

Painting at the Origin

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The title of the Getty exhibition *Courbet and the Modern Landscape* puts my problem front and center: how can we call a work such as the Getty Museum's *Grotto of Sarrazine* (ca. 1864, fig. 1) modern when, in the same decade, other works such as Édouard Manet's *Races at Longchamp* (1867[?], fig. 2) are proposing the breathtaking pace of the spectacle and the brushstroke as the defining features of modern painting? Or to put it another way, does it make any sense to mention in the same breath the brooding, figureless grottoes of 1864 and the multicolored swarm of humanity gathering for *Music in the Tuileries Garden* (1862, fig. 3)?

My answer is, of course, yes, we can. But to do so means finding a place for darkness and deceleration in our understanding of modern experience, at the expense of—or, rather, as an alternative to—the brilliance and immediacy made familiar to us by the art of Manet and the Impressionists. In the first part of this paper, I discuss two pictorial strategies Gustave Courbet uses in 1864 to create the feeling of slow immersion. I will then reemerge from the depths of Courbet's painting, so to speak, to explore its modernity from another point of view, not that of speed and the city, but that of matter and its origins.



Figure 1

Gustave Courbet (French, 1819–1877). *The Grotto of Sarrazine near Nans-sous-Sainte-Anne*, ca. 1864. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm (19 11/16 x 23 5/8 in.). Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004.7.



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Figure 2
Édouard Manet (French, 1832–1883). *The Races at Longchamp*, 1867[?]. Oil on canvas, 43.9 x 84.5 cm (17 1/4 x 33 1/4 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Potter Palmer Collection, 1922.424. Photo: © The Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 3
Édouard Manet. *Music in the Tuileries Garden*, 1862. Oil on canvas, 76 x 118 cm (30 x 46 1/2 in.). Sir Hugh Lane Bequest, 1917, London, The Trustees of the National Gallery, NG3260. Photo: © The National Gallery, London.



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First, a bit of background. After the opening of the Salon in spring 1864, Courbet returns to his studio at Ornans, where he spends the summer painting the Source of the Loue and the Black Well (Puits Noir) series. Later, that autumn, he is reunited with his childhood friend Max Buchon in the latter's hometown of Salins. Passing by his familial property at Flagey, Courbet's route is marked by a series of old Roman towns on the plateau until he descends at Nans-sous-Sainte-Anne into a river valley leading to Salins. During these travels he produces *The Source of the Lison*, the *Roche Pourrie*, and the *Gour de Conche* (figs. 4, 5, and 6).



Figure 4

Gustave Courbet, *The Source of the Lison*, 1864. Oil on canvas, 65.5 x 80.5 cm (25 13/16 x 31 11/16 in.). Berlin, Nationalgalerie. Photo: Jörg P. Anders, Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, New York.



Figure 5

Gustave Courbet, *La Roche Pourrie*, 1864. Oil on canvas, 59.7 x 73 cm (23 1/2 x 28 3/4 in.). Salins-les-Bains, France, Musée Max-Claudet, F.409.



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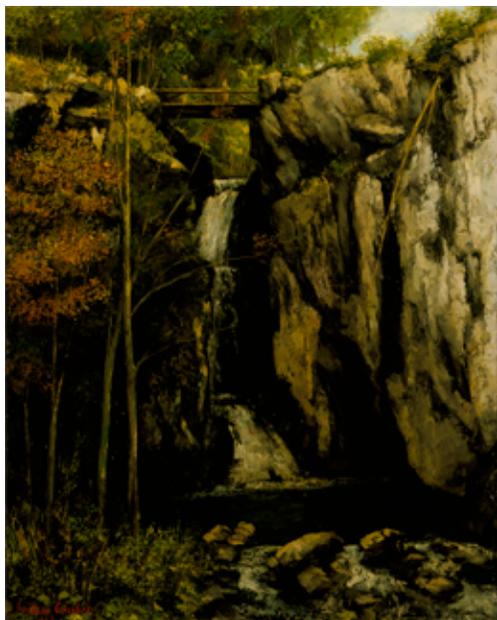


Figure 6

Gustave Courbet, *Le Gour de Conche*, 1864. Oil on canvas, 70 x 60 cm (27 5/8 x 23 5/8 in.). Besançon, Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie. Photo: Snark / Art Resource, NY.

It is striking how much Courbet avoids the long expansive views to be found on the plateau of Flagey. His first strategy could therefore be called one of downward descent. His eye gravitates to sites naturally corralled. Usually he even accentuates their enclosure. Sometimes he does so by cropping the top of the motif so as not to reveal its full height, as in the Source of the Loue series (fig. 7). In other works he



Figure 7

Gustave Courbet, *The Source of the Loue*, 1864. Oil on canvas, 99.7 x 142.2 cm (39 1/4 x 56 in.). New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, New York.



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reduces the sky to a mere speck of blue paint, thus delivering himself from the rules of aerial perspective, which state that the further up into the landscape you go, the more blue the color and the smaller and more invisible the brushstroke. It is not hard to imagine Courbet reveling in this antiacademic maneuver, whereby he could distinguish himself from more traditional landscape painters, such as that great master of the early nineteenth century, Camille Corot (1796–1875).

Courbet's habit of sucking the air out of his landscapes is fairly well known. But less remarked upon is the compensatory gesture: atmosphere that once covered the landscape now covertly returns as a moist air permeating it. We are fortunate to have an eyewitness account revealing this process of humidification:

I accompanied the painter to the Gour de Conche, explaining to him on the spot that the bridge overhanging the three basins had been farther forward in the past and thus even more picturesque. Courbet gave to the waterfall more water than there was that day, made it whiter, added some foliage, and placed the bridge where I had indicated. So I said to him when he gave the last swipe of the brush, "Realism?" "Oh," he laughed, "nothings, some touches of beauty. It happens sometimes."¹

Contrary to the realist mantra of painting only what one sees, Courbet is not averse to moistening a landscape, as long as this allows it, like rejuvenated skin, to breathe more easily.

Courbet's "downward descent" should one day be part of a history of implied viewing distance in nineteenth-century painting, from, let's say, the uncomfortable proximity of the toppling corpse in the foreground of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819, Louvre) to Adolf von Hildebrand's plea for the superiority of the far view over the near one, toward century's end. With Courbet's landscapes we are well on our way to the perceptual incoherence and breakdown of form that Hildebrand feared would paralyze the viewer who looks at a work of art from too close. While in the Black Well series (fig. 8) individual trees and rocks are easily recognized, they are oases of stability in an otherwise pulsating vortex of hesitant forms and black holes, where craggy outgrowths, verdant canopies, and mossy embankments creep out toward the beholder. Their stealthy approach seems to warp space around them, initiating an invagination of space running from uppermost leaf all the way to the stream's watery depths. Add to this the undifferentiated dark areas near the center and middle ground, and it is hard not to feel that the entire image field is somehow in flux, convulsing, as if powered by an invisible bellows.

Courbet's second strategy is what I will provisionally call his antihierarchical mark making. Klaus Herding's important article "Equality and Authority in Courbet's Landscape Painting" first brought attention to the democratizing impulse behind Courbet's use of noncentered composition in this genre, to his way of depositing the elements of a landscape across a canvas so that all parts are treated equally.² I would argue that the concept of equality—or at least of evenness of attention—also aptly describes his unique approach to the pictorial mark.





Figure 8

Gustave Courbet, *The Shaded Stream at the Puits Noir*, ca. 1860–65. Oil on canvas, 64.2 x 79.1 cm (25 1/4 x 31 1/8 in.). The Baltimore Museum of Art, BMA 1950.202. Photo: The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland.

It is obvious from the Getty Museum exhibition that, far from being simply a crude palette-knife painter, Courbet exercises a great degree of control over the four properties of the mark: its size, its color, its degree of transparency, and its texture or thickness. This focused study of the painter's touch is already evident in the series of still lifes Courbet paints in 1862 and 1863. But it is in the 1864 landscapes—where the intimacy of domestic tabletop arrangement must adapt to a more chaotic, unruly genre—that Courbet unleashes the full range of his technique. Here his great contribution to the history of painting is not so much making these brusque gestures visible but making them visible without one mark—or one group of marks—completely dominating the others. It is almost as if Courbet is playing out an internal dare: how boldly can I set down my paint, how much pictorial energy can I inject into the composition, before one of these strokes begins to stick out too much, thus spoiling the careful buildup of layers? Can I really load up a canvas with so many discrete units, he asks himself, without ever creating a dominant figure or compositional center?

In terms of color, he learns from Corot—when they paint together in 1862—how to create a landscape from a palette limited to colors of a certain tone or tonal range. The Museum of Fine Arts's *Stream in the Forest* (fig. 9), where a small number of different greens generate a multitude of forms, culminates this apprenticeship. The difference between the two is that Corot likes blond tonalities, whereas Courbet prefers his auburn or Brunette. We tend not to give Courbet enough credit for this choice, no doubt because his colors do not illuminate like Corot's. Yet when you look closely at the landscapes in the show, you discover that darkness in Courbet is never simply black but rather a varied undergrowth of tonally somber colors.



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Figure 9

Gustave Courbet, *A Stream in the Forest*, ca. 1862. Oil on canvas, 156.8 x 114 cm (61 3/4 x 44 7/8 in.). Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 55.892.

We know that Courbet also learns a lot from an older master, Rembrandt (1606–1669). The way in which the Dutchman seems to conjure cloaks and garments from the fabric of the canvas itself is not unlike the terrestrial magic of Courbet’s landscapes, where foliage and rocks emerge similarly from a primordial soup. Rembrandt, however, likes to add a gold necklace, metal filigree, or wrinkled skin as the cherry on top of the image, whereas Courbet limits himself to an odd rock or ripple here and there, always careful not to usurp the other marks. To put it admittedly all too briefly, I would say that Courbet is the Rembrandt of nineteenth-century landscape, but a Rembrandt filtered through the powerful example of Géricault’s horses and heroes. It is no accident that one compares Courbet’s rocks to bodies or organs; the ability to create the illusion of unbridled muscle and mass out of the thinnest paint application is a talent Courbet shares with the master of *The Raft of the Medusa*.

To return to my original juxtaposition, Courbet’s fondness for what I am calling the antihierarchical mark makes him the opposite of Manet in almost every respect. Color in Manet’s *Fifer* (fig. 10) is not about binding the palette to a single tone but about bringing opposites into chromatic confrontation, thus making lights even lighter, darks even darker. The opacity of these color planes helps distribute visual interest across the picture plane rather than coaxing it out of the fabric of the field; as for the size of the mark, Manet pushes the length and width of the brushstroke to extremes, longer in the fifer’s instruments, wider in his hat, short and sweet in the face and hands; finally, he cultivates textural accidents of the brush—the way in which ridges and furrows effortlessly metamorphose into skin and fabric is one of the great accomplishments of his art.



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Figure 10

Édouard Manet. *The Fifer*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 160 x 98 cm (63 x 38 1/2 in.). Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Photo: Hervé Lewandowski, Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, New York.

I have been arguing that the face-off between Courbet and Manet, so crucial to any account of Modernist painting, goes well beyond the art-historical cliché of Courbet's rotund forms versus Manet's flat playing cards.³ I would like to make the further claim that we can actually pinpoint the beginning of Courbet's deep investment in the decelerated, lingering gaze to a specific historical event.

In January 1864, Courbet prepares a large canvas for that year's Salon. The painting, *The Source of the Hippocrene*, depicts a beautiful nude Parisian model spitting into the mythical waters of a splendid vale where poets since antiquity have gone in hopes of invigorating their creative powers. However, as one would expect of Courbet, the pilgrims paying homage to the source are no toga-clad Homers, but the nineteenth-century writers Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, and Alphonse Lamartine, among others, all unwittingly imbibing the tainted brew.

One day the artist's sister, Juliette, accidentally knocks the painting over, causing it severe damage. Courbet abandons the composition but saves the canvas. At the Salon of 1866, Courbet exhibits a new scene, the Musée d'Orsay *Covert of the Roe-Deer* (fig. 11), painted over the old one.⁴ A photograph taken of Courbet's studio some time in 1864 shows the Orsay picture. Lo and behold a landscape clearly representing the Black Well is laid out, if not altogether finished, a full year or two before its arrival at the Salon. We do not know whether Courbet painted over *The Source of Hippocrene* soon after the accident or was incorporating the original landscape into the new work. Either way the photograph shows that in 1864 Courbet already had major aspirations for this particular scene.



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Figure 11

Gustave Courbet, *The Covert of the Roe-Deer*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 174 x 209 cm (68 1/2 x 82 1/4 in.). Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Photo: Gérard Blot / Christian Jean, RMN / Art Resource, New York.



Figure 12

Édouard Manet. *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863. Oil on canvas, 208 x 264 cm (82 in. x 12 ft. 8 in.). Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Photo: RMN / Art Resource, New York.

Is *The Source of Hippocrene* perhaps Courbet's response to another painting staging the encounter of a Parisian nude with her male colleagues in a landscape? The *Luncheon on the Grass*, or *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (fig. 12), announces the raucous arrival of Manet at the Salon des Refusés of 1863, the very same



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year Baudelaire publishes his famous essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” a text which in many respects can be read as a defense of the kind of painting Manet was doing at the time. The coupling of Manet and Baudelaire in the public’s mind is made explicit in Henri Fantin-Latour’s *Homage to Delacroix* (fig. 13).

The death of Delacroix in 1863 prompts a long glowing eulogy from Baudelaire, seated at bottom right, implicitly raising the question of who would replace the great Romantic at the head of the modern school. Immediately to the right of the deceased artist’s portrait stands Fantin-Latour’s answer, the heir apparent, Manet. Needless to say, in this august company the loutish Courbet is conspicuously absent.



Figure 13

Henri Fantin-Latour (French, 1836–1904). *Homage to Delacroix*, 1864.
Oil on canvas, 160 x 250 cm (63 x 98 3/8 in.). Paris, Musée d’Orsay.
Photo: Hervé Lewandowski, RMN / Art Resource, New York.

Courbet, an artist so aware of his public persona, would not have taken these developments lightly, especially since Manet’s showpiece seems to inherit its ambiguity, lack of narrative action, and interplay of reality and fantasy from Courbet’s own *Bathers* of 1853 (fig. 14). His response is to reframe *Déjeuner*: intimates become public figures; a scenic, decorative background becomes a hybrid landscape at once Hippocrene and Puits Noir; the nude stops staring and starts spitting; and, most curiously, Manet’s brother, gesturing to the mysterious woman in the water, becomes Baudelaire drinking from the source, getting indigestion from inspiration. If to be inspired is to drink from an original source, then Baudelaire’s counterpart in painting is surely Manet, who had an unquenchable thirst for sources. Courbet does not simply reconfigure *Déjeuner*; he recasts Manet’s signature strategy of combining sources as mere romantic inspiration: “Drink from the well of art history too often,” Courbet seems to say, “and you’ll get sick!”

But how does an artist in 1864 avoid the influence of the old masters? Manet’s answer was to pile up selected references to past art and contemporary events to the point of indecipherability. Courbet takes the opposite tack; he dreams of a world without precedent. And this is where Courbet’s “deceleration”



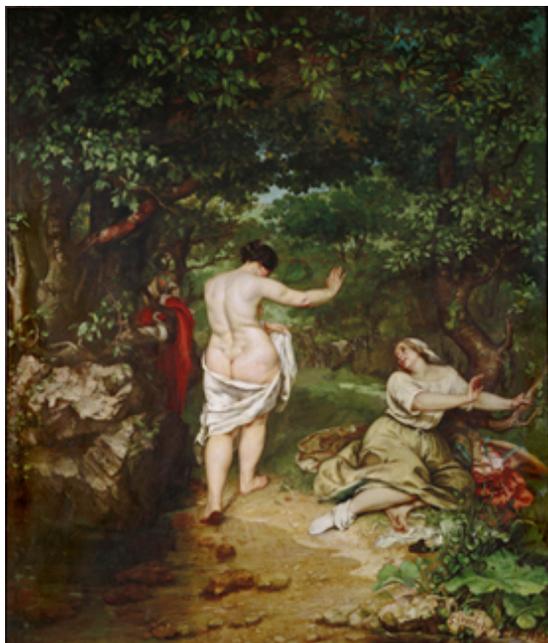


Figure 14

Gustave Courbet, *Bathers*, 1853. Oil on canvas, 227.7 x 193 cm (89 5/8 x 76 in.). Montpellier, France, Musée Fabre. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, New York.

comes into play. For if one is to avoid drowning in the currents of art-historical influence, one needs something else to do at the source. By slowing down perception, by making the viewer an active participant in the making of a world, Courbet in the landscapes of 1864 unleashes all the physical sensations the source has to offer, thus evading its contaminated waters, where creativity goes to die. Urban spectacle is not the only way to stir the modern consciousness. It can happen anywhere, even in the serene precincts of Nature, even right outside the door of one's studio, if one submits to the tactile experience of what is going on right here, right now.

¹ Memoirs of Charles Toubin, cited in Charles Pornier, "Un Témoin de la Bohème littéraire," *La Revue de France* (March 1925): pp. 85–86. Unless otherwise noted, translations are by the author.

² Klaus Herding, "Equality and Authority in Courbet's Landscape Painting," in *Courbet: To Venture Independence*, trans. John William Gabriel, (New Haven and London, 1991), pp. 62–98. Originally published as "Egalität und Autorität in Courbets Landschaftsmalerei," *Städel-Jahrbuch* 5 (1975): pp. 159–99.

³ As has been argued, in their own ways, by Theodore Rett, "Courbet and Manet," *Art News* 54 (March 1980): pp. 98–103; Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism* (Chicago, 1996), pp. 343–44, 478 n. 89, 480 n. 97; and Carol M. Armstrong, *Manet Manette* (New Haven, 2002), pp. 3–30.

⁴ See letter to Jules Castagnary, January 18, 1864, and letter to Urbain Cuenot, April 6, 1866, in Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, ed., *Letters of Gustave Courbet* (Chicago, 1992).



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