

Contents

| | |
|-----|---|
| 7 | Prologue – <i>The Hammock</i> |
| 17 | Ornans – Flagey |
| 35 | Industrialization in the Countryside – Remarks on <i>The Stonebreakers</i> and <i>The Wheat Sifters</i> |
| 51 | Eugène Delacroix Sees <i>The Painter's Studio</i> |
| 67 | With Knife and Thumb |
| 81 | Origine du monde – Origine de la peinture |
| 99 | Epilogue |
| 107 | Notes |
| 115 | Biography |
| 122 | Recommended Reading and Viewing |
| 123 | Literature |
| 125 | Acknowledgments |

Prologue
The Hammock

I can remember my first encounter with a painting by Gustave Courbet quite vividly. It was in 1971 during a visit to the Oskar Reinhart Collection “Am Römerholz” in Winterthur. I was five years old; my father, as usual, took me by the hand and I know for sure that I was puzzled by the peculiar yellow socks worn by the young girl sleeping in a hammock in Courbet’s painting (ill. p. 10/11). Could they be some kind of shoe-socks? Even today, after countless visits to this magnificent museum, I am still puzzled by this odd footwear, which seems better suited to a character in a Biedermeier fairy-tale painting by Ludwig Richter. Her feet are naturally immaculate, as if this beauty never touched the ground before laying herself down to sleep.

Gustave Courbet’s *Le hamac (The Hammock)* from 1844 is a masterpiece, a dreamlike vision in every sense of the word. But what does the painting depict? Is it Courbet’s dream or the sleeping girl’s? One sees a forest clearing; a hammock is stretched over a path that leads in turn to another clearing in the background. A girl lies in it and sleeps, half in sunshine, half in shade. She wears a garland of flowers in her loose blond hair. The weather is apparently very warm because she has removed her blue silk shawl and opened her bodice, lined in yellow, un-

derneath which her breasts are just visible through transparent gauze. The girl's legs hang down from the hammock, feet crossed, her skirt hiked up to reveal calves clad in white stockings. She holds firmly onto the edge of the hammock with her right hand, while her left hand extends over her head in a gesture typical of sleeping persons. Her chin rests on her chest and the expression on her face has something equally lascivious and innocent about it. And in general she seems virginal and a little wicked at the same time. The dream she is presently dreaming is surely very pleasant. It is a pity that it will soon come to an end, because she is about to fall off the hammock. Her hair, which resembles a waterfall, presages her imminent plunge to the ground. She will not fall onto the path itself but rather into shallow, dark water, which will wrench her from her reverie.

This painting often reminds me of two verses from "Frühlingstraum" [Dream of Spring], a poem from Wilhelm Müller's *Winterreise* [Winter Journey] cycle published in 1823 and set to music by Franz Schubert. They concern the abrupt shift from the world of dreams to that of reality, which for Müller was a sign of the difference between the idea of freedom and the reality of suppression during the Restoration and the period leading up to the March Revolution of 1848:

Ich träumte von Lieb' um Liebe,
Von einer schönen Maid,
Von Herzen und von Küssen,
Von Wonne und Seligkeit.

Und als die Hähne krächten,
Da ward mein Herze wach;
Nun sitz' ich hier alleine
Und denke dem Traume nach.

[I dreamt of mutual love,
Of a lovely maiden,
Of embracing and kissing,
Of joy and rapture.

And when the cocks crowed
My heart awoke;
Now I sit here alone
And reflect upon my dream.]¹

Does Courbet's *Hammock* depict the transition from an idealized world to a harsh reality? Is this image of sleep shortly before it comes to an abrupt end also about the end of an era that can be designated "Romantic"? The fact that this painting might unexpectedly contain concealed messages still occupies me today. The garland the young woman wears in her hair is not an ivy wreath, as has frequently been claimed.² It is in fact



Gustave Courbet, *Le hamac* (*The Hammock*), 1844, oil on canvas, 70.5 × 97 cm,
Oskar Reinhart Collection "Am Römerholz," Winterthur

made from black bryony, a medicinal plant with heart-shaped leaves and red berries that, as the French name unmistakably indicates, is traditionally used to treat bruises: “herbe aux femmes battues” (herb of battered women).³ Other vernacular names include “racine vierge” (maiden root) or “sceau de Notre Dame,” which can be translated as “seal of Our Lady.” Both names indicate a further function: the plant seems to have been employed as a contraceptive.⁴ If Courbet was aware of this, which is likely, then the rude awakening that will follow upon sleep would take on a very different meaning here.

The year before completing this painting, Courbet depicted himself in a self-portrait that was selected in 1844 for the annual public Salon exhibition in Paris—his debut. The *Portrait de l'artiste*, known as *Courbet au chien noir* (*Portrait of the Artist*, known as *Courbet with a Black Dog*, front cover) shows him as a fashionably dressed Romantic wearing plaid trousers, a dapper frock coat, and a hat adorning his magnificently curly head of hair like some murky halo. The artist is seen resting during a walk; he holds a pipe in his hand, while his walking stick and sketchbook lean against the rocks behind him. It appears as if he has given himself over to melancholy, and his glance, looking down his nose at the viewer, seems to underscore the distance between himself and his audience, as if the latter will never be in a position to understand him. And the glance of the dog seated next to the painter also seems to say: “I am the only one who is faithful to you.” The background, freely painted—probably with a palette knife—and left unfinished, is conspicuous.

The painting depicts Courbet in the mood he was in when he imagined the women of his dreams in forest clearings, yet not without recalling the unwanted consequences of sexual exuberance.

The Reinhart Collection likewise houses a painting made by Eugène Delacroix in 1844, the same year as Courbet's *Hammock*, namely *La mort d'Ophélie* (*The Death of Ophelia*, ill. p. 14). Delacroix (1798–1863), the most important artist of the Romantic movement in France, was over twenty years Courbet's senior (1819–1877). Here again the painting concerns a young woman and water: in Delacroix's painting, however, she has already fallen into the water, both literally and figuratively. Delacroix's Ophelia is somewhat more buxom compared to Courbet's sleeping girl, and with her completely exposed upper body I always felt her to be much more erotic than the girl on the hammock. As is often the case with Delacroix, his work is a painted elaboration of a scene described in William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*, though less ambiguous than Courbet's cryptic and much more subtle painting.

But one thing I will never understand is how Ophelia could drown in such a shallow stream; it reminds me of the critical remark Delacroix noted in his journal when Courbet's *Baigneuses* (*Bathers*, Montpellier, Musée Fabre) was exhibited in 1853, stating that the water was a “little puddle scarcely deep enough for a footbath.”⁵ Courbet may have responded to Delacroix's Ophelia motif, which exists in numerous versions, to the extent that he also painted a picture of a woman bathing



Eugène Delacroix, *La mort d'Ophélie* (*The Death of Ophelia*), 1844, oil on canvas, 55 × 64 cm, Oskar Reinhart Collection "Am Römerholz," Winterthur

in a stream in a very similar pose—who, however, is undressed and surely not about to take her own life (Mohamed Mahmoud Khalil Museum, Cairo). Courbet used this motif again in his painting *Trois baigneuses* (*Three Bathers*, 1865–68, ill. p. 15), rotating it by ninety degrees in the process and turning a woman reclining in the water into one who is slipping vertically into the pool. Quite an unusual procedure.⁶

Delacroix and Courbet surely observed each other quite closely. Their—more or less concealed—reactions are a leitmotif in this book, whose seven essays serve as an introduction to



Gustave Courbet, *Trois baigneuses* (*Three Bathers*), 1865–68, oil on paper on canvas, 126 × 96 cm, Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris

selected aspects of Gustave Courbet's life and work. It is published on the occasion of the exhibition devoted to Courbet at the Fondation Beyeler. Courbet plays with the expectations of his viewers and the treatment of color; the hidden references to classic art-historical iconography and emphasis on his individuality as an artist make him a seminal figure in the transition from tradition to modernity. He is an artist whose work also fascinates those who are not concerned with art on a daily basis. And perhaps this little book will contribute to the desire to take a fresh look at Courbet and rediscover his immensely rich oeuvre and compelling life.

Ornans – Flagey

May 2013: Underway in Gustave Courbet's native land, in the French part of the Jura. The rain is coming down in sheets—suitable weather for this rural and remote region where water seems to be everywhere. Plateaus alternate with deeply carved valleys through which rivers, springing forth from the depths of the earth in grottos and cascading downward in mighty waterfalls, wind their way. It is as if one is moving about on a giant sponge. This area belongs to Franche-Comté, the “free county,” with its capital Besançon, that first became a part of France in 1678; it had previously been under the control of the Habsburgs and the Swiss, and after the mid-sixteenth century even belonged to the Spanish Habsburgs. Its inhabitants are still proud of this Spanish influence; it is considered particularly good form to display a certain independence from Paris. And this was very likely the case in Gustave Courbet's day as well.

He was born on June 10, 1819, officially in Ornans, a bustling town situated twenty-five kilometers from Besançon. The registry at the local town hall does not specifically indicate the place of birth, but notes that his father resided in Flagey near Ornans.⁷ Perhaps the story is true, according to which Courbet's mother went into labor while she was on her way from Flagey