

Piotr Schollenberger

Traces of Real Presence : Jean-Luc Marion on the Origins of Courbet's Painting

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Jean-Luc Marion
Courbet ou la peinture à l'oeil
Paris: Flammarion, 2013

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The last chapter of Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublov* entitled "The Bell" perfectly encapsulates the problem of the origins of artistic creation and its relation to reality. It is the story of a young boy, Boriska, son of a bellmaker and the only plague survivor of a village. After persuading others that he is the only one to whom his father had confided the secret of casting a bell, he becomes the head of a group of craftsmen and workers who cast a bell for a cruel and merciless Prince. The decisions that he makes throughout the whole process of production are peculiar and provoke a subtle conflict between him and the older, more experienced staff. Viewed by the others as arrogant and irresponsible, he manages to finish his job and, after breaking the mold, the bell is finally ready to be tolled. The Prince arrives and everyone prepares for the worst, since no one is sure if the bell will ring. When the deep, all-encompassing sound can finally be heard, all the people fall to their knees in reverence and cathartic relief – except for the boy who, curled in the mud, spasmodically cries. When asked why he is crying instead of being proud and happy, he answers: "My father never told me – he took his secret to the grave."

This story shows all the aspects of the process of artistic creation in which certainty mixes with doubt, modesty, and even the shame that is felt towards the work itself, constantly outbalanced by an arrogance regarding the accepted rules, and in which what is intended is no more important than blind chance. It could also be an illustration of the life and work of French realist painter Gustave Courbet. But what does it mean to be a "realist" in painting? This is the question Jean-Luc Marion tries to answer in his latest book, entitled *Courbet ou la peinture à l'oeil*. As the title suggests, the answer to the question is simple: to be the realist painter is to "paint by the eye." But what does that mean? Is it possible for the painter to paint by anything else? And above all, doesn't the painter paint "through" the eye, rather than "with" it?

Jean-Luc Marion, together with Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Henry, Jean-Louis Chrétien and Jean-François Courtine, is one of the most important representatives of the so-called "theological turn" in French phenomenology. Without going

into more detailed analysis of this branch of the phenomenological movement,¹ what should be mentioned here is the specific way in which proponents of this turn understand the main phenomenological, Husserlian imperative “zu den Sachen selbst” – “to the things themselves.”² The phenomenological project aims to ground any kind of possible knowledge in the “things themselves,” that is: on the immediate experience. This experience is not interpreted in an empirical way (although Husserl used to call phenomenology a kind of “radical empiricism”), but in a transcendental way. This means that to study the structure of our experience without making any assumptions concerning an object of that experience is to focus on the way it appears to consciousness. Objects appear to the consciousness; they are phenomena, and the consciousness is always directed towards certain objects (content, meaning), which means that it is intentional. Hence, Husserlian phenomenology, as the radically descriptive science, seeks to investigate different modes in which different phenomena present themselves to the consciousness, in order to grasp essences through a categorial intuition and to gain apodictic and absolutely certain knowledge. Such a project of the transcendental theory of cognition had been criticized, but also radicalized, by Martin Heidegger who defined the structure of experience not mainly in terms of knowing but in terms of being, and who developed an existential analysis of the different modes of *Dasein*. The “theological turn” belongs also to this line of constant radicalization of the original return to the truly originary in experience. If the things are to present themselves “as they are,” without any assumptions about their structure – for example as the objects of cognition, as Husserl assumed, or as tools entangled in worldly relations guided by ontological difference, as Heidegger claimed – then perhaps a new kind of experience should be investigated. So firstly, the turn towards religious phenomena seems to be dictated by the inherent phenomenological striving to find the experience that would be purely originary, that would present – and not only re-present – what appears, without making any preestablished project, without any further claims concerning the nature or meaning of such appearance. Secondly, this turn reflects a broader tendency of a critique of metaphysics and ontotheology of Heideggerian provenance that would neglect any kind reflection upon the Absolute, upon God in “ontic” terms – that is, as a substance or a highest being (*Seiende*). This second feature will also deeply influence the language and conceptual framework of philosophers who follow this path of analysis and would sometimes provoke certain analogies with the tradition of negative theology.

In his philosophical books, Jean-Luc Marion has developed his own project of the phenomenology of givenness (*donation*), which is based on the central category of gift and in which the two mentioned tendencies meet. “To be given,” or “being given,” is Marion’s translation of *Gegebenheit* – the “technical” phenomenological term used by Husserl that is attached to Marion’s interpretation

1 On this topic see D. Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2000. Also R. Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion. A Theological Introduction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

2 E. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, ed. D. Moran (London: Routledge 2001), 168.

of the "Principle of All Principles," in which Husserl stresses "that every originary presentive [*gebende Anschauung*] intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originally (so to speak, in its 'personal' actuality) offered to us in 'intuition' is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there."³ In Marion's terms, phenomena are "being given;" that is, they present themselves as they are and according to their inherent structure, without any additional activity on the side of consciousness. But is it possible to point out such phenomena? This is where the second "postmetaphysical" theological tendency appears, in the phenomenon of the Revelation, of an unconditional faith, since what is an icon – as opposed to an idol – corresponds with the basic characteristics of what is given, with what comes unexpectedly, exceeding any kind of rational scheme projected by the consciousness. The specificity of Marion's analysis consists in developing the phenomenology of aesthetic phenomena in what appears at first sight to be a subsidiary argumentation. In the books *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*,⁴ *God Without Being*,⁵ *The Crossing of the Visible*,⁶ *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*,⁷ and *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*,⁸ aesthetic phenomena, especially painting and the phenomenon of visibility, seem to introduce autonomous aesthetic reflection. Even though a painting as a work of art belongs to the order of "idols" that aim at presentation and proximity of what is given as opposed to an "icon" that accentuates distance and radical transcendence, it may however serve as the model of explanation of the very fact that things are being given to consciousness, that they appear. This means that painting becomes a medium of appearance – it is a manifestation of the shift from what is unseen (*l'invisu*) to visibility. The world can be viewed, so to speak, in its infinite and indefinite aspects and forms that can take shape in paintings but can never be objectified into one cardinal image. To explain these characteristics, one doesn't necessarily have to refer to the phenomenological vocabulary. For example, Nelson Goodman writes in this case about "syntactic and semantic density" and "syntactic repleteness."⁹ Paintings present to us how the world becomes visible by showing us that there is always something yet to be seen, which is invisible now (indefinable, unexpected, hidden) but potentially visible, able to manifest itself as an "artistic idol." It needs to be mentioned here that Marion uses the term "idol" in a non-normative way. One can speak of idols non-pejoratively,

3 *Idem*, *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy*, vol. I, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague/Boston/Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 44.

4 J.-L. Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. T.A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

5 *Idem*, *God Without Being*, trans. T.A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

6 *Idem*, *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. J.K.A. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

7 *Idem*, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. J.L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

8 *Idem*, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. R. Horner, V. Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

9 N. Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company 1976), 252-255.

just to stress the “autonomous glory” of the painting.¹⁰ Painting saturates or fills the vision so that the visible is made entirely present, whereas in the case of an icon the gaze is confronted not with what is presented but with the invisible – the other gaze or the gaze of the Other, God. Painting is a “saturated phenomenon” because it is filled with “originary presentive intuition,” so to speak. It gives more than can be conceptually grasped or objectified. What is important is that for Marion the painting shows how the transfer from the unseen (*l'invu*) to visible is made and how it lays the groundwork for artistic creation: “The painting *adds* presence to presence, where nature preserves space and thus absence.”¹¹

The book about Courbet’s painting is the first to be devoted exclusively to the analysis of one particular painter, although in his previous works Marion carefully interpreted such artists as Raphael, Caravaggio, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. Written more as an artistic essay than as a philosophical argument, it can be read as an introduction to Marion’s aesthetics, or even as an autonomous analysis of the work of the great French painter. Marion’s analysis can also be paralleled with the inquiry presented by Michael Fried in his *Courbet’s Realism*¹² (to which Marion often refers) and Linda Nochlin’s *Courbet*.¹³ Those two important studies, written by art historian and theorists, go beyond mere historiography in order to grasp the specificity of Courbet’s work, which – as Linda Nochlin writes – “despite its surface immediacy, and its apparent ease of availability, has often seemed, paradoxically, to hide a secret, or produced an effect of the occulted and suggested an alluring mystery of withheld meaning rather than the clear legibility one might expect from a realist artist.”¹⁴ For Marion this “alluring mystery” in Courbet’s painting is deeply attached to what has been previously described as the “unseen”: “The painter grants visibility to the unseen,” wrote Marion in his earlier book, “delivering unseen from its anterior invisibility, its shapelessness.”¹⁵

According to the hypothesis presented in this book, Courbet, as one of the most prominent fathers of modern painting, was the first modern painter who wanted to create not the mere representations of reality but to render reality fully present. The painter doesn’t look at the world, at things, people, events, or landscapes, to create an adequate pictorial representation equipped with aesthetic qualities. To paint, according to Courbet and to Marion, is to let things present themselves as they are. In his *The Stonebreakers* (1849-50) or *La Rocher de Hautpierre* (1869), Courbet is the first painter to show a stone as a stone, and nothing else. At first, such statement may sound exaggerated, but Marion is trying to show that what Courbet had been doing in painting, Husserl planned in philosophy: to accept everything that is “offered to us in

10 J.-L. Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, *op. cit.*, 25.

11 *Idem*, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, *op. cit.*, 66.

12 M. Fried, *Courbet’s Realism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

13 L. Nochlin, *Courbet* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007).

14 *Ibid.*, 6.

15 J.-L. Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, *op. cit.*, 26. On this topic see also Shane Mackinlay’s *Interpreting Excess. Jean-Luc Marion, Saturated Phenomena and Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

‘intuition’” (...) simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there.) We may say that in Marion’s interpretation Courbet performs “painterly reduction” analogous to the phenomenological reduction that enables one to focus not on “what” is given to us in experience but on “how” it is given – a specific mode of visual presentation in the case of painting. This line of argumentation has been prepared in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty about Cézanne,¹⁶ and, indeed, in the one of last chapters Marion writes about “Courbet’s certainty” and tries to link those two artistic projects as both belonging to the “figural philosophy of seeing,” to use Merleau-Ponty’s phrase. For anyone acquainted with Courbet’s biography, his political involvement, and his letters, what is the most striking in this parallel is that there is very little that would enable to connect these two artists on personal grounds. According to Marion they both show how the art of painting operates to “reduce entirely the phenomenal to the visible.”¹⁷ In Courbet’s case this may be entirely related to his radical resistance to the claim that one should “make art according to the idea” [*faire de l’art à l’idée*], to which he opposes sight and the careful observation of the things emerging out of the unseen into the visible.¹⁸ As Marion stresses: “The painting gesture does not redouble the already existing appearance of the thing by consigning it by art to the object it should become, but it lets the visible emerge and accomplishes itself together with it in a unique energy, letting also the spectator see what he hasn’t foreseen.”¹⁹

Thus for Marion the art of Courbet aims to transcend the order of representation, based always on a certain “idea” – a basic scheme, a symbolic form (e.g., perspective), a convention or subjective plan (*disegno*) – and by surpassing it he turns towards the real presence. This presence, mute but visible, is not the presence of things-for-themselves, of Kantian *noumena*, but of Husserlian *noemata* – and this means that things in their real presence are always given to us.²⁰ Noema are intentional objects, that is, objects of the intentional act of consciousness, noesis. And just as each act of consciousness has its intentional correlate, so, too, seeing is correlated with what is seen. The peculiarity of the painter’s work lies in the fact that he doesn’t copy what he has seen in order to mirror or reproduce the sight but is able to performatively catch the act of seeing “in the act,” *in statu nascendi*. This is possible if one – like Courbet – doesn’t prepare and foresee what is to be seen but “sees (by) painting;” only then, writes Marion, “[t]he thing seen is contemporary, so to speak, with its pictorial visibility.”²¹ And this leads Marion to the conclusion that: “The painter not only sees according to the act of painting (and not after taking some time and observation), but also what he shows is united itself with what is given. He makes us able to see what

16 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, transl. C. Dallery in: *Primacy of Perception*, ed. J. Wild (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159-190. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Cézanne’s Doubt* in: *Sense and Non-sense*, transl. H. Dreyfus, P. Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

17 J.-L. Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, *op. cit.*, 68.

18 *Idem*, *Courbet ou la peinture à l’oeil* (Paris: Flammarion, 2013), 97-126.

19 *Ibid.*, 29.

20 *Ibid.*, 154-158.

21 *Ibid.*, 113.

he has seen *with the eye*.²² One acts without any preestablished rules, but it doesn't mean that one acts blindly. The rules of pictorial presentation are given within the "material" – within what is being made visible in the act of painting. This reminds one of Husserl's famous example from *Ideas I*, where he describes the act of looking at a blossoming tree. The tree as the natural, physical object "can burn up, be resolved into its chemical elements," but the tree as perceived cannot burn or be cut to pieces since as a noeme it is "the sense of this perception, something belonging necessarily to its essence."²³ According to Marion, Courbet's famous painting *The Oak of Flagey* (1864) is able to "fix" the noeme (the oak tree as something perceived), so he doesn't merely make a reproductive image of a certain view but evokes the "thing itself," the tree as an intentional object. For Marion, one can speak of the "grace of painting," of the "eucharistic trace of a real presence"²⁴ that – as a trace – points at the presence of *res*, things making them this way present by calling them forth.

For someone who is familiar with French phenomenology and phenomenological aesthetics, such an interpretation and conceptual framework is nothing new and the stress being put on the exceptional character of painting is echoed by analyses proposed by Merleau-Ponty or Michel Henry in his book on Wassily Kandinsky.²⁵ What is new, and what pushes Marion's aesthetics further to a new field of investigation, is what we might call the problem of existential conditions of art. Following Courbet in asking "what does it mean to be a realist painter?," he interprets this question not in formal or stylistic terms but as an existential question. Quoting the *Letter to the Romans*, "We are well aware that the whole creation, until this time, has been groaning in labor pains" [*Romans*, 8, 22], he traces the "groan" (*la peine*) not only in Courbet's realist paintings of peasants, workers, mourners, and servants (*The Stonebreakers*, *The Grain Sifters*, *A Burial at Ornans*), but also in still-life and landscape painting. Often defined in terms of detachment and distancing, the aesthetic attitude has been attacked as either an artificial, subjective aestheticization or as a purely formalist maneuver to protect against difficulties of contextual interpretation. Stressing the exclusive character of the aesthetic experience resulting from its ability to "frame" reality and thus reduce it to its "givenness," Marion emphasizes also the importance of grounding such experience amongst "human affairs." On the basic and universal level it is a question of suffering that unites all the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*). If a painting doesn't produce images of the world but presents what is real – the world, nature, man as being seen – as becoming visible, so it must also include *pathos* – finitude and the ability to suffer. In the final chapter, Marion opens once again the question concerning the relations between aesthetics and ethics but also between aesthetics and theology.

While Marion's essay wasn't intended as a strictly academic philosophical work, it demonstrates the most important features of his phenomenology, so

22 *Ibid.*, 115.

23 E. Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy*, *op. cit.*, 216.

24 J.-L. Marion, *Courbet ou la peinture à l'oeil*, 126-127.

25 M. Henry, *Seeing the Invisible*, transl. S. Davidson (New York: Continuum, 2009).

it may serve as an introduction for those interested in contemporary French debates. As a book on art, it shows that what phenomenological tradition has to offer is the craftsmanship of meticulous description that should not be mistaken for detached formalism. As a philosophical proposal it shows – and this is a statement with which (not only) phenomenologists would agree – that no one has told us any secrets and that we must discover it by acting.

piotr.schollenberger@uw.edu.pl