

Bruno Foucart. G. Courbet. New York, Crown Publishers, 1977. Translated from the French by Alice Sachs. 96 pages, 51 color plates, 17 black and white illustrations, \$5.95.

Bruno Foucart discusses the traditional view of Courbet as a man whose rural peasant background endowed him with a crude but unspoiled eye. But he also sees Courbet as a self-conscious individual, knowledgeable about the culture of his time and the traditions of his art. He even considers Courbet as a subtle thinker encoding his paintings with spiritual and political messages. Foucart cautions against using any rigid formula to interpret Courbet. In following his own advice he gives a many-sided view of Courbet's art, doing justice to his landscapes, flower paintings and figure studies as well as his better known self-portraits and his large realist compositions. Foucart's approach captures Courbet's complexity, but it involves him in evasions concerning the basic definition of realism and in contradictions about the nature of Courbet's artistic goals.

Photographic verisimilitude has been used as a criterion to judge realistic painting as has the use of contemporary or relevant social and political subject matter. Another definition of realism requires that the transcription from nature be a direct one without additions by the artist of associative clues or expressive distortions. Did Courbet impose a message on his works? The question is at the heart of the controversy about Courbet, and at the core of the definition of realism, but it is one that Foucart does not adequately resolve. Courbet's contemporaries were used to reading meanings into academic painting and complained of a lack of meaning in Courbet's works. "It would not be so bad if the idea, whatever it is, were clear," said Delacroix of the Bathers. Recent commentators on Courbet have tended to agree that his paintings do not convey meaning in the same manner as other paintings of his time. "It was precisely its lack of open declared significance," writes T. J. Clark of Burial at Ornans, "which offended most of all." The painting seemed to hide meaning behind a "cruel deadpan" and invite contrary interpretations. "No idea, no emotion emerges from it," agrees George Boudaille, "the Burial affords us nothing of what we expect from a work and even less of what Courbet's contemporaries expected." Linda Nochlin describes the "very lack of any moral, dramatic or even overtly 'convivial' implications" in After Dinner at Ornans. She describes it as a "simple statement of how things were at a particular time, without comment or intrusive arrangement."

On the one hand Foucart states that Courbet refused to "embellish reality." He "did not need to say anything else or suggest anything more," explains Foucart, "than what existed." The last sentence of