

**Flesh: The Question of Decency in the Works of
Gustave Courbet and Balthus**

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There is no question that Balthus had a special affinity for Gustave Courbet. He frequently praised Courbet's works and found inspiration in them. Scholars have made their own associations between the two artists. Some of the compositions in Balthus's paintings seem to be directly lifted from works by Courbet. What was it about Courbet that inspired Balthus? The two men's dispositions were quite different from each other. But the burgeoning sexual climate in Paris in the mid-nineteenth century which Courbet was very much a part of (preceded by the writings of the Marquis de Sade), paved the way for interest in the works of Sade in the early twentieth century by many artists and writers, including Balthus. Both men disavowed the presence of such indecencies in their works, but it is undeniable that they were a part of these climates, and it is impossible to conclude that Sade's ideas did not inform their work.

Balthazar Klossowski was born in Paris in 1908. He retained his childhood nickname, Balthus, for most of his life. Balthus considered himself to be a self-taught painter. He spent part of 1924 and 1925 copying paintings by the masters in the Louvre. This short time in the Louvre does not completely account for his vast knowledge of art history, though. Balthus's parents, Erich and Baladine Klossowski, were artists and art historians. It was not rare for artists such as Henri Matisse and André Derain to have dinner at their home. The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (who became Baladine's lover in the early 1920s) took a special interest in Balthus. Rilke even published a little book of drawings by Balthus called *Mitsou* with an introduction by Rilke. The book was about a boy who loses his cat, and was published when Balthus was only 13 years old. Cats remained a motif throughout much of Balthus's career.

If Balthus had not already been exposed to Courbet through his parents and their friends, he certainly would have encountered him during his time in the Louvre. Balthus considered Courbet to be one of the greatest French painters, and admired his realism.¹ Balthus singling out Courbet's realism is interesting, since the group that Balthus could be said to be closest to was the Surrealists. However, Balthus and his close friend Alberto Giacometti were what one might call "anti-surrealists, anti-abstractors."² Though Balthus was friends with many artists in various disciplines, such as Pablo Picasso and Albert Camus, he chose to work alone and refused to disclose any details about his life in regard to his work. This is evident in a telegram that Balthus sent to an art critic in 1968:

NO BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS. BEGIN: BALTHUS
IS A PAINTER OF WHOM NOTHING IS KNOWN.
NOW LET US LOOK AT THE PICTURES.
REGARDS. B.³

Balthus wished to be a tabula rasa so that his works would speak for themselves, but in doing so, he set himself up to be the subject of detective-like art historians, trying to know something of the mysterious painter. They have uncovered many details of the man and his life, and, in Balthus's later years, he opened up a little about his past. Unfortunately, though, many things about Balthus and his work remain unknown. So let us look at the pictures.

Courbet's influence can be seen in the compositions of many of Balthus's paintings. One such painting is a portrait of Courbet's great friend and mentor: *Portrait of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in 1853* [Fig. 1], which Courbet painted in 1865 shortly after

¹ Balthus, *Balthus: In His Own Words: A Conversation with Cristina Carrillo de Albornoz*. (New York: Assouline, 2001), 12.

² Mielke Bal, *Balthus*. (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2008), 106.

³ Stanislas Klossowski, "Introduction," in *Balthus* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 18.



Figure 1. Gustave Courbet, *Portrait of Pierre Joseph Proudhon in 1853, 1865*.

Proudhon's death. In the painting, Proudhon sits on the front steps of his home with his books and a pen. Close by, his children innocently play. In Balthus's 1937 painting, *The Blanchard Children* [Fig. 2], the brother and sister's silent activity mirrors that of the



Figure 2. Balthus. *The Blanchard Children*, 1937.

Proudhon children: the boy at the table and the girl hunched over on the ground. However, in Balthus's painting, the focus is on the children and their inner life; Proudhon's children are in Courbet's painting as symbols of his great accomplishment as a man: fatherhood.

Another painting adapted by Balthus is Courbet's *Portrait of Juliette Courbet* [Fig. 3], his adored younger sister. This painting is notable in its directness and familiarity.



Figure 3. Gustave Courbet, *Portrait of Juliette Courbet*, 1844.

Most of Courbet's seated portraits of children and adolescents depict them in the same manner one would paint a traditional portrait of an adult: distant. His few paintings of Juliette are more endearing. Here, Juliette is relaxed, seated in a chair with flowers and drapery complimenting her pretty dress. However, if Juliette Courbet is relaxed, then Thérèse Blanchard is uninhibited [Fig. 4]. In Balthus's portrait, *Thérèse*, she, too, sits in a chair, but it cannot contain her, nor can the canvas. Much of the difference, though, aside from the fashion of each girl's clothing, is the manner expected of young girls in their respective times. Both Thérèse and Juliette's expressions communicate something about themselves to the viewer, something unique in the artists' portrayals of both girls.



Figure 4. Balthus. *Thérèse*, 1938.

The kinship between these two pairs of paintings are enough to show that Balthus admired Courbet's work. But Balthus's admiration goes beyond composition, as seen in his series of reclining girls. He painted dozens of girls asleep or relaxed on sofas or chairs, often lit by a window and oftentimes accompanied by another person or a cat. Three paintings in particular stand out. Two were painted at the same time: *Nude with Cat* [Fig. 5], and *The Week of Four Thursdays* [Fig. 6]. Both show a girl leaning back in a chair in order to pet a cat perched above her. Peaceful expressions grace their faces. One leg is bent while the other stretches out. In the first painting, she is undressed aside from the slippers on her feet, and a basin lays by her outstretched foot.



Figure 5. Balthus. *Nude with Cat*, 1948-1950



Figure 6. Balthus. *The Week of Four Thursdays*, 1949.

In *The Week of Four Thursdays*, the girl wears a robe, signifying bathing as the basin does in *Nude with Cat*. In both paintings, the window lights the room, and in front of it stands an unknown woman. She has a pageboy haircut, and wears simple clothing.

The masterpiece of the three paintings is *The Room* [Fig. 7], painted two years after *The Week of Four Thursdays*. A darkened room is revealed with the pulling aside of a curtain by a strange figure. Though one would identify the figures in the previous two paintings as women, the sex of this figure is ambiguous. It wears a skirt, but its flattened head, darkened expression, and lack of breasts do not indicate femininity. The light pouring in reveals a young girl asleep on a lounge, as though she had been sitting in it and slumped down into sleep, assuming this unnatural, open position. She is nude aside from her socks and slippers, and has the budding fullness of an adolescent. She does not face us, though, and thus would not be considered indecent as in the nudes of Édouard Manet.



Figure 7. Balthus. *The Room*, 1952-1954.

The room is sparsely decorated and is colored in earthy hues of yellow, brown, and green. The girl lays on a high-backed, green lounge with a blue blanket (or towel?) underneath her, also seen in the previous two paintings. Another curtain hangs on the wall behind the girl, next to a cabinet atop which sits a pitcher in a bowl. In the corner of the room is a spindly table; a cat sits on a book. Its pose is unnatural, making it look like a statue, but its stare at the dwarf⁴ gives it life. In *Girl with a Cat*, the cat is playful; in *The Week of Four Thursdays*, the cat seems to keep guard over the girl. In *The Room*, the cat's position across the room with its eyes on the dwarf and its surprising act of

⁴ "Dwarf," "hunchback," and "monster" are the terms frequently used to describe this figure.

throwing open the curtain makes this cat a witness.⁵ A witness to what, one can only speculate.

Courbet is known for being the master of Realism, but his work did not always depict the proud working class or awesome nature. His interest in the growing culture of prostitution during the Second Empire resulted in a number of paintings of nude women in repose. One example of this is *Sleeping Nude Woman* of 1862 [Fig. 8].

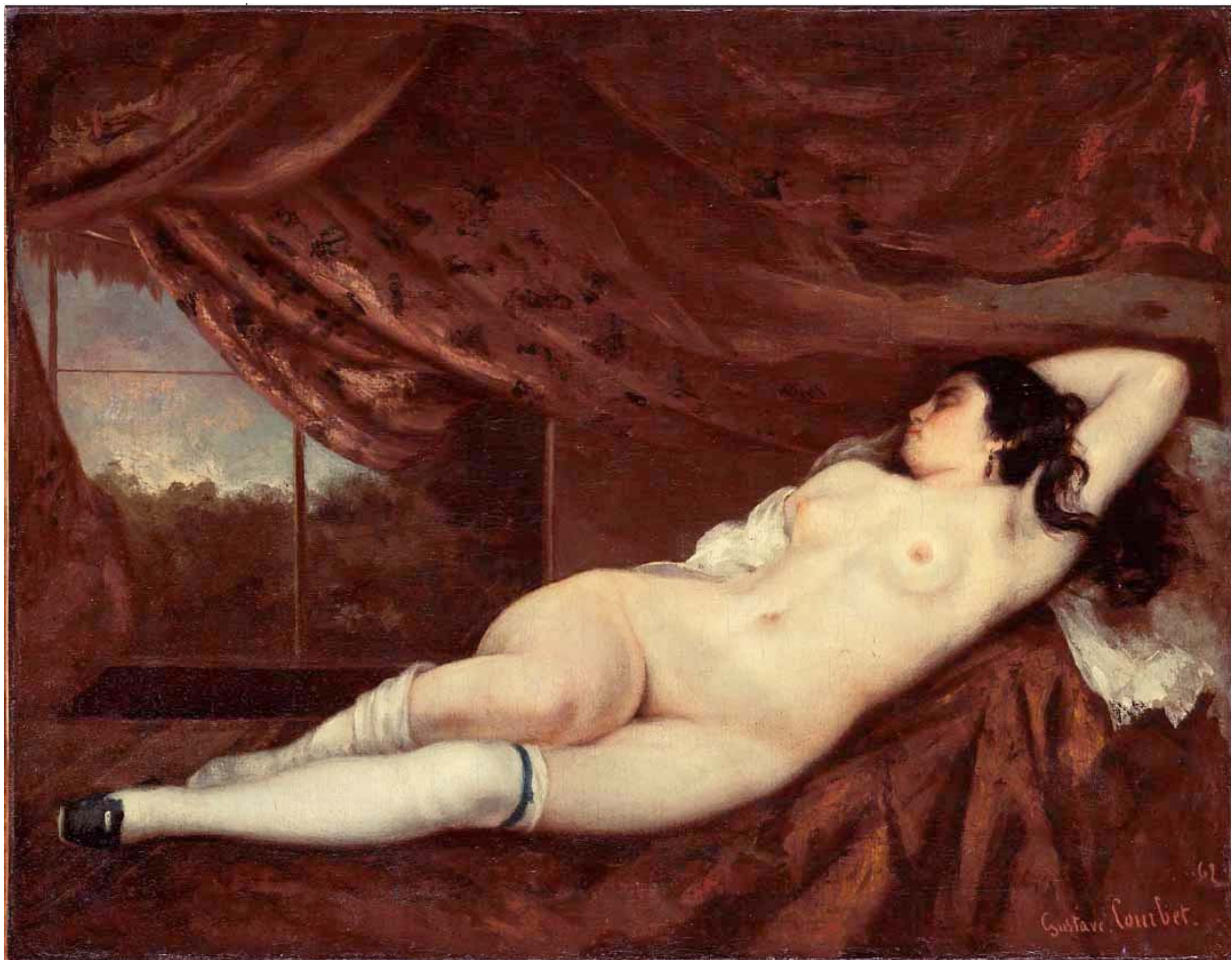


Figure 8. Gustave Courbet. *Sleeping Nude Woman*, 1862.

A woman sleeps in an enticing pose, surrounded by lush drapery that spreads open to reveal a window that allows, not light, but nature inside. Whether or not she is a

⁵ Jean Clair, "The Hundred-Year Sleep," in *Balthus: Catalogue Raisonné de l'Œuvre Complet*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 14.

prostitute is irrelevant: in her sleep, she is a defenseless woman subject to the (male) viewer's desire, whether sexual, violent, or both. The rich redness surrounding her suggests the flushness of sex created by increased blood flow; transitively, it suggests blood flow of another kind. A poem by Courbet's friend Charles Baudelaire titled "The Martyr" uncannily describes the scene:

a headless corpse pours out vivid red blood in a river to the open pillow which drinks it in like a parched meadow.

As in dim visions born from shadows which bind our eyes, the head, with its tangle of dark hair and its precious jewelry,

rests on the night table, like a buttercup. A stare, vague and pale as dusk, escapes the withdrawn eyes.

On the bed, her naked trunk exposes in the most complete abandon the secret splendor of mortal beauty, gift of nature;

a pinkish stocking, trimmed with gold stitching, remains on one leg as souvenir; the garter, along with a secret flaming eye, flashes a diamond barb.⁶

Of course, Courbet's woman has her head, and her eyes are withdrawn from sleep, not from death. However, her dark hair flowing into the red shadow of her pillow and the fabric underneath her, along with her disheveled right stocking gives *Sleeping Nude Woman* a more curious air than many of the fashionable nudes painted at the time. Something has just happened.

In 1864, Courbet created a painting that he was quite excited about, for, as he wrote to a dealer, it was unlike anything he had done before.⁷ Initially, he called it *Venus in Jealous Pursuit of Psyche* [Fig. 9].⁸ The painting truly was unlike anything he'd ever

⁶ Charles Baudelaire, "The Martyr," in *The Flowers of Evil*. Translated by Keith Waldrop. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 150.

⁷ Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *The Most Arrogant Man in France: Gustave Courbet and the Nineteenth-Century Media Culture*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 130.

⁸ The whereabouts of *Venus in Jealous Pursuit of Psyche* are unknown. All that exists are black and white photographs.

done; his culturally relevant exploration of prostitution, turned into idealized, sleeping women, had now completely veered from Realism into the realm of history painting.

The Roman legend of Cupid and Psyche begins with Venus's jealousy over the mortal Psyche's notorious beauty. Venus sends Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with a hideous man to spite her, but, struck by her radiance, Cupid falls in love with her himself.



Figure 9. Gustave Courbet. *Venus in Jealous Pursuit of Psyche*, 1864.

Venus in Jealous Pursuit of Psyche shows Venus lifting the curtain on a four-poster bed to gaze in envy at Psyche's sleeping beauty. As in *Sleeping Nude Woman*, the bed curtain behind Psyche reveals a window to the outdoors. In this instance, though, Psyche's vulnerability is all the more apparent with the threatening presence of Venus. There is no hint of violence in this tableau, however much Venus wants it; in the myth, she sets Psyche on a series of tasks that, without the aid of helpful strangers, would have resulted in Psyche's death.

Perhaps Courbet regretted his foray into mythology; he submitted the painting to the Salon of 1864 as *Study of Women*. He changed the title so that it could be viewed more ambiguously. However, it may have been better received had he kept its original title. *Study of Women* was rejected by the Salon on grounds of immorality, which many

saw as an unfounded sentence. In the previous year's Salon, Courbet's friend Jules Castagnary humorously denounced a painting by Paul-Jacques-Aimé Baudry titled *The Pearl and the Wave* [Fig. 10]: "Wouldn't this pretty woman with the looks of a Parisian modiste be much more comfortable on a sofa? She who lived so well in her rich apartment on the chaussée d'Antin, she must be ill at ease on that hard rock, near those hurtful pebbles, those sharp-edge shells...Perhaps she is not the Venus of the boudoirs but rather the Venus of the bathing resorts."⁹



Figure 10. Paul-Jacques-Aimé Baudry. *The Pearl and the Wave*, 1862.

Courbet's fellow Realist painter, Jean-François Millet, wrote to Castagnary in regard to the rejection of Courbet's painting, shocked that Courbet was capable of painting something more indecent than Baudry's *The Pearl and the Wave*.¹⁰

Courbet maintained that there was nothing indecent about the painting, and was quite upset about the incident. This was intensified further when a man became interested in purchasing the painting – as long as Courbet modified it. Venus's hand no longer lifted up a curtain. She now lifted up a cockatoo.

⁹ Petra ten-Doesschate Chu. "Gustave Courbet's Venus and Psyche: Uneasy Nudity in Second-Empire France," *Art Journal*. Vol. 51, No. 1 (Spring, 1992): 38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*



Figure 11. Gustave Courbet. *The Awakening*, 1864.

Thus, the painting was renamed *The Awakening* [Fig. 11], the addition of the cockatoo (birds being a contemporary symbol of the male) having completely changed Courbet's original intent.



Figure 12. Gustave Courbet, *Woman with a Parrot*, 1866.

Courbet, however, got the last laugh: his *Woman with a Parrot* [Fig 12] was, as predicted,¹¹ received favorably at the Salon of 1866, and eventually sold for 20,000 francs.¹² A painting far more indecent than *Venus in Jealous Pursuit of Psyche*, *Woman with a Parrot* reveals to us a nude woman completely sprawled out on a bed, her legs

¹¹ Petra Chu, ed., *Letters of Gustave Courbet*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 279.

¹² *Ibid.*, 374.

opening up to a bird stand from which a parrot has flown, brilliantly-colored wings outstretched over the woman's delighted face. Again, we see nature through a draped curtain. The room is dark except for the whiteness of the woman's flawless skin.

Though the woman seems to be enjoying her encounter with the parrot, this too is a curious painting. Something is about to happen. Birds, though beautiful, can be vicious creatures, and the popularity at the time of paintings of the myth of Leda and the Swan automatically created the association of birds with rape.

Perhaps it is this woman's skin that Balthus speaks of when remarking on Courbet's "trembling, silken women's flesh."¹³ Balthus mostly painted adolescents, who by nature have silken flesh. But both Courbet and Balthus are faced with a conflict in their representations of adolescents/women. Both claim to want to create something beautiful, something higher than carnal sexuality, but their respective culture's interest in sexuality will not accept nudity without eroticism. In Courbet's case, he recognizes that no one will accept his work unless it is a work for male pleasure, and so he boastfully capitalized on it by painting *Woman with a Parrot and Sleep* [Fig. 13].



Figure 13. Gustave Courbet. *Sleep*, 1866.

¹³ Balthus, *Vanished Splendors: A Memoir*. As told to Alain Vircondelet. Translated by Benjamin Ivry (New York: Ecco Press, 2001), 94.

Balthus, trying to kick start his career, painted *The Guitar Lesson* [Fig. 14].



Figure 14. Balthus. *The Guitar Lesson*, 1934.

The Guitar Lesson is a painting one would probably not initially associate with Courbet. At first glance, it appears to depict an act of rape; any indication of such an act in Courbet's nudes seems to depict either the moments before (as in *Woman with a Parrot*) or afterward (as in *Nude Woman Sleeping*). However, like *Woman with a Parrot* and *Sleep*, *The Guitar Lesson* was painted as a statement. In one of his rare, coy discussions of his work, Balthus pointedly connects *The Guitar Lesson* to *Sleep*. In an interview with Constanzo Costantini, the interviewer attempted to broach the subject of *The Guitar Lesson* by comparing its scandal to the scandal caused by Modigliani's nudes. Balthus replied, "...it would be more interesting to talk about *The Sleepers* by Courbet." He then goes on to say, "I find the blue of the vase in that painting very

erotic.”¹⁴ His pointed comparison to *Sleep* requires one to reconsider *The Guitar Lesson*, starting with the facial expressions of the women. In *Sleep*, the sleeping women are of course relaxed and peaceful. What makes *The Guitar Lesson* seem so violent is the tugging of the young girl’s hair and the woman’s apparent clawing at her vulva. But this is a guitar lesson. The woman’s fingers are positioned on the girl’s thigh as though playing a chord. And though she is tugging on the girl’s hair, the girl does not fight back; she allows the abuse to take place, delicately holding onto the woman’s dress...or is she about to grab her breast? Though rape is definitely occurring due to the difference in age, it appears that this scene is closer to the plot of the Marquis de Sade’s story, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, in which a woman, Madame de Saint-Ange, takes a 15 year-old girl named Eugénie under her wing to be initiated into the world of sexual pleasure.

There is a possibility that Courbet was aware of Sade himself, or at least his philosophy. Though his friendship with the poet Baudelaire was often strained, they were connected by their friend Champfleury, art critic, novelist, and Realist. Baudelaire is known to have been influenced by Sade’s works, as can be seen in many of his poems, such as the poem quoted earlier, “The Martyr.” Baudelaire even wrote to a friend asking swiftly for a copy of Sade’s infamous novel *Justine* on another friend’s behalf.¹⁵ Sade’s works were initially published in the late eighteenth century and condemned by the government as filth. The republication of Sade’s novels in the early twentieth century introduced Sade to a whole new generation, excited to associate his connection with the revolution at the Bastille to their own artistic revolutions. It would

¹⁴ Mielke Bal, *Balthus*. (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2008), 144.

¹⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Letters of Charles Baudelaire: The Conquest of Solitude*. Edited and Translated by Rosemary Lloyd. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 233.

appear that between these ages, Sade's works had fallen off the face of the earth. But, as evidenced by Baudelaire's letter, people were still searching for Sade's writings 60 years after their original publication, and there was obviously enough interest for someone to commit to republishing them.

Though Baudelaire was influenced by Sade, he struggled with the moralistic implications of this interest. In the same letter requesting a copy of *Justine*, Baudelaire writes, "What in the world does C. Baudelaire, esquire, want with a packet of filth? C. Baudelaire, esquire, has enough intelligence to study crime in his own heart. This note is intended for a great man¹⁶ who thinks he can study it only in others..."¹⁷ Courbet struggled with morality as well, as seen in his indignation over the reception of *Venus in Jealous Pursuit of Psyche*. His friend Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (whose portrait was discussed at the beginning of this essay) wrote of the incident:

It is to that entire world that Courbet says through his painting: "you are a bunch of lechers and hypocrites; I know you; I know what you want and what your pimps are asking for you. You are not interested in the art of painting the nude; you are not hungry for natural beauty but for dirt. Here, this is how one paints the nude, and I defy you to do the same. And that is what you are all looking for, you race of pederasts and lesbians."¹⁸

Balthus says in his memoirs that he is repelled by "horror, ugliness, and oddness."¹⁹ Yet the dwarf exists in *The Room*. The painting was made between 1952 and 1954; Balthus's older brother, Pierre Klossowski, published a novel called *Roberte Ce Soir* in 1953. Klossowski was a scholar of Sade, unique in that he explored Sade as a moralist;²⁰ thus, his book reflects his interest in the Sadean nature of man. *Roberte Ce*

¹⁶ Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve was a literary critic.

¹⁷ Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Letters of Charles Baudelaire: The Conquest of Solitude*. Edited and Translated by Rosemary Lloyd. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 233.

¹⁸ Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *The Most Arrogant Man in France: Gustave Courbet and the Nineteenth-Century Media Culture*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 132.

¹⁹ Balthus, *Vanished Splendors: A Memoir*. As told to Alain Vircondelet. Translated by Benjamin Ivry (New York: Ecco Press, 2001), 157.

²⁰ Klossowski's major work on Sade, *Sade My Neighbor*, was first published in 1947.

Soir tells the story of Octave, his wife Roberte, and their rule of hospitality: the offering of the hostess to their guests. Balthus originally was supposed to do the illustrations for the novel, but he became too wrapped up in painting *The Room*.²¹ Klossowski drew the illustrations himself. Of his brother's drawings, Balthus said that, at the time, he didn't appreciate them due to Klossowski's interest in the "morbid, perverse, and sadomasochistic."²² However, this statement cannot be completely true. In one scene of *Roberte Ce Soir*, a small hunchback attacks Roberte; the fact that the woman at the window in *Girl with a Cat* and *The Week of Four Thursdays* is turned into a sinister looking dwarf at the same time Klossowski was writing his novel cannot be a coincidence. *The Room*, in fact, represents Pierre Klossowski's living room.²³

Though Balthus may deny the presence of Sade in his work, the fact that the intelligentsia of his time were lauding Sade as a great revolutionary and that his own brother is considered to be one of the great scholars of Sade strongly suggests that he would have been aware enough of Sade's ideas for them to leak into his works, especially in *The Guitar Lesson* and *The Room*.

Courbet and Balthus both struggled with the moralistic implications of eroticism in their work. Even today, 200 years after Sade's works were first published, one may find a conflict in studying him and being inspired by his ideas. His works can be disgusting and offensive, but also humorous and truthful, no matter how much we might want to deny it as part of our human nature. The desire to ascend above their degenerative

²¹ Pierre Klossowski, "Balthus: beyond realism," in *ARTNEWS*. Vol. 55, No. 8 (December 1956): 29

²² Balthus, *Vanished Splendors: A Memoir*. As told to Alain Vircondelet. Translated by Benjamin Ivry. (New York: Ecco Press, 2001), 157.

²³ Pierre Klossowski, "Balthus: beyond realism," in *ARTNEWS*. Vol. 55, No. 8 (December 1956): 29

peers provides some insight into what appealed to Balthus about Courbet, and why he turned to Courbet time and time again.

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