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book review of

Courbet by Ségolène Le Men

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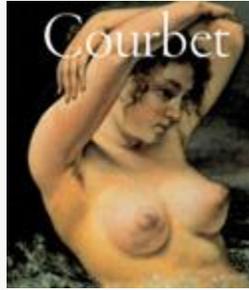
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Courbet

Ségolène Le Men

New York: Abbeville, 2008.

400 pp.; 309 color illustrations.

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The artist monograph has become something of a vexed genre. Like its more ambitious cousin the *catalogue raisonné*, the traditional monograph seeks to wrangle an artist's career within the bounds of a single, authoritative narrative. This approach elicited some wariness in the final decades of the twentieth century as many art historians reoriented their scholarship in response to the influence of critical methods (feminism, Marxism, Post-structuralism) that eschewed such "grand narratives." The necessarily biographical organization of the traditional artist monograph came under particular suspicion as scholars sought increasingly to interpret artworks in relation to the social dynamics of artistic production and reception rather than the elusive intentions of a lone genius. Attempts to present the life and work of an artist in its entirety fell out of fashion during the 80s and 90s, and art historians focusing on the work of a single artist tended instead to home in on a single thematic, social, or technical issue relevant to that artist's oeuvre.

While the intellectual status of the artist monograph may remain uncertain in some quarters, the genre survives, even flourishes. The reasons for its persistence are, of course, numerous. The monographic format enjoys a certain disciplinary prestige as the heritor of one of the earliest approaches to documenting art's history: the inclination to examine works of art in relation to the lived experience of the artist goes back at least as far as Vasari's *Vite* (some would argue that it goes back even to Pliny). Monographs also help establish and preserve the artistic brand names upon which the art market has depended for centuries. Publishers and booksellers likewise rely on such recognizable brands: the name of a well-known artist (ideally, along with a familiar self-portrait or other signal artwork) on the cover of a book is more likely to attract an audience of general readers than some arcane title or unfamiliar image. There are, as well, scholarly gains to be made by considering the whole of an artist's oeuvre in a single work. Cultural, political, technical, aesthetic and psychological influences and consequences of artworks can all be profitably explored through a monographic approach.

Ségolène Le Men's ambitious *Courbet* makes a case for the continuing relevance and utility of the artist monograph. Le Men leaves no doubt that *Courbet* is a monograph in the

traditional sense: “This book aims to take into account the full diversity of Courbet’s art.” (18) Never shrinking from her task, Le Men proceeds to develop an account of Courbet’s oeuvre that maintains many of the features of a traditional monograph while insisting on the depth and complexity of argument associated with more tightly-focused studies. Among the conventional characteristics of the monograph retained in *Courbet* are its chronological organization (the main narrative commences with the artist’s birth and closes with his death—a brief conclusion discusses the influence of Courbet’s art on modernism); its assertion of an essential, recognizable, and persistent aesthetic personality (the same formal and thematic concerns can be discerned throughout his career, even in his juvenalia); its grand scale (in folio with 400 pages and 309 color illustrations); and its exhaustive bibliography and supplementary chronology. In its scope and erudition, *Courbet* exemplifies the scholarly monograph.

Where Le Men importantly augments the monographic formula is in her insistence upon developing several complex theoretical propositions generated by Courbet’s work. These themes are laid out in the book’s introduction and can be distilled into five basic assertions: 1) only through a multi-disciplinary approach can Courbet’s oeuvre be understood; 2) Courbet’s art is grounded in a renegotiation of Romanticism; 3) the painter’s Naturalism derives as much from his biography as from external, social pressures; 4) Courbet pursued different genres at different points in his career in order to satisfy commercial concerns as well as personal interests; 5) the artist’s placement of enigmatic, often hidden, images in his works was a deliberate attempt to engage the viewer in a form of visual play. As Le Men is quick to point out, these ideas have been explored by other art historians, and her introduction provides a thorough historiography of the field of Courbet studies. Le Men frequently invokes the work of previous scholars—especially Petra Chu, Hélène Toussaint, Michael Fried, and T.J. Clark—in support of her own arguments, each of which provides the particular focus of a single chapter. It is important to note, however, that Le Men is not content to circumscribe major themes within a chapter: she attempts to pursue each of her main motifs across all five chapters of the book in order to impose thematic as well as chronological coherence on Courbet’s oeuvre. This is where Le Men’s study reveals the strain of the monographic format.

Le Men refuses to allow chronology alone to dictate the shape of her monograph; throughout the book she attempts to weave together threads of several complex aesthetic questions. An ambitious approach, Le Men occasionally seems to wrestle uncomfortably with the book’s various goals. On the one hand, as she states herself, *Courbet* seeks to present a comprehensive overview of the artist’s career and its influence for later artists. On the other, Le Men wants to develop original arguments concerning the legacy of Romanticism, the meaning of Naturalism, the play of gender and sexuality in Courbet’s art, and the role of enigma in nineteenth-century visual and literary culture. These aims occasionally struggle against one another, with the survey of Courbet’s career generally succeeding in pushing Le Men’s subtler arguments to the sidelines. For instance, Le Men commences a provocative argument about the condensation of femininity, religion, and the landscape in Courbet’s painting on page 45. After whetting the reader’s appetite with a paragraph on this phenomenon, the theme is abandoned for nearly 250 pages until it finally reappears on page 285. While deferring general observations for a few chapters may not pose much of a problem, an intricate theoretical argument cannot be sustained in this way. Sadly, many of Le Men’s most trenchant arguments are similarly segmented. An intriguing assertion about

the literary and visual significance of the serpentine line for Courbet's work is likewise disjointed and protracted over several chapters, which undermines the force of Le Men's thesis. Another example concerns the significance of paths, roads, and waterways in Courbet's art and biography. Presented fleetingly in the first chapter, the motif abruptly returns in the fifth chapter with no attempt to re-introduce the theme to a reader who has since traversed several chapters and thirty-five years of Courbet's career. This happens frequently enough to make one wonder whether the manuscript for *Courbet* was originally conceived a series of thematic chapters that were later reorganized chronologically in order to accommodate the conventions of the standard monograph.

Courbet is strongest where Le Men takes the necessary space to develop an argument fully. Her account of Naturalism in chapter 4, for instance, is especially good. Read against the philosophical interests of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, recent developments in natural history, republican political interests, and the social ideals of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Le Men asserts that it is possible to discern a coherent Naturalist movement in literature and the visual arts. For Le Men, Naturalism is not a style but mode of inquiry through which all manifestations of human and natural history should be subjected to dispassionate, empirical scrutiny. Only through this objective pursuit of knowledge could society—and, hence, the arts—progress. Her thorough account of Naturalism curiously omits Hippolyte Taine from the movement's genealogy, an exclusion that deserves at least a note of explanation. Taine's ideas were widely disseminated during the second half of the nineteenth century via his books on literature, history, philosophy, and even the nascent field of psychology. Not only had Taine formulated one of the first coherent theories of philosophic Naturalism, his post as professor of art history and aesthetics at the École des Beaux-Arts from 1864 until 1893 gave him singular authority on the matter among artists and critics. This influential philosopher and aesthete, whose ideas were later twisted and co-opted by fascist supporters of eugenics, remains an important contributor to the development of Naturalism in France during the nineteenth century. Whether Le Men's reticence is due to the history of Taine's reception or the failure of his ideas to accord with her definition of Naturalism (Taine's writings tend to characterize Naturalism in sharp opposition to Romanticism in contrast to Le Men's account, which sees the two movements as closely related), his contribution to the movement should be noted.

Despite this omission, Le Men's discussion of Naturalism leads her to develop a fresh and convincing account of Courbet's renowned *The Origin of the World*. Tracing the history of the painting's creation, ownership, and reception, Le Men asserts its fundamental significance as "one of the most intense, most modern expressions" of "physiological and artistic Naturalism" (248). The painting, Le Men explains, is not simply a depiction of a model's genitalia, but a visual record of female orgasm—a physiological reality that had only recently become a topic of scientific interest and debate. A direct transcription of sexuality unbounded by the dictates of either social institutions or procreative duty, Courbet's painting withholds any directives for the viewer's response: there are no signs that the viewer is being admonished, incited, cautioned, or congratulated. For this reason, *The Origin of the World* stands as "the last word in Naturalism."

Le Men insists upon a close relationship between Naturalist art and literature, describing Courbet and his work in decidedly literary terms. Literary comparisons commence in the

first chapter where Le Men sees Courbet “determined to study on his own, in the manner of a writer” (50). His process is one “he shared with Proust” along with Balzac and Hugo (50). Le Men further notes that Courbet referred to himself as an “author” rather than an artist (56). Throughout the book, Courbet and his works are compared to characters and scenes taken from contemporary literature: Honoré Balzac’s *Comédie humaine*, Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, Max Buchon’s *Poésies franc-comtoises*, Jules Michelet’s *La Mer*, Victor Hugo’s *Les travailleurs de la mer*, to name only a handful of the works that Le Men engages at length. By using literature to frame her analysis of Courbet’s oeuvre and process, Le Men underscores her assertion that Naturalism was, in fact, a coherent cultural movement. But her reliance on literary comparisons ultimately accords literature the status of a precedent or model for the visual arts. This becomes clear in chapter 5, “Glory and Exile,” where a discussion of Courbet’s marine paintings leads Le Men to invoke the writings of Michelet, Hugo, and Guy de Maupassant before offering the following assessment: “Perhaps Courbet’s modernity here lies in this ability to recapture in paint the marine sensations that the great writers of his century had rendered so well in words” (327). Unfortunately, Le Men does not explain precisely why modernity might be understood as a particularly verbal rather than visual experience.

Le Men’s exploration of Courbet’s oeuvre in literary terms is complemented by her methodology, which she draws from the literary criticism. Le Men finds a convincing methodological rationale for the relevance of the artist monograph in what is known as genetic criticism. Developed chiefly in France in the final quarter of the twentieth century, genetic criticism offers a riposte to both New Historicism and reception theory. Full artistic meaning, according to genetic criticism, arises neither through the hermetic “close reading” of New Historicism nor during the encounter between the audience and the text, as supposed in reception theory. Instead, genetic criticism turns to the artistic process—through the various assays, false starts, drafts, and revisions (whether made deliberately by the artist or accidentally by the typesetter or copyist) of a work of art—to uncover its meaning. A mode of intertextual scholarship that privileges the texts of a particular author—especially those texts that seem to relate to the “genesis” of the artwork under consideration—genetic criticism has been embraced in France by scholars with quite diverse methodological aims. Some use genetic criticism to help fix a work’s meaning by providing insight into the author’s intention: words tried and discarded can suggest the precise valence sought by the author. Scholars not seeking such positivist conclusions have also turned to genetic criticism, taking advantage of its capacity to expose something of the author’s unconscious in his or her scribbled marginalia or orthographic errors.

Although this theory is presented as fundamental to Le Men’s endeavor, its import for *Courbet* is never fully developed. She avows in her introduction that she has applied genetic criticism in her study “to demonstrate how the artist gradually developed his ‘complete work’ over time,” only to defer further discussion of this approach until the fourth chapter, where she alludes to it again without elaborating its relevance for her monograph. While Le Men may have felt that a thorough explication of the methodological significance of genetic criticism for *Courbet* was not necessary for readers of the original French version of the book, the audience for the English translation is less likely to be familiar with this approach. Perhaps Le Men assumes that most art historians will find the methods of genetic criticism familiar: the parallels between genetic criticism and long-standing art historical practice in which sketches, preparatory drawings, *pentimenti*, and copies are generally accepted as

integral to a conception of a “final” artwork are apparent. Even the practice of examining all manner of texts produced by an artist—such as letters, journals, lectures, poems, stories, essays, manifestoes, films, and musical compositions—has been a part of art history since the discipline’s inception. Yet the specificity of Le Men’s citation of genetic criticism suggests that she sees in this approach something supplementary to conventional art historical practice. An account of genetic criticism and its specific relevance for the present volume would have provided Le Men with an opportunity to address directly the methodological tension that expresses itself throughout *Courbet*.

Genetic criticism might, in fact, be usefully employed by readers of *Courbet*. As previously mentioned, the volume under consideration is a translation, thus a variant of Le Men’s text, originally published in French by Editio-Éditions Citadelles & Mazenod in 2007. The present English version of the book appeared just one year later under the Abbeville imprint. A cursory glance through this grand volume will convey the enormity of the endeavor, for which six translators are credited. While Abbeville is to be applauded for its commitment to publishing scholarly art history books as beautifully produced as Le Men’s *Courbet*, the apparent haste with which the English translation was completed is lamentable. The tone, and even the quality, of the prose varies tremendously from chapter to chapter, with the linchpin chapters 3 and 4 fortunately faring better than the others. It is inevitable that a book of this size and complexity will be marked by occasional typos, but phrases like “beyond its documental character” or redundant references to Courbet’s “graphic and drawn works” attest to Abbeville’s failure to submit the final version of the English translation to a copy editor with the necessary expertise in art history. Neither Professor Le Men nor her readers are well served by sentences such as this one from Chapter 5:

“To bury faces in the landscape is tantamount to hiding them there, which can be interpreted as the converse of the exhibition of the unveiled *The Origin of the World*, whereby the beholder tends to metamorphose into a face and landscape, thereby masking it once again” (280).

The original French phrasing shows none of this clumsiness:

“Enfouir dans ses paysages des visages tend à les cacher, ce qui peut s’interpréter comme la réciproque de l’exhibition sans voile de l’Origine du monde que seule l’imagination du spectateur tend à métamorphoser en visage et en paysage pour le masquer à nouveau” (280).

Or later in the same chapter, in reference to Courbet’s paintings of flowers, the translated sentence loses its grammatical way, undermining the eloquence and interest of Le Men’s argument:

*“In the variety of colors and species there we can find a secret language, close to the emblems and expressions used in everyday languages, with marigolds (*soucis*) evoking melancholy, or poppies, sleep, are placed near a death’s head: around these flowers, then, Eros, Hypnos, and Thanatos come together once again (293). [Dans la variété des coloris et des espèces qui s’y trouvent rassemblées, se traduit un langage secret, proche de l’emblématique et des expressions du langage quotidien, quand les soucis évoquent la mélancolie, et les parots, le sommeil, près du crâne de la mort: autour des fleurs, sont à nouveau réunis Éros, Hypnos et Thanatos.”* (293)]

Abbeville undoubtedly rushed the translation in order for the book's release to coincide with the American leg of the touring retrospective of Courbet's painting organized by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Unlike the exhibition, Le Men's *Courbet* is a permanent reference work on Courbet studies; greater care should have been taken in the preparation of the English version.

That Ségolène Le Men's *Courbet* will be a standard work on the artist is certain. Along with the author's provocative discussions of Courbet's Naturalism and its literary and biographical sources, scholars and students will benefit from the book's account of the historiography of Courbet scholarship, its exhaustive bibliography, and its abundant illustrations.

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