it."

"Wiser than man, his learning and his courage were without equal."

Gustave Courbet 1865

"I have received an enormous letter from Courbet. I believe he went looking in the oldest grocer's shop in Ornans for the dirtiest, yellowest, coarsest schoolboy's exercise book in order to write to me. One would believe that the letter belonged to the century of Gutenberg. Ink to match. Courbet does not write often, but when he sets himself to it, beware! This time he covered no less than fourteen pages with the dregs of wine."

I do not propose here to become the advocate or sponsor of M. Courbet's caprices.

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon 1863

"These days I am in correspondence with Proudhon. Together we are writing an important work that makes the connection between my art and his philosophy and between his work and mine."

Gustave Courbet 1863

"Yes, decidedly, he is stupid!"

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon 1863

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271 Ibid, 256.
272 Ibid, 257.
273 Ibid, 257
277 Rubin, *Realism and Social Vision in Courbet and Proudhon*, 158. Here, Rubin cites Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, notation written on letter from Courbet. Rubin also cites Bonniot *Courbet en Saintonge*, 310. The quote may also be read as referring to Courbet as "a beast", as "bête" may translate in both ways.
There are three key documented aspects of Courbet’s life which demonstrate the dramatic asymmetry of the relationship between Courbet and Proudhon. The first being the significantly new and different translation of a Courbet letter which previously led to mistaken impressions of the mutuality of the relationship. The second demonstrable aspect of Courbet’s asymmetrical relationship with Proudhon was his perpetually unsuccessful attempts to have Proudhon sit for a live portrait. And finally, asymmetry is indicated by the disparity of correspondence between the two men, both in volume and with respect to Courbet’s highly anticipated meetings with Proudhon, which consistently failed to occur, always due to demurral by Proudhon, never Courbet.

Additionally, there are three key groupings of activities taken by Courbet which demonstrate the thesis that Courbet, in his later life, emulated Proudhon in his rhetorical, political, and even personal actions. The first of these is represented by Courbet’s change from personal observations made in private letters (some of which he feared ever becoming public) to manifestos generated for public consumption, much like Proudhon’s published editorials. Secondly, this emulation becomes manifest at the Antwerp Conference of 1861 during which Courbet first attempted in public to explain the philosophy of Proudhon, with debatable results. Finally, we will look at Courbet’s Proudhon-like ventures into public office, changing from a proudly
independent country unto himself,\textsuperscript{278} into an elected representative and eager member of public committees.

The New Translation

The traditional academic reading of the relationship between Courbet and Proudhon is based, to a great extent, on scholarly readings of Courbet’s correspondence, which is problematical. As noted in the introduction, Courbet’s correspondence is notable for its bragging and its egotistical touches. “I am the proudest and most arrogant man in France.”\textsuperscript{279} The curators of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s exhibition \textit{Gustave Courbet} (Feb. 27 – May 18, 2008) as well as the editors of the impressive accompanying book refer to Courbet’s correspondence as “a confused mixture of frankness and naivety”, arrogance and boasting."\textsuperscript{280} Accordingly, caution must be exercised at all times in the reading of his letters. However, critical though we must be, there is no better source for factual information, uncontaminated by later editorial glosses.

A major contribution to the field of Courbet correspondence study is the 1992 work \textit{Letters of Gustave Courbet} by Petra ten-Doesschate Chu which has received significant scholarly praise.\textsuperscript{281} A careful review of this text provides the researcher with as much information as is contained in several major collections of Courbet’s papers in France. With its 571 Courbet letters and meticulously detailed supporting

\begin{footnotes}
\item[278] Chu, \textit{The Letters of Gustave Courbet}, 115.
\item[279] Ibid, 116.
\end{footnotes}
notes, it provides the researcher with the opportunity to not only understand Courbet’s actions, but to also undertake a minimum level of quantitative analysis which is supportive of the theme of disparity in the volume and nature of correspondence in this chapter and the theme of the nature and timing of the relationship as studied in chapters three and four.

Most significantly, Chu’s text of Courbet’s letters, which allows researchers to analyze both qualitatively and quantitatively the body of his correspondence, provides the impetus for the main theme of this entire work, which is that the Courbet-Proudhon relationship has been seriously misrepresented by scholars for the better part of a century. Although it is close to impossible to say with certainty that a particular subject has not been discussed in the literature (due to the impossibility of proving a negative) it is certainly clear that the observations in this chapter concerning the significantly new translation of one key Courbet letter, and the quantitative and temporal analysis of the totality of the correspondence prior to the Chu work, has had no significant public exposure.

A careful reading of Courbet and Proudhon’s extant personally written material (primarily Courbet’s letters and Proudhon’s diaries) is key to understanding their relationship. A small difference in the reading of a letter can make a notable difference in the scholarly interpretation of the relationship. The most significant case in point is Courbet’s letter of January 24, 1865 to Gustave Chaudey* (republican lawyer and close friend of both Courbet and Proudhon) who was summarily executed by the Communards in 1871. In describing his anticipated memorial portrait and sculpture of Proudhon, Courbet is quoted in Mack (1951) as
telling Chaudey that he wanted to represent Proudhon “sitting on a bench in the Bois de Boulogne, where I used to talk with him every day” (italics added). In her later, excellent translation of the letter, Chu tells us that Courbet wrote: “I want to do him sitting on a bench in the Bois de Boulogne, just as he was, everyday, talking to people” (italics added). The 1992 Courbet translation work by Chu is considered by the Metropolitan Museum of Art to be “an exemplary edition...the cornerstone of any work devoted to Courbet.”

This difference in translation is significant, and it is understandable. Different translators can often present differing interpretations of a passage. There are those who choose to translate literally, word for word, and those who choose to attempt to effectively translate the spirit of a phrase. Adding to the difficulty is the fact that Courbet, from the time he was in school, was notorious for his poor penmanship and equally poor spelling, further confusing matters. But, the fact that the difference is entirely understandable does not diminish its significance for academic inquiry, particularly when it modifies the entire nature of the relationship. In the original French, the phrase in question is “comme il etait causant avec lui tous les jours.”

The construction “causant avec lui”, rather than “converser avec moi,” or “parler avec

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Chu, \textit{The Letters of Gustave Courbet}, 258.}
\footnote{Metropolitan Museum of Art, \textit{Gustave Courbet}, 15. Laurence des Cars, Dominique de Font-Réaulx, Michel Hilaire, Gary Tinterow.}
\footnote{Mack, \textit{Gustave Courbet}, 11.}
\footnote{Chu, \textit{The Most Arrogant Man in France}, 192.}
\end{footnotes}
"moi" indicates that the later, Chu, translation is appropriate. If Courbet had meant himself, he would likely have utilized the traditional "moi."

If Mack, and by extension, the earlier translators of the letter (1910) from which he drew his information, were correct, then the relationship could be seen to have been mutual, consenting and close. However, the latest, best translation we have tells us that for a hundred years the nature of the relationship has been misstated. The original translation was arguably also used by Woodcock in his 1956 (original publishing date) biography of Proudhon.

In this thesis, we consider the reference to be "arguable" because despite the length (196 pages), detail of the book, and the fact that it is cited in other scholarly works²⁸⁷, it is footnoted only to the most minimal extent (less than a dozen total in 182 pages), making it impossible to definitively assess the accuracy of the work. It is interesting to note that, although the curators and editors of the Met’s 2008 Courbet retrospective consider Chu’s work to be the cornerstone of modern scholarly research on the subject of Courbet’s correspondence, since they do not do an actual analysis of the letters themselves, they make no mention of the discrepancy in this key translation, make no quantitative or qualitative analysis of the correspondence, and hold to the "long time friend" position.

The observation which was mentioned in chapter three, made by George Woodcock in his 1956 volume *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: His Life and Work*, contributed to the mistaken assertion that Courbet and Proudhon were close friends in

²⁸⁷ Bowness, “Courbet’s Proudhon,” 124. Here, Bowness is disputing Woodcock’s assertion.
a mutually appreciated relationship. Woodcock asserted that “from 1848 onwards, Courbet was a constant companion of Proudhon, and painted portraits of him, alone and en famille”\textsuperscript{288} This information has informed the dialogue of art history with respect to the relationship, even to the point where Nochlin refers to Proudhon as “Courbet’s close friend, the anarchist philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon”\textsuperscript{289} But, it is simply not accurate. No real documentation exists of the relationship at all prior to 1851, when they met in one of the salons held in the common rooms at Sainte Pélagie prison during Proudhon’s incarceration,\textsuperscript{290} the arranged celebrity meeting documented in chapter three. Although Courbet was an extremely prolific correspondent, with almost six hundred extant letters, there is not a single reference to Proudhon in any of them prior to 1854, when he mentions Proudhon for the first time, with reference to his inclusion in \textit{The Studio}.\textsuperscript{291} This is a key area where we must take note of what is not said, as well as what is said by Courbet. It is simply not credible to accept that Courbet and Proudhon were intimate friends from 1848 and that Courbet failed to communicate with him or even mention it to anyone for six years. This lack of communication either to, or about Proudhon strikes at the heart of the traditional image of the close, personal nature of the relationship.

\textbf{The Sittings That Never Happened}

Additionally, the fact that Courbet painted Proudhon can create the mistaken impression that the portraits of Proudhon were, in some manner, evidence of the

\textsuperscript{288} Woodcock, \textit{Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: His Life and Work}, 257.
\textsuperscript{290} Bowness, “Courbet’s Proudhon,” 124.
\textsuperscript{291} Chu, \textit{The Letters of Gustave Courbet}, 132.
relationship being close and personal. In actuality Courbet, ever the devoted but unappreciated follower, was never successful in convincing Proudhon to even sit for a portrait. Courbet’s unsuccessful efforts at securing a sitting with Proudhon establish abundant evidence of the essential asymmetry of the relationship. Courbet painted Proudhon’s portrait three times (plus a small, sketched, head-study upon his death) and in each case had no live contact with the philosopher. Proudhon first shows up in Courbet’s The Studio (L’Atelier, 1855) where he is placed somewhat inconspicuously in the right side background (third figure to the right of the nude model) among other individuals whom Courbet considered to be significant in a positive manner, such as Bruyas, Promayet, and Cuénot. The figure of Proudhon is not nearly as significant as those of Champfleury or Baudelaire, both of whom are shown seated in the right foreground, and both of whom were quite close to the artist at the time. Unable to secure a live sitting from Proudhon (whereas Champfleury, Baudelaire and Bruyas all have their figures taken from previous live sitting portraits) Courbet was reduced to copying a lithograph made by Charles Bazin.\(^{292}\)

\(^{292}\) Ibid, 134.
The other two portraits of Proudhon, the individual ones, were painted after his death in 1865. The documented record indicates that Courbet had tried strenuously, but without success, to convince Proudhon to sit for him. There are at least five Courbet letters which testify to this fact. In a famous letter to Champfleury written in November/December of 1854, in which Courbet goes to great length describing his work on *The Studio*, Courbet tells Champfleury “I would very much like to include the philosopher Proudhon, who shares our views, I would be happy if he were willing to pose. If you see him, ask him whether I can count on him.” As in the reading of Proudhon’s *Carnets* regarding the meeting at Sainte Pélagie, it is striking that Courbet refers to Proudhon as “the philosopher Proudhon”, not as “my dear friend Proudhon”, or even “our mutual acquaintance Proudhon”, both of these being literary

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constructions of which Courbet was fond. This description of "the philosopher Proudhon" is therefore significant both for what it says and for what it does not say. Seven months later, after this unsuccessful attempt, Courbet asks Champfleury on March 8, 1855 for "any portrait of Proudhon, a lithograph, whatever, as long as it resembles him a little."  

Fig. 13: *Portrait of Proudhon*, Gustave Courbet, 1865

This search for a likeness of Proudhon, undertaken by an artist who was renowned for his ability to briefly see a scene and later replicate it beautifully and accurately in his studio, does nothing to indicate any significant familiarity by Courbet with

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294 A reading of Courbet’s extant correspondence finds him using these phrases both in the addresses and the body of his letters with regularity. Chu, (1992) ltr. 53-6, “dear friend,” “my good friend,” “my dear friend,” “your dear friend”, all with reference to Bruyas in a single letter.

Proudhon’s visage. Hardly the type of problem that Courbet would have experienced with long-time, constant contact.

By 1863, Courbet had still not convinced Proudhon to sit for him. Seemingly giving up on the idea of a live sitting, he wrote to him on May 25, 1863 requesting that he “please do be so kind as to go as soon as possible to the address herewith enclosed to have your picture taken.”296 This, Proudhon was willing to do, but the resulting photograph was insufficient as the basis for Courbet’s concept of the portrait he then wanted to paint. Accordingly, Courbet asked Proudhon on June 3 to again visit the photographic studio in hopes of a better outcome. This Proudhon did, and that photograph became the basis of Courbet’s memorial Proudhon portraits. It is fortunate that Proudhon was willing to visit the photographic studio as Courbet was still imploring him for a live sitting right up to Proudhon’s death. In his January 13, 1865 letter to Jules Castagnary Courbet becomes desperate. “You must see Proudhon immediately on my behalf. Ask him by way of pretext, for the letter I wrote him on the freedom of the Exhibition…and with that pretext, see whether there is still a way to do his portrait.”297 He now required a “pretext” to attempt to acquire time for a sitting from Proudhon, his supposed dear friend. Six days later, on January 19, 1865, Proudhon died, never having sat for Courbet.

296 Ibid, 222.
297 Ibid, 255.
Asymmetrical Writings and Unaccepted Invitations

It was said by Proudhon that Courbet “assassinated” him with his lengthy letters.\textsuperscript{298} Unfortunately, not many of them still exist. From a reading of Proudhon’s correspondence to others (Max Buchon) we can tell that the philosopher was unhappy with the volume of Courbet’s correspondence, or at least, with the length of the letters themselves.\textsuperscript{299} Proudhon’s reference to the length of Courbet’s letters was not an exaggeration. Courbet himself told Max Buchon in August of 1863 “Every day I write Proudhon my eight or ten pages of aesthetics, on the art that is being done, the art that I have done and wish to establish.”\textsuperscript{300} These lengthy missives were Courbet’s attempts to “collaborate” with Proudhon on his large treatise, published posthumously, \textit{Du principe de l’art}. In his letter to his father of July 28, 1863 Courbet

\textsuperscript{298} See note 5, Introduction
\textsuperscript{299} Bowness, “Courbet’s Proudhon,” 127.
\textsuperscript{300} Chu, \textit{The Letters of Gustave Courbet}, 232.
tells him that “I am in correspondence with Proudhon. Together we are writing an important work that makes the connection between my art and his philosophy and between his work and mine.”301 There is little doubt that Courbet’s reports of collaboration were overstated. The very large work *Du principe de l’art* contained only one chapter regarding Courbet and that work was almost exclusively Proudhon’s. Proudhon’s reaction to Courbet’s attempts at collaboration were less than enthusiastic, typically the “utter exasperation”302 cited by Rubin. There exist over twenty Courbet letters which mention Proudhon, eighteen to other recipients, and four letters to Proudhon himself. Of these letters, eight were written with respect to Proudhon’s death and five were written with respect to obtaining a likeness of the man. It is certainly possible that other letters to Proudhon existed at one time and were not retained by either party, but conclusions cannot be drawn absent the evidence.

Conversely, it may be that several lengthy Courbet manuscripts were reclaimed by Courbet and destroyed. In a postscript to a Courbet letter to Proudhon dated December 8, 1864, their mutual friend, Max Buchon, appended the following: “Courbet has talked to me again about the numerous manuscripts on the subject that he has manufactured for you, and he wonders whether it would not be advisable for him to retrieve them from you at some point, for he is afraid that those long letters, if ever they were to fall into the wrong hands, could be used as war machines against

301 Ibid, 227.
him.” This reference likely concerns Courbet’s previously mentioned letter to Proudhon of summer 1863 in which Courbet, in his extensive list of aphorisms, makes a number of observations regarding social and economic matters which pertain more to politics than they do to art, and which offer significant and critical observations of important individuals. 

In his insightful treatment of the Courbet-Proudhon relationship, Alan Bowness notes that among the letters which Proudhon saved, from roughly three hundred correspondents, there is not a single letter from Courbet which Proudhon thought to keep, and only a few scattered references to Courbet in his Carnets, as when Proudhon memorializes in his diary of August 20, 1857, that he has been advised by Courbet and Champfleury about the “infamies de G. Sand, et autres gens de letters.” Proudhon, a notorious prude, was sufficiently aggrieved by Sand’s equally notorious (for entirely differing reasons) activities to comment upon them for posterity. It is instructive to note that of such material is one of the few references to Courbet. Perhaps most significantly, among the hundreds of letters written by Proudhon which have been saved, there is not a single letter to Courbet.

When we turn to a study of Courbet’s real or fancied visitations with Proudhon, we find that a careful reading of Courbet’s correspondence indicates a number of

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303 Chu, *The Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 250. This citation in Chu is a postscript appended to the letter by Buchon.
304 Ibid, 228.
306 Pseudonym of Amantine Aurore Lucile Dupin, Baroness Dudevant
references to Courbet-Proudhon meetings that never happened, sittings that Proudhon would never agree to, and mutual trips not taken.

In his letter to his father, reporting on the Antwerp Conference of 1861, Courbet first indicates purported plans with Proudhon that failed to materialize. “I stayed with M. Gossi, a ship owner. Proudhon and Victor Hugo were supposed to stay there (too), but neither one was able to come, Hugo because he was ill, and Proudhon because he had pressing work.” In point of fact, Proudhon gave careful consideration to attending the conference, but makes no note of even considering staying with the Courbet group.

In August of 1863 Courbet wrote to his close friend Max Buchon (who was arrested for his revolutionary activities in the June Days of 1848) with whom he attended both the petit Seminary and the College of Besançon, “we have plotted, Proudhon and I, to come badger you in Salins in early September.” This visit did come to pass, but significantly, only by Courbet himself. In Courbet’s letter to Proudhon of December 8, 1864, written while he is still visiting Salins, it is clear that Proudhon is in Paris, not in Salins with Courbet and Buchon. Courbet even reminds Proudhon that he had promised to accompany him to Ornans, a promise that is nowhere attested to except in Courbet’s own letters. Courbet creates a strong inference for physical association that never occurred.

309 Ibid, 360.
310 Mack, Gustave Courbet, 10, 20.
312 Ibid, 250.
From Personal Missives to Public Manifestos: The Emulation Begins

In 1855, four years after having met Proudhon, Courbet published his famous *Realist Manifesto*, accompanying his 1855 exhibition. In it, we find his first public utterances of Proudhonian themes. The text is mainly centered upon his definition of Realism in art (rejecting art for art’s sake) a relatively brief excursion into his feelings regarding the art of the ancients, and his claim of not belonging to any “school” of art. However, Courbet also makes two statements that are less related to art than they are to Proudhonian philosophy. He maintains that his work is essentially a representation of his own “reasoned and independent consciousness of (his) own individuality.”

He goes on to note that he was “not only a painter, but a man as well,” clearly invoking the Proudhonian ideal of individuality.

This definition of Realism in art was a relatively simple description of an art form that was much discussed at the time and which deserves some measure of explication. According to T.J. Clark, a Realist school of art (sometimes referred to as L’Ecole Socialiste) had existed, to some extent, from the 1840s, but by 1850 it had “...taken on a new form,” becoming even more modern, gritty and politically charged than the early Realist works, and in the modern phrase, “edgy”. This school was criticized by the traditionalist critics of the time as being composed of artists who failed to do what art was supposed to do, namely to transcend the reality of the world as it was and to envision a more elevated ideal of what the world should be. Instead, it glorified the commonplace and the common man.

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Courbet had no argument with the concept of Realism as a glorification of the truth of everyday life. In his famous letter in which he announced himself to be “not only a socialist but a democrat and a Republican as well,”\(^{315}\) he says that he is “above all a Realist...for ‘Realist’ means a sincere lover of honest truth.”\(^{316}\) The entire Realist school of art remained controversial at least until 1857 when Castagnary wrote his first Salon review and, according to Courbet, “vindicated” Realism.\(^ {317}\) However, as much as he proclaimed himself to be a Realist, he did take issue with the idea of a “school” of art. Claiming to have been entirely self taught, Courbet told the young artists of Paris in 1861 that “there can be no schools, only painters.”\(^ {318}\) In this, he was taking to task the critics who not only applauded Realism, but claimed that Courbet was in some manner a leader of that movement. At the time of the 1851 Salon, critic Prosper Haussard declared that “we are ready to applaud the formation of a school of painters of the people, of which MM. Courbet, Fr. Millet and Jeanron may be the chiefs.”\(^ {319}\) For Courbet, Realism was key, a school of Realism with him at its head, was impossible.

The 1860’s were a transitional time for Courbet with respect to his correspondence, during which time he changed from the painter who wrote personal letters to friends and family, to the activist who dispatched manifestos to the public press much like the editorials of Proudhon. From the beginning of his life away from home and family, he wrote only two letters for publication until he was thirty-two


\(^{316}\) Ibid, 103.

\(^{317}\) Ibid, 103.

\(^{318}\) Ibid, 156.

\(^{319}\) Ibid, 204.

years old. It is notable that this period included the exciting but disastrous days of the revolution of 1848, during which he took no public political positions at all, not a single letter to the editor or any other type of public writing. The two public letters from early in his career were totally non-political.

The first was meant to take exception to the characterization of him as a student of painter Auguste Hesse, with Courbet having maintained for years that he had no teacher and was completely self-taught. The second of these letters is significant in that it explicitly takes the position that he was definitely not involved in a political meeting which he had been alleged to have attended. It was in this letter that he made his famous statement that he was "not only a socialist but a democrat and a Republican as well", a socialist, democrat and Republican indeed, but in no way politically active, a fact which he intended to make abundantly clear.

Beginning in 1861, Courbet wrote no fewer than nineteen letters for publication, most of them political in nature. Fifteen of the letters deal with his squabbles with various government agencies; five arguing over the subject of art and politics, three regarding his running for elective office, four dealing with the destruction of the Vendôme Column, and three dealing with other political matters. Only four of his public letters cannot be characterized as being political in nature.

His most significant public letter of the 1860's is that one, previously noted, to the young artists of Paris, written in December of 1861. In it we find, in addition to his largest and most comprehensive discussion of art and artists, a number of statements

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which reflect his impressions of Proudhon’s teaching. Courbet assumes the posture of the man he considers to be his philosophical idol, and becomes effectively if not consciously, the master, teaching his own would-be followers. He tells the young artists that he cannot agree to set up a studio in which he would be master and they, students, as “every artist must be his own master.”\textsuperscript{321} Individualism is all. He tells the aspiring students that, if he were to work with them, it could only be as “associates,” his adherence to the principle of Mutualism so beloved of Proudhon. The entire perspective is in line with Proudhon’s own reply to Marx back in 1846, which could be read as either a conditional acceptance, or conditional rejection. In this case, as in that of the Marx-Proudhon correspondence, it makes no difference. In this public letter he manifests that fascinating contradiction so inherent in Proudhon’s works, that although he may teach them, they cannot become his followers, classic Proudhon.

This letter presents one of those interesting difficulties in dealing with Courbet’s correspondence. The letter was written on December 25\textsuperscript{th} 1861 and published in Courrier du dimanche on December 29\textsuperscript{th} of that year. It is clear, concise, well written, and in the handwriting of Jules Castagnary. The only extant copy of this manuscript contains the writing of Castagnary, and the signature of Courbet.\textsuperscript{322} It is safe to presume that the thoughts are Courbet’s (and Proudhon’s) but that Castagnary was able to put those ideas down on paper in a manner more suitable for publication than could Courbet himself.

\textsuperscript{321} Ibid, 203, 204.
\textsuperscript{322} Ibid, 205.
At this same time, the 1860's, he first begins with his public debates regarding the government and art, then by the 1870's he has involved himself in serious political action, much like Proudhon did in the 1840's. Letters to the editor, open letters to the German army, exhortations to the artists of Paris, declaiming his positions publicly in theaters, Courbet did it all. In a scene reminiscent of Proudhon's anti-Catholic Church diatribe in 1858's *De la Justice*, Courbet published his own anti-Catholic Church pamphlets, *Les Cures en goguette* and *La Mort de Jeannot: Les Frais de culte* in 1868. When one considers that Proudhon's giant *Du principe de l'art* began life as a pamphlet sized defense of *Les Cures*, Courbet's attempt at his own pamphleteering in his own words, is understandable. In this, as in his efforts to explain Proudhon's philosophy in Antwerp, his efforts fell short of Proudhonian quality. Political performance as performance art had replaced art itself as a means to send a message.

**The Antwerp Conference**

The Antwerp Conference on Art, held August 19-21, 1861 provided an opportunity for concerned individuals to meet and discuss art related issues of the day, from a discussion of Realism to debates of a commercial nature regarding the "business" of art. While the bulk of the participants argued topics such as unauthorized reproduction of artworks and copyright inheritance issues, Courbet engaged in what is described by Paul Crapo as "merriment" and "exhibitionism." When Proudhon, after serious consideration, decided not to attend, and rather, sent delegates

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323 Crapo "Disjunction on the Left: Proudhon, Courbet and the Antwerp Conference of 1861," 70.
to represent his ideas, selecting for this task Gustave Chaudey and Noel-Francois-
Alfred Madier de Montjau.\(^{324}\)

This was a seminal moment, because now Courbet turned from being only an
opinionated painter in public, to someone who actually attempted to represent the
issues important to Proudhon, with mixed results and with no authorization from the
philosopher. Had Proudhon wanted Courbet to represent his views, and had they
been the close personal friends that they are so often depicted to be, there would have
been no need to send Chaudey and Madier de Montjau to do so. To posture as a
representative of Proudhon was typical Courbet as he entered the emulation cycle of
the relationship.

There are two key points here, the first being that Courbet was in no way a
representative of Proudhon,\(^{325}\) and even more significantly, when Courbet did make
his self-appointed attempt to represent Proudhon’s views, he failed to present the
philosopher’s perspective accurately. Proudhon was abundantly clear that his
representatives were Chaudey and Madier de Montjau, not Courbet. Both of his
representatives were notable attorneys, well versed in Proudhon’s areas of interest in
the conference, unauthorized reproductions of artistic or literary works and
inheritance rights for copyrighted materials. Proudhon was not particularly interested
in the artistic discussions or displays at all. Courbet would have been a terrible
choice as representative. Yet, that was the posture that Courbet assumed for himself.

\(^{324}\) Ibid, 71.
\(^{325}\) Ibid, 71.
He said in his *profession de foi* to those attending the conference that “I regret that my friend Proudhon, with whom I get along so well, who has arrived at similar conclusions to mine although along different paths, could not be here to support my thesis.”\(^{326}\) clearly indicating that he was professing Proudhonian ideas, while suggesting that the ideas were his and would only have needed “support” from Proudhon. He then proceeded to claim that the core of Realism was essentially “the negation of the ideal,”\(^{327}\) a simplification which Proudhon was uncomfortable with when he learned of it. Proudhon was considerably more concerned with quite the opposite, that art reach out to the beautiful and the sublime in ways that manifested the power of the ideal, which was substantially a pre-Courbet, pre-Realism conceptualization.

Courbet’s *defense de Realisme* was not simply a recapitulation of his 1855 *Realist Manifesto*, it also contained his attempted Proudhonian references which were not present in the Manifesto. In ’55, Courbet had taken the position that his intention was primarily not to practice “art for art’s sake,”\(^{328}\) rather it was “to know in order to be able to create.”\(^{329}\) By the time of the 1861 conference however, Courbet had moved on to the negation of the ideal, claiming that the essential character of modern art was the material, not the spiritual, or the religious. He told the conference that “the

\(^{326}\) Ibid, 84. Here Crapo cites Gustave Courbet’s *Profession de Foi* (1861).  
\(^{327}\) Ibid, 84.  
\(^{329}\) Ibid, 447.
negation of the ideal (results in) the emancipation of reason, the emancipation of the individual, and ultimately, the emancipation of democracy."\textsuperscript{330}

Here was the core of the oversimplification which distressed Proudhon. He was quite happy to reject the idealism of the Church, but not idealism in its totality. He did not reject an idealism based on the “school which was human, rational, progressive and definitive,”\textsuperscript{331} essentially an idealism based on humanism rather than faith in a higher power. It was this distinction which Courbet failed to grasp, but which was explained to the attendees on behalf of Proudhon by Madier de Montjau. Proudhon himself explained in \textit{Du principe de l’art} that art had to be more than mere replication of reality, it must strive to teach, inform, and guide society. Art which did none of those things and which was simply photographic was “the Great Error, the mistake of all mistakes.”\textsuperscript{332} That is why the early Courbet works such as \textit{The Stonebreakers} so appealed to him. By now, thirteen years after that “socialist” painting, Courbet had managed to lose the perspective entirely. It fell to Madier-Montjau to publicly correct Courbet’s representations and explicate Proudhon for the attendees.

When remarking publicly on the events of the conference Proudhon omitted Courbet from all commentary with one small exception,\textsuperscript{333} listing him among persons who had made remarks which aided in “foiling the intrigue”\textsuperscript{334} of certain factions at

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{330} Crapo, “Disjuncture on the Left: Proudhon, Courbet and the Antwerp Conference of 1861,” 84. Here, Crapo again cites Courbet’s \textit{Profession de Foi}, (1861).
\item\textsuperscript{331} Ibid, 74. Crapo again cites Courbet’s \textit{Profession de Foi}.
\item\textsuperscript{332} Ibid, 78. Crapo cites Proudhon’s \textit{Du principe de l’art}.
\item\textsuperscript{333} Ibid, 71.
\item\textsuperscript{334} Ibid, 71.
\end{footnotes}
the conference, distancing himself from the painter’s actions and explanations. Proudhon’s silence roared.

From Being His Own Government to Being *Le Representant du Peuple*

"I did not feel that I was in any way a part of that government, that I too was a government."

Gustave Courbet

In April of 1848 Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, a proudly admitted socialist and leader of the anarchist faction was elected to the French National Assembly, an amazing accomplishment when one considers that only 1.2% of the French population was allowed to vote at that time. That 1.2% with the franchise had to be land owners with significant property in order to qualify. From this we can conclude that his election was not a matter of simply being supported by the uneducated, the jobless, the dispossessed. He had the support of significant numbers of bourgeois intellectuals in his campaign. In 1848 France, the political left, and the opposition to the government did not consist solely of the children of the *sans-culottes* of 1793. It included merchants, intellectuals, artists and writers. The only demographic who were resolutely conservative were the rural bourgeois, far from Paris. For Courbet, the situation was different. He would seek election to the Commune among the newly enfranchised masses, and he did so successfully.

The Franco-Prussian War, the siege of Paris, and his subsequent participation in the Commune provided Courbet with the ideal fulfillment of his political ambitions and constituted the fourth element in his Proudhonian emulation. Painting now took a

[335 Chu, *The Letters of Gustave Courbet*, 115.]
back seat to political activism, and political activism took center stage for Courbet inasmuch as he had "no inclination to bear arms." As he wrote to his family in September of 1870, "the performance of civic duties comes first." He was elected to the presidency of the General Superintendence of the National Museums and appointed by the Ministry of Public Education, Worship and Fine Arts to the French Archives Committee. His appointment to the Archives Committee would be short lived as within two months he resigned due to the committee’s decision not to remove from office the museum officials who had been appointed by the previous regime, an act which freed him to run for public office and which was supportive of his anti-authoritarian beliefs.

As did Proudhon in 1848, Courbet entered the political arena with an initial attempt at public office in January of 1871, when he entertained the notion of running for the National Assembly to be held in Bordeaux. In an open letter to the citizens of Paris he announced that "having been informed that several arrondissements have nominated me for the formidable assembly that will take place in Bordeaux, I readily accept, if you believe that I can serve my country." Although he claimed in a letter to his family to have received 50,666 votes, he failed to be elected, an inauspicious start to a political career, but one that did nothing to dissuade him from further attempts at public office. The only record of his having received the supposed 50,666 votes is his own claim in the letter.

337 Ibid, 385.
338 Ibid, 403.
339 Ibid, 405.
His succeeding attempts finally bore fruit in the chaotic atmosphere of the Commune. On March 19, 1871 Courbet publicly announced his candidacy for Representative of the Commune for the sixth arrondissement in elections to be held on March 26, 1871, a second election which he also lost.

However, in the supplementary election of April 16, held to fill seats emptied through resignations, he managed to secure election with 2,418 votes. In an act typical of the "proudest and most arrogant man in France", he accepted election even though he did not receive the mandatory one-eighth of the total number of registered voters in the arrondissement. This undervote was understandable in that, according to Rupert Christiansen in his history of the Commune, there had occurred a significant exodus of voters from all over Paris, leaving relatively few behind to cast ballots.340 As he told Auguste Rogeard on April 22, "even if I had been nominated with three votes, I would have accepted the position because it is dangerous. I would have accepted if they had authorized me to nominate myself."341 At this point, Courbet not only was willing to participate in the political process and serve in elective office, but sought that office with determination. By April 30th he could report to his family that he was "up to [his] neck in politics."342 As did Proudhon in 1848, he now had the opportunity to put his ideas to the test of governing.

It was for this election that Courbet published his famous profession de foi as first noted in chapter four, which is filled with Proudhonian representations such as "I have struggled against all forms of government that are authoritarian and by divine

342 Ibid, 416, 417.
right, for I want man to govern himself—according to his needs, for his direct benefit, and in accordance with his own ideas... All associations that are self-regulated and constituted according to their own interests will be our ‘cantons’, and the more they govern themselves the more they will ease the task of the Commune." All of these ideas were based on principles enunciated by Proudhon in his 1863 work *Du principe fédérative.* In this case, his profession appears to have counted for more than twenty years of reality as far as the voters were concerned, in that they put him in office. Not all of the Communards themselves were in favor of Courbet’s attentions. In his journal Catulle Mendès wrote, “for heaven’s sake, Courbet, get back to painting. It’s spring and you should be in the woods, sketching the rustling young leaves, not debating and federating in the Hôtel de Ville. How will any of this make you a better artist?”

As all of the decisions of the Commune transpired, Courbet made his finest Proudhonian emulative gesture on May 1, 1871, his most significant homage to Proudhon, when he went against the wishes of the majority of his fellow Communards on a key proposal. It was one of those proposals which seem to be a call to radicalism, an attempt for one faction to out-radical another, to see who was really on-point. On April 28th it had been proposed that the Commune establish a Committee of Public Safety, with full dictatorial powers, eerily reminiscent of the Reign of Terror following the revolution of 1793. In accord with the finest anarchist tradition of repudiation of all forms of oppression and centralization of power

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343 Ibid, 413.
344 Ibid, 414.
possible, Courbet said no.\footnote{Mack, \textit{Gustave Courbet}, 257.} The vote ultimately went in favor of the Committee by a vote of forty-five for approval to twenty-three against the plan. The minority of the Communards who disagreed with the decision issued their own public manifesto, which Courbet signed, stating: “Whereas the establishment of a Committee of Public Safety will inevitably entail the creation of a dictatorial power which will contribute nothing to the strength of the Commune...therefore the creation of any dictatorship by the Commune would be in fact a usurpation of the sovereignty of the people, we vote in the negative.”\footnote{Ibid, 258.}

With this vote, Courbet succeeded in manifesting in the most public manner possible Proudhon’s dictum as he had outlined it in his letter to Marx, that he would not become a party to anything which would serve to create leaders of “a new intolerance.”\footnote{Op Cit, Proudhon to Marx} He had finally interpreted the master correctly and voted his conscience in a manner of which Proudhon would have been proud. His vote did not stop the ensuing killing and destruction; the \textit{Tuileries} was burned, the hostages were executed, \textit{petroleuses}\footnote{The so-called \textit{petroleuses} were women who roamed the streets of Paris setting fires during the worst of the destruction. Although the image of the \textit{petroleuse} was widely disseminated after the suppression of the Commune by the forces of order, and their exploits were exaggerated greatly for political effect, it was not the case, as claimed by the apologists for the Commune, that they were solely a right-wing myth.} roamed the streets, and large sections of Paris were destroyed. But, due to his vote against centralized, dictatorial power, Courbet was responsible for none of that.

\footnote{346 Mack, \textit{Gustave Courbet}, 257.} \footnote{347 Ibid, 258.} \footnote{348 Op Cit, Proudhon to Marx} \footnote{349 The so-called \textit{petroleuses} were women who roamed the streets of Paris setting fires during the worst of the destruction. Although the image of the \textit{petroleuse} was widely disseminated after the suppression of the Commune by the forces of order, and their exploits were exaggerated greatly for political effect, it was not the case, as claimed by the apologists for the Commune, that they were solely a right-wing myth.}
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS – THE MYTH AND THE MAN

“I am the proudest and most arrogant man in France.”³⁵⁰ (1853) “I have been unswervingly occupied with the social question and the philosophies connected with it, choosing my own path, parallel to that of my comrade Proudhon.”³⁵¹ (1871)

Gustave Courbet

Gustave Courbet spent the better part of his life creating fanciful self-images of Courbet the musician, Courbet the wounded hero, Courbet the desperate man, and Courbet the itinerant artisan/laborer.³⁵² In each of these iterations there was an element of truth as well as some convenient fiction. As time passed, the man re-invented himself as he saw the need arise.

His re-inventions of self were quite conscious; from rustic bourgeois to left-bank Parisian and then back to hardy rustic. From socialist painter to marketable portraitist. From a man who did not participate in the revolution of 1848, to a man who bragged of having done so amid some stretching of the truth. And from a man too busy to concern himself with politics, to a man for whom political action was his chief concern, abandoning his art for a year and a half. His determination to be what he wanted to be was terribly focused.

³⁵¹ Ibid, 413.
For much of the last century, scholars have typically characterized the nature of the relationship between Courbet and Proudhon as long term, close and mutually fulfilling, based largely on an early translation of a key Courbet letter, acceptance at face value of Courbet’s repeated representations, and anecdotal evidence. If, as I have argued, we take a more literal interpretation as Chu offers, then the nature of the relationship is changed. This is significant as it suggests that long term canonical readings of the association between the two men are fundamentally flawed.

Based on the number of letters from Courbet to Proudhon, which were minimal by Courbet’s prolific standards, and also Proudhon’s lack of written response, we can observe some loose correlations. Utilizing this data we offer a different interpretation of the relationship.

A recap of the actual data shows the following with respect to the essentially asymmetrical nature of the relationship.

The 1992 Chu translation of the January 24, 1865 letter from Courbet to Gustave Chaudey indicates that Courbet and Proudhon did not “sit together daily” in the Bois de Boulogne.

The only two meetings between Courbet and Proudhon which can be documented through the writings of either man were the 1851 meeting at Sainte Pélagie prison and Proudhon’s attendance at Courbet’s 1855 one man exhibition. Both of these meetings are attested to in Proudhon’s *Carnets*. 
Not a single one of the trips, visits, or planned excursions by the two men together which are mentioned by Courbet in his letters ever happened.

Among hundreds of extant letters of Proudhon, not one is addressed to Courbet.

Among Proudhon's papers, containing over three hundred received letters, not a single letter from Courbet is saved.

In Courbet's prolific correspondence there is not a single mention of Proudhon prior to 1854, when he attempted to acquire a likeness of Proudhon for inclusion in *The Studio*.

In the production of *The Studio*, Courbet, a man renowned for his ability to render accurate depictions from memory, could not paint the face of Proudhon without assistance.

The emulative aspects of the relationship are demonstrated by the following.

Courbet's writings from 1855 on are demonstrated to change from private letters to personal friends and family to; Proudhonian public manifestos written to the artists of Paris, *professions de foi* written to editors and voters, *The Realist Manifesto*, letters to the German army, anti-Catholic Church pamphlets, and demands for the destruction of the Vendôme Column.

Courbet's attempts to speak on behalf of Proudhon in Antwerp in 1861 are documented by the records of the conference, Proudhon's *Carnets*, and the letters of Proudhon's actual representatives.
And finally, Courbet’s change from a “government of one” to a Representative du Peuple is documented by both Courbet’s own correspondence and the records of the Commune.

Although the conclusions drawn in this thesis are the result of interpretation of letters, diaries and historical fact, in each case, the representations made in this thesis are based on hard data rather than speculation, inference, or anecdote.

Throughout the text of this paper, an important consideration has been to not impose modern psychological glosses onto the actions of a man of the nineteenth century. However, it is appropriate at this point to ask two questions, “Did he ever come to understand the essential asymmetry of his relationship with Proudhon?”, and “Did he do all of this on purpose, was his emulation of Proudhon conscious?”

We have shown that the essential asymmetry of the relationship was manifested in three key areas: the initial translation which led to years of misunderstanding of the nature of the relationship, the notable lack of success in convincing Proudhon to sit for a portrait, and the asymmetry of correspondence.

The relationship was not one of mutuality of affection, it was that of disciple and reluctant prophet, a prophet who would have vehemently opposed being regarded as such by anyone, and most certainly to being regarded as such by a man like Courbet. For eleven years (1854 - 1865) Courbet attempted to secure time with Proudhon for a portrait. During those eleven years Proudhon did not choose to find the time, hardly the response of a close friend. He would not even accept the invitations to travel together, and his diary entries concerning Courbet were rudimentary at best, and not

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at all complimentary. But, the “proudest and most arrogant man in France” never came to understand that disconnect. His correspondence exaggerates his collaborative connection to the philosopher, and he never seems to react to, or even be conscious of, Proudhon’s negativity towards him. To the very end of his life, Courbet sang the praises of Proudhon, without ever seeing the relationship for what it was.

Gustave Courbet was not a terribly introspective man. We find nothing to suggest any serious level of insight in his writings. He understands that he is proud and arrogant, that is essentially the extent of his self-knowledge. He certainly was deluded in his view of his own capacities for intellectual achievement. And so we come to the conclusion that, for Courbet, the reality of the nature of the relationship was never really understood.

With respect to Courbet’s emulation of Proudhon, there is no question that Courbet followed what he understood (however misunderstood that may have been) to be the social and artistic philosophy of Proudhon for many years. This outlook was honed from the rudimentary, emotionally revolutionary mindset that he acquired as a young child at the dinner table in the family home in Ornans, and perfected (as he saw it) after meeting Proudhon in 1851. However, the text of his profession de foi, as requested by La Rappel, shows that his understanding of his own life path was clouded by his ego. His construction in this letter is key. He claims to have chosen “his own path”, but notes that it is “parallel to…Proudhon”. It is the idea that his path was only “parallel” to that of Proudhon which is disingenuous. The most “arrogant man in France” had difficulty assessing himself as a follower of anyone, be it of a
philosopher or of a school of painting, yet that is clearly what he was. It is likely that he never really saw his actions for what they were. In Edward Hyams’ 1979 intellectual biography of Proudhon, he referred to Courbet as Proudhon’s “friend and almost disciple,” which is a typical characterization of the relationship. The more appropriate characterization would be “distant disciple and not-quite friend”.

Ultimately, this has been the history of a man’s life trajectory, his political radicalization, and the almost inevitable result; the activism, the imprisonment, the exile and the deterioration of both the man and his art. It is the history of a man who became ever more radical, acting out his self-created destruction under the influence of another man who did not even want to accept the responsibility of that influence and was no longer alive to even see the final results of the association.

If this were literature instead of art history there might have been a final redemption, or perhaps even salvation. But, there was no redemptive moment, no epiphanies, no crowning glory or greatness. Courbet was not a man who died at the heights of his powers while still achieving great things. No, his greatest achievements were long behind him in a country he could no longer call his own. He died in the midst of passing off to an unsuspecting public works as his own which were created by much lesser men.

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APPENDIX A: CORRESPONDENTS AND PERSONS MENTIONED

Bakunin, Mikhail: Russian anarchist, foe of Marx and compatriot of Proudhon.

Baudelaire, Charles: Well known French poet and novelist, also wrote Salon commentaries.

Bruyas, Alfred: Wealthy art collector and patron of Courbet. Commissioned several works including portraits. Famously pictured in The Meeting.

Buchon, Max: Youthful classmate of Courbet and lifelong friend. A significant local author, he held republican sentiments, spent time exiled in Switzerland.

Castagnary, Jules-Antoine: A lawyer and politician, he became notable as one of the most significant art critics of his day.


Cuénot, Urbain: Wealthy schoolmate of Courbet, imprisoned for political activities.

Chaudey, Gustave: Leftist lawyer and journalist, close friend of Proudhon who was on committee which published Proudhon’s posthumous work.

Considérant, Prosper-Victor: Enthusiastic disciple of Fourier, politician, journalist.

Delacroix, Charles: French general and brother of Eugene.

Delacroix, Eugene: Painter, best known political work, Liberty Leading the People.

Fourier, Charles: French utopian socialist philosopher.

Gautier, Amand: Realist painter and friend of Courbet.

Guizot, François: Prime Minister of France and one-time Minister of Justice who was responsible for Marx’s expulsion from France.

Lassalle, Ferdinand: German socialist writer and activist, stridently criticized in Marx’s Critique of the Gotha Program.

Marat, Jean-Paul: French revolutionary leader.

Metternich, Klementz Wenzel, von: Austrian diplomat, significant factor at the Congress of Vienna.

Saint-Simon, Henri de: French socialist philosopher.
Toubain, Charles: French writer and co-publisher, along with Baudelaire and Champfleury of short lived radical newspaper *Salut Public*.
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