Allan Antliff
Freedom, Individualism, Revolution
Courbet, Zola, Proudhon and Artistic Anarchism
1997

Retrieved on 2021-11-03 from https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/350-fall-1997/freedom-individualism-revolution/
Fifth Estate # 350, Fall, 1997

theanarchistlibrary.org

Freedom, Individualism, Revolution

Courbet, Zola, Proudhon and Artistic Anarchism

Allan Antliff

1997

Artistic anarchism has a long and complex history. Certainly one of its most interesting chapters in France is the development of two competing anarchist discourses about art's libertarian possibilities during the years leading up to the ill-fated Paris Commune of 1871. Then the paintings of the anarchist artist Gustave Courbet served as a foil for a debate in which Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's praise for Courbet's "Realist" aesthetic was pitted against the young novelist Emile Zola's enthusiasm for the stylistic qualities of Courbet's art. Proudhon encapsulated his views in his last book, Du principe de l'art et de sa destination social (The principle of art and its social goal), published in 1865.[1] Here he situated art production socially so as to affirm the artist's freedom to transform history. Proudhon argued art was inescapably social, and that the artist was free only to the degree to which he or she sought to transform society. He admired Courbet's Realism because it pushed

[1] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Du principe de l'art et de sa destination social*, (Paris: 1865).

history forward through critique, extending the dialectical interplay between anarchist criticism and social transformation into the artistic realm.

Zola, on the other hand, argued art was a vehicle of freedom solely to the degree that it was in accord with the artist's own tastes and aesthetic sensibility.[2] With this end in mind he decoupled the issue of artistic freedom from the artist's role in history, encouraging the artist to depict society from a position of disinterestedness rather than engagement. As we shall see, his dismissal of Proudhon's emphasis on art's critical content led him to praise Courbet for the stylistic innovations in his art, which Zola held up as a new anarchist index of artistic freedom.

Gustave Courbet, Proudhon and His Family, 1865

So the debate stood in the late 1860s. Courbet went on to participate in the Paris Commune, where he formed an artists' federation bent on implementing a radical art program for the new revolutionary era. Then, as theory gave way to the test of practice, he and his comrades proclaimed total freedom in the arts. In effect, the Commune had broken the chains binding anarchist art theory to the problem of how to achieve artistic freedom in an oppressive social order. Thus, for a fleeting moment, the Proudhon-Zola debate was resolved by new, uncharted possibilities for artistic creation, possibilities the Commune would guarantee, support, and extend indefinitely.

The story begins in the early 1840s, when Paris became a haven for a number of political refugees known as the "radical Hegelians." These refugees were part of a small group of activists who had transformed a philosophy of historical devel-

[2] Emile Zola, "Proudhon and Courbet," in *My Hatreds*, trans. by Paloma Pves-Yashinsky and Jack Yashinsky, (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 9–21. The original article appeared in two installments in the July 26, 1865 and August 31, 1865 editions of *Le Salut Public*.

opment first formulated by the conservative German philosopher Wilhelm Hegel (1770–1831) into a radical theory of social change which challenged the sanctity of the church, the system of monarchical rule, and capitalist property relations. Principal among the group were the Russian Mikhail Bakunin, who arrived in France to avoid forcible extradition to Russia, and the Germans Karl Marx and Karl Grun, who had been forced out of Germany for their journalistic activities.

In Paris they all sought out and befriended Proudhon, who had recently gained fame for his stinging critique of capitalism and the state entitled, *What is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government* (1840). In this book Proudhon declared "property is theft" and denounced "the government of man by man" in favor of a society based on "equality, law, independence, and proportionality"—principles which he argued found their highest perfection in the social union of "order and anarchy."[3] In one simple and compelling statement the anarchist movement was born: and the message rang as a clarion call throughout leftist Europe.

Proudhon and his new friends met in the humble apartments, ale houses, and coffee-houses of working-class Paris, where they engaged in excited discussions that turned on two issues: the critique of idealism mounted by the radical Hegelian philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and the related concept of dialectics, which was central to the Hegelian theory of historical change.[4] Briefly, Hegel posited that world history was driven by an unfolding process of alienation in which a divine "World Spirit" manifested itself in partial and incomplete forms of self-knowledge which were objec-

[3] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government*, (New York: Dover Press, 1970), 286.

[4] Proudhon's meetings with Bakunin, Marx, and Grun are discussed in Brian Morris, *Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom*, (Montreal: Black Rose Press, 1993), 12–13; and James H. Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men*, (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 289–290.

tified in human consciousness as Reason and Freedom. This Spirit was gradually emerging to complete self-consciousness and self-definition through a dialectical process in which incomplete forms of self-consciousness manifest in human history were formulated, negated and then reconciled in successively higher and more inclusive syntheses—syntheses that in turn were destined to themselves be negated and subsumed. History progressed along this dialectical path until the World Spirit achieved total self-knowledge, at which time its own objectification and self-alienation would cease and its objecthood and knowledge of itself would coincide in unity.[5] Hegel argued that the dialectical manifestation of the World Spirit's self-consciousness could only be recognized in retrospect, and that the future forms of Reason and Freedom could not be predicted. In other words, this was a philosophy of the status quo in which the current social state of affairs was justified as the latest manifestation of the World Spirit's unfolding self-consciousness.

The radical Hegelians questioned this notion by utilizing the principles of Reason and Freedom to critically distinguish "the actual and rational features of the universe from the illusionary, irrational ones."[6] In Germany, for example, they rejected the prevailing monarchist political order and argued for the adoption of the bourgeois-democratic and republican principles of the French Revolution. They also introduced human agency into the dialectical process, equating their social critiques with the dialectic of negation in Hegel's progressive triad.[7]

Ludwig Feuerbach's attack on Hegel completed the radicals' revision of the philosopher's grand scheme. Feuerbach argued that the divine World Spirit was a fiction, and that the real

[5] Lesek Kolakowski, *Main Currents in Marxism: The Founders*, trans. by P.S. Falla, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 72–73.

[6] Ibid., 82.

[7] Ibid., 83–85.

April 30th, at the Commune's height, he wrote, "Paris is a true paradise! No police, no nonsense, no exaction of any kind, no arguments! Everything in Paris rolls along like clockwork. If only it could stay like this forever. In short, it is a beautiful dream. All government bodies are organized federally and run themselves."[47]

Courbet organized a Federation of Artists which abolished official state exhibitions, declared complete freedom of expression in the arts, and proposed the establishment of Commune-sponsored artist's schools throughout Paris. "Complete freedom of expression:" for Courbet there was no longer a conflict between Zola's advocacy of freedom through style and Proudhon's advocacy of freedom through critique—an anarchist future could accommodate both. However this future was not to be. On the 21st of May the French army, which had been laying siege to the free city, broke through its defences and began subduing the Communards by force. Fighting was fierce as the city's inhabitants retreated behind barricades and fought the invaders house by house. The final stand against the army took place in the cemetery of Pere-Lachaise. After the Commune's defeat the army set up firing squads at this cemetery, which was later to become a rallying point for anarchists and socialists in the 1880s and '90s. In all the army killed 20,000 Parisians during the fighting and 30,000 more were jailed, executed, or deported. Among them was Courbet, who had organized one of the Commune's most spectacular events—the pulling down, on the 16th of May, of the hated Vendome column, symbol of Napoleonic tyranny under the First and Second Empires. Driven into Swiss exile for his part in the column's destruction, he continued to paint until his death in 1877.[48]

[47] *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, ed. by Ten-Doesschate Chu, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 416.

[48] Donald Drew Egbert, *Social Radicalism and the Arts*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf', 1970), 203–205.

be achieved apart from human subjectivity, albeit two conflicting subjectivities—one social and historical, the other individual and ahistorical. Underlying their differences was a shared consensus that individual freedom lay at the heart of any artistic anarchism worthy of the name.

As it turned out, this consensus proved to be the starting point for the implementation of a revolutionary art program in the spring of 1871. In July, 1870 Louis-Napoleon III declared war on the German state of Prussia over the issue of that state's growing power and influence in European affairs. An ignominious rout of the French army followed in September, 1870 and Louis-Napoleon was captured by the Germans. In response conservative French politicians deposed the monarchy, proclaiming a National Government of Defence and a new "Third Republic." But the conservatives were insincere in their efforts to resist the German invasion of France. Instead of prosecuting the war they entered into negotiations with the Prussians while a restive Parisian populace, unaware of the government's intentions, prepared itself for the defence of the capital. A German-French armistice was signed in January, 1871. With the Prussians encamped just outside the gates of the French capital the French army then moved on Paris to seize the cannon held by the city's militias. However the city resisted. Driving the troops of the so-called Government of Defence out of the city, they founded the Paris Commune on the 28th of March, 1871.[46]

The Commune established a form of government akin to Proudhon's model of federalist anarchism in which a municipal government subject to direct recall shaped its programs around the desires of various political clubs and working-class organizations. Courbet was witness to this social revolution during the Commune's short existence (March 28 to May 28, 1871). On

[46] For a standard history of the Commune see Roger L. Williams, *The French Revolution of 1870–71*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1969).

dialectic driving history hitherto had been a process of human estrangement from our essence in which ideals born of human experience were continuously objectified in the form of metaphysical concepts attributed to otherworldly deities, such as goodness, justice, and love.[8] Humanity's self-negation through objectification could only be overcome by recognizing that no ideals existed apart from humanity. "The species," wrote Feuerbach, "is the last measure of truth…what is true is what is in agreement with the essence of the species, what is false is what disagrees with it."[9]

Freedom, therefore, resided in our ability to realize our humanized ideals in the world. Feuerbach characterized his philosophy as "anthropological" to signal that, finally, the metaphysical ideals which had dominated human thought since time immemorial had been brought down to earth and subsumed into humanity's sensuous, historical essence)[10]

Proudhon was introduced to Feuerbach's critique of Hegel by Grun in the fall of 1844.[11] In his book *On the Socialist Movement in France and Belgium* (1845), Grun described his meetings with Proudhon and the French anarchist's eagerness to discuss German philosophy. Proudhon had already gained a cursory grasp of Hegel through French commentaries on the German philosopher. "He was greatly relieved," wrote Grun, "when I told him how Feuerbach's criticism dissolved the Hegelian bombast."[12] Grun outlined Feuerbach's revision

[8] David McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), 89.

[9] Feuerbach quoted in ibid., 92.

[10] Ludwig Feuerbach, "Provisional Theses for the Reformation of Philosophy," *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence S. Stepelevich, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); 164.

[11] George Woodcock, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: A Biography*, (Montreal: Black Rose Press, 1987), 87–88.

[12] Grun quoted in Henri de Lubac, *The Un-Marxian Socialist: A Study of Proudhon*, trans. by R.E. Scantlebury, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1948), 134, note 33.

of Hegel for Proudhon and ended the conversation declaring his "anthropology" was "metaphysics in action" to which Proudhon excitedly replied, "I am going to show that political economy is metaphysics in action."[13]

In fact, Feuerbach provided Proudhon with the philosophical foundation for sweeping the metaphysical moralities of religion and philosophy aside in favour of moral principles logically "synthesized" from experience. Proudhon described his method of arriving at moral judgments as human-centered and anti-metaphysical, writing: "With man consciousness/conscience is the dominant faculty, the sovereign power.…it is not from any metaphysics, poetry or theodicy that I deduce the rules of my life or my sociability. On the contrary, it is from the dictates of my consciousness/conscience that I deduce the laws of my understanding."[14]

Feuerbach's dialectical and anthropological idealism, which underpinned Proudhon's anti-metaphysical concept of the critical synthesis, led the French anarchist to justify revolutions as the supreme attempt to realize moral goals through social change. In *The General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century* (1851), Proudhon called revolution "an act of sovereign justice, in the order of moral facts, springing out of the necessity of things, and in consequence carrying with it its own justification."[15] "Springing out of the necessity of things," moral imperatives changed as society changed: in Proudhon's critical method, "justice" took on a radically contingent, historical and social character.

Proudhon's idea of a critical "synthesis" was derived from the theory of dialectics espoused by the German philosopher

[13] Grun quoted in Woodcock, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, 88.

[14] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, De la justice dans la révolution et dans l'église, (Paris, 1858), 492–93.

[15] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *General Idea of the Revolution in the Twentieth-Century*, trans. by John Beverley Robinson, (London: Pluto Press, 1989), 40.

canvases, unified, solidly constructed, true to life and as beautiful as truth."[42]

Having established the libertarian primacy of style, Zola ridiculed Proudhon for emphasizing the exact opposite, namely Courbet's subject matter. Proudhon, he wrote, saw Courbet "from the point of view of pure thought, outside of all painterly qualities. For him a canvas is a subject; paint it red or green, he could not care less.…He [always] obliges the painting to mean something; about the form, not a word."[43] The anarchist philosopher's problem, Zola concluded, was that he did not understand that "Courbet exists through himself, and not through the subjects he has chosen." "As for me," he wrote, "it is not the tree, the face, the scene I have shown that moves me: it is the man revealed through the work, it is the forceful, unique individual who has discovered how to create, alongside God's world, a personal world."[44]

In the most telling passage from this essay Zola defined a work of art as "a fragment of creation seen through a temperament."[45] For Zola the "fragment" was secondary to "temperament," and the index of temperament was style. Equating the exercise of temperament with the anarchist goal of individual freedom, therefore, Zola turned stylistic originality into a political act. Here the anarchist politics of art imploded into the art object as the artist strove to assert personal freedom through stylistic innovation, rather than social critique. The contrast with Proudhon's artist, who could not approach a condition of freedom except through social critique, was unequivocal.

In the mid-1860s, therefore, anarchism's relation to art had become hotly contested and divisive terrain. But in retrospect the differences dividing Proudhon and Zola were not unbridgeable. Both critics agreed that a libertarian aesthetic could not

[42] Ibid, 18.

[43] Ibid, 19.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid, 12.

understood that we have little care for the world. We are fully in heaven and we are not coming down."[39]

Real freedom for artists lay in self-expression unfettered by social strictures and moral dictates. Consequently Zola placed a premium on formalist originality and dismissed the significance of subject-matter in painting. Content in a work of art was always derived from something else—either the external world or traditional subject-matter. The true measure of artistic freedom, therefore, was style, since the artist's manipulation of formal elements such as colour, texture, light, etc. was the only aspect of a painting that was unique, original, in a word, individual.

Zola's discussion of Courbet's art centered on this argument. "My Courbet is an individual," he wrote, and he praised the artist's youthful decision to cease to imitate "Flemish and Renaissance masters" as the mark of his "rebellious nature."[40] Even Courbet's Realism was transformed into an extension of the artist's individualism. Zola claimed that Courbet had become a Realist because he "felt drawn through his physical being…toward the material world surrounding him."[41] But the artist's real greatness lay in the singularity of his style. Zola recounted his own "confrontation" with the anarchist artist's paintings during a visit to Courbet's studio: "I was confronted with a tightly constructed manner of painting, broad, extremely polished and honest. The figures were true without being vulgar; the fleshy parts, firm and supple, were powerfully alive; the backgrounds were airy and endowed the figures with astounding vigour. The slightly muted coloration has an almost sweet harmony, while the exactness of tones, the breath of technique, establish the planes and help set off each detail in a surprising way. I see again these energy-filled

[39] Ibid., 21.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

Emanuel Kant.[16] In his famous essay, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant claimed he had exposed the inability of human reason to know the world as it is, meaning the world conceived apart from the perspective of the knower.[17] Reason, he argued, could not transcend the boundaries of the sensible and the dialectical nature of human reason was proof of this fact. Kant held that from any premise we could derive both a proposition and its negation. This dialectical opposition exposed the false truth of the premise which gave birth to it, leading him to conclude that we could never attain the transcendental knowledge necessary for knowing the world in its totality.[18]

In Proudhon's anti-metaphysical reformulation of the Kantian dialectic, the social critic, guided by the imperatives of reason and morality, deduced moral syntheses from dialectical contradictions found in society. The means by which a synthesis was transformed from a moral-based deduction of social contradictions to a resolution of those contradictions was through social transformation. Whereas for Marx history was driven by a Hegelian dialectic in which conflicting social forces moved through ever-higher syntheses toward their final resolution, Proudhon argued social contradictions, and the moral solutions the social critic deduced from these contradictions, were historically contingent and ever-changing.[19] In Proudhon's system the free exercise of human reason in every social sphere came to the fore as the progressive force in history, a position which led him to argue freedom from all coercion was the necessary prerequisite for realizing a just society. In James

[16] Steven Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 62; 72.

[17] Roger Scruton, *Kant*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 46.

[18] Ibid., 48–49.

[19] Bakunin also rejected the higher subsuming synthesis in the Hegelian triad. See Robert M. Cutler, "Introduction," *The Basic Bakunin: Selected Writings*, trans. and ed. by Robert M. Cutler, (New York: Prometheus Books, 1992).

Rubin's words, "Proudhon held that anarchy (that is an-archy, the absence of authority) was the only possible condition for social progress."[20]

Proudhon's anarchist philosophy of art was deeply inscribed with the Feuerbachian critique of metaphysical idealism which I have outlined above. He codified this philosophy in *Du principe de l'art* which was published in the year of his death in 1865. In the opening chapter Proudhon informed his readers that the book was inspired by the French government's refusal to exhibit Courbet's painting, entitled *Return from the conference*, at the official state art exhibition of 1863.[21]

Gustave Courbet was an old friend of Proudhon and a long-standing participant in the anarchist political culture of Paris (he honoured Proudhon in 1865 with a portrait, *Proudhon and His Family*). Courbet's artistic notoriety stemmed from the years 1848 through 1851, when the French monarchy was overthrown and a Republican government was briefly instituted. In 1851 Courbet created a scandal at the state's annual art exhibition, where he exhibited two immense paintings depicting banal scenes from the life of the French peasantry, painted in a style akin to popular woodblock prints. The upper-class public were accustomed to works such as Jean-Leon Jerome's Greek Interior of 1850 which offered slickly-painted "classical" titillations far removed from the social realities of the day. Courbet's *Stonebreakers* and *Burial at Ornans* (both painted in 1849 through 1850 and exhibited in 1851), therefore, came as a shock. Courbet's paintings shattered the artistic boundaries between rich and poor, cultured and uncultured, and as a result they were roundly condemned

[20] James Henry Rubin, *Realism and Social Vision in Courbet and Proudhon*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 34.

[21] Proudhon, *Du principe de l'art*, 1.

social good.[35] This single-mindedness, Zola wrote, had led Proudhon to his impoverished definition of art. The author of *Du principe de l'art* defined art as "an idealization of nature and ourselves, whose goal is the physical and moral perfection of our species." But this definition was an oppressive tautology.[36] It could broach no unruly deviation on the part of the artist from art's stated goal. "In a word," Zola wrote, "individual feeling, the free expression of a personality, are forbidden."[37]

Here Zola's support for "the free expression of the personality" came head-to-head with the Feuerbachian underpinnings of Proudhon's notion of artistic anarchism. As I have demonstrated, in *Du principe de l'art* Proudhon moved, step by step, from a repudiation of photographic realism and metaphysical idealism in art to a reformulation which tied art inextricably to the improvement of society. Individual freedom only entered the realm of art to the degree that the artist mounted a moral critique. Zola quite rightly pointed out that Proudhon's concept of artistic liberty was tied to a historical mission, and thus found its sole libertarian legitimation in relation to society.

For Zola, on the other hand, the locus of freedom was the individual, not society. In his words, "My art is a negation of society, an affirmation of the individual, independent of all rules and all social obligations."[38] As we have seen, Proudhon argued moral imperatives derived from the study of society should shape art. Zola, however, drew an absolute division between the artist and the world the artist represents by marshalling a radical subjectivism in which the imagination of the artist stood in for the old metaphysical realm of the Ideal. "I will have Proudhon note," Zola wrote, "That our ideas are absolute…. we achieve perfection in a single bound; in our imagination, we arrive at the ideal state. Consequently it can be

[35] Ibid., 11.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., 20.

Recognition of art's relationship to society, therefore, was the prerequisite for the free exercise of the artist's critical reason. In Feuerbachian terms the artist gained freedom from the condition of self-alienation engendered by a metaphysical world-view by taking up the cause of improving society through art. It followed that art would progress "as reason and humanity progress."[30] Such art, concluded Proudhon; "Will at last show us man, the citizen, and scientist, the producer, in his true dignity, which has too long been ignored; from now on art will work for the physical and moral improvement of the species, and it will do this, not by means of obscure hieroglyphics, erotic figures, or useless images of spirituality, but by means of vivid, intelligent representations of ourselves."[31]

This was Proudhon's view. That same year Emile Zola, who championed radical politics and artistic independence with equal tenacity, encapsulated his position in a polemical review of Proudhon's book entitled "Proudhon and Courbet." He too supported "the free manifestation of individual thoughts—what Proudhon calls anarchy."[32] However his anarchism led him to a position markedly different from Proudhon's.

Zola couched his criticism of Proudhon in terms of a polarity that pit his own affirmation of individualism against the alleged repudiation of individual freedom in Proudhon's theory of art.[33] Proudhon, Zola argued, was trapped by his method, which preceded from a desire for the reign of equality and liberty in society to a logical deduction of the type of art that would bring about such a society.[34] The rigors of this "logic" determined that Proudhon could only imagine one kind of artist: an artist who contributed to the anarchist struggle through the exercise of critical reason in the service of the

[30] Ibid., 84.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Zola, "Proudhon and Courbet," in *My Hatreds*, 14.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid., 9.

for their rude subject-matter, rough, "unfinished" brush-work, shallow perspectives, and overall lack of painterly decorum.

But artistic "crudity" was not the sole reason for the heated objections to Courbet's work. During the short-lived Republic of 1848 through 1851 the workers of Paris and Lyon engaged in violent agitation for the state to adopt Proudhon's call for "national workshops" that would guarantee them employment, and the impoverished French peasantry were in a perpetual state of unrest against landlords in the countryside. Beset by growing working-class radicalism, the Parisian upper classes saw Courbet's paintings as an affront to establishment values in art and a political provocation against their power. Eventually they solved the problem of social unrest by throwing their lot in with the dictatorship of Louis-Napoleon III, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, who proclaimed himself emperor after a coup d'etat in 1851.[22]

However throughout Napoleon III's reign, from 1851 to 1870, Courbet continued to paint in the same uncompromising manner. He called his new style "Realism," and paid tribute to himself and his accomplishment in a huge retrospective painting of 1855 entitled *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory*. Courbet depicted himself painting a landscape, observed by an admiring nude model. The model is "real" but also an allegorical figure of the painter's muse (nature). Behind the artists are the patrons, comrades, writers, and philosophers who inspired him—notably Charles Baudelaire and Proudhon, who surveys the scene from the back of the room. Facing the painter are the products of the corrupt and degenerate society he critiqued, including destitute workers, a businessman, and Louis-Napoleon himself with his hunting dog and gun.

Courbet's *Return from the Conference*, which depicted drunken clerics on their way home from a religious gathering,

[22] Roger Magraw, *The Age of the Artisan Revolution, 1815–1871*, (London: Blackwell, 1992), 140–169; 180–181.

was another Realist *tour-de-force*; in this instance, directed against the degenerate institution of the church. Refused a showing in the 1863 state exhibition and maligned by establishment art critics, the painting provoked a tremendous storm of indignation, leading Courbet, who regarded the work as the artistic equivalent to Proudhon's own critical "synthesis" of society's wrongs, to ask the anarchist philosopher to defend it.[23]

In *Du principe de l'art* Proudhon recounted Courbet's rebuke of the establishment critics who villified *Return from the Conference*. The artist condemned them "for misrepresenting… the high mission of art, for moral depravity, and for prostituting [art] with their idealism." "Who is wrong," Proudhon asked; "the so-called Realist Courbet, or his detractors, the champions of the ideal?"[24] Proudhon set out to resolve this opposition.

First he turned his attention to the issue of idealism. As we have seen, Proudhon, following Feuerbach, viewed metaphysical knowledge as an impossibility, and this informed his critique of artistic idealism, in which he attacked the idea that metaphysical ideas could spring, fully-formed, from the imagination of the artist. Art, Proudhon argued, was made up of specific forms, subjects, and images. The idealized subject in art, therefore, was inseparable from the real objects it represented. Thus there was no metaphysical "separation of the real and the ideal" as Courbet's "idealist" critics maintained.[25]

Proudhon then took up the question of realism. By the early 1860s other artists were also painting in a "realist" style, however they tended to temper the aesthetic crudeness associated with Courbet and chose subject-matter from everyday life that, though "real," would not offend. Proudhon criticized the artists of this lesser "realist" camp, accusing them of maintaining that

[23] Rubin, *Realism and Social Vision*, 164.
[24] Proudhon, *Du principe de l'art*, 3.
[25] Ibid., 31.

art should slavishly imitate reality.[26] This, he argued, was a falsification of what art was. A photograph, for example, could capture an image, but it could not replicate the power of the artist to magnify the qualities of character residing in a subject or imbue an inanimate object with meaning. A "realist" aesthetic that imitated the photograph, therefore, entailed "the death of art."[27]

As we have seen, in his earlier writings Proudhon condemned social criticism based on metaphysical idealism and valorized an anti-metaphysical, moral synthesis as the basis for social advancement. In *Du principe de l'art* he argued that art contained the potential to become a vehicle for such a critique. Art was a product of idealism, but idealism in a Proudhonian sense, because the creative imagination of the artist, like art's subject-matter, was inseparable from the real world. Courbet not only recognized this fact; his brand of Realism turned art to critical ends in the interest of social advancement, bringing art in line with Proudhon's prognosis for the reform of society through a critique deduced from the actual conditions of contemporary society. As such Courbet's painting stood in stark contrast to both "photographic realism" and the "metaphysical" art of Gérôme and his ilk, whose irrational and self-indulgent pursuit of otherworldly "chimeras" such as "beauty" elevated artistic contemplation to an ideal in-and-of-itself, rendering the critical power of human abstraction and reason "useless."[28] "Our idealism," wrote Proudhon, "consists of improving humanity… not according to types deduced a priori… but according to the givens supplied continuously from experience." And this critical idealism, he proclaimed, was the heart of Courbet's Realist aesthetic.[29]

[26] Ibid, 38.
[27] Ibid., 39; 40–42.
[28] Ibid, 199.
[29] Ibid.