
Poets as Modern Art Critics: Stating the “Redemptive Power” of the Abstracted Image

MARY DEZEMBER

NEW MEXICO INSTITUTE OF MINING AND TECHNOLOGY

*Si nous savions, tous les dieux s'éveilleraient.
[If we knew, all the gods would awaken.]
— poet and art critic Apollinaire¹*

In the essay “The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man,” C.G. Jung defines the “completely modern” person as one who “has come to the very edge of the world, leaving behind him all that has been discarded and outgrown, and acknowledging that he stands before a void out of which all things may grow” (197). This image of the modern person edged onto an abyss of hope holds, simultaneously, despair and promise — and a need for faith to go forward when there is seemingly nowhere to go. However, during the Renaissance, when humankind began its progression to modernity and to the “edge of the world,” the intellect began its gain in supremacy over faith, delegating faith to the realm of superstition and “dark age” thinking. By the eighteenth century, intellect was sovereign, and faith had no credibility during such a reasonable age. Art corresponded with the times, as images in painting moved away from religious depictions and the God-image,² becoming more secular. By the early nineteenth century, artists began replacing the concrete, traditional religious images of faith with abstracted images that emphasized their compositional elements, specifically color and shape.³ By the mid-nineteenth century, art was becoming a quasi-religion composed of these secular symbols of color and shape, and art critics as the modern “priests” to decipher these symbolic codes for the public emerged. Some of the most adept critics were poets, as poets, like painters, make images, and like painters who abstracted their images, poets arrange symbolic codes (words) to create meaning. Thus, while the human psyche was supposedly rejecting faith as a viable life force, the poet-art critic began seeing in the abstracted images of art the redemption formerly reserved for religion. The poet-art critic seemed to understand this modern/modern art

phenomenon: that faith, dissociated with concrete religious images, remains as it is: abstract. Still it remains. It manifests as the meaning attached to color and shape (the abstraction of images) and is the meaning human beings need the most, and thus will not discard, when they are on the “edge of the world.” In our postmodern society, art continues to evoke hidden aspects of the psyche, and, worldwide, art critics still are often poets: news articles dated from 1974 to 2003 name more than thirty poet-art critics.

The close relationship of the art forms of poetry and painting has been articulated since antiquity. Aristotle acknowledged the following idea that echoes throughout the history of these art forms, as is stated by Rensselaer W. Lee:

The sister arts as they were generally called — and [Giovanni Paolo] Lomazzo observes [in 1585] that they arrived at a single birth — differed, it was acknowledged, in means and manner of expression, but were considered almost identical in fundamental nature, in content, and in purpose. The saying attributed to Plutarch to Simonides that painting is mute poetry, poetry a speaking picture, was quoted frequently and with enthusiasm; and Horace’s famous simile *ut pictura poesis* — as is painting so is poetry — which the writers on art expected one to read “as is poetry so is painting,” was invoked more and more as final sanction for a much closer relationship between the sister arts than Horace himself would probably have approved. (3)

Also with a substantial history is poetry written as art criticism. One example is from Bienvenuto Cellini, who reported in his autobiography that “more than twenty” sonnets were attached to posts in praise of his bronze statue, *Perseus*, 1545-1554, when he first allowed its public viewing, and “every day brought sonnets” (382). However, the emphasis of this study is the onset of art criticism that unveils the arcane redemptive symbols of modern art, promoting compositional elements as important in their own right — or art elements for art elements’ sake. In addition, these critiques are written poetically, in lyrical though prose renderings that capture and transmit the feel or essence of the redemptive effect of the emphasis of compositional elements in painting.

The critical selections of this study — by Charles Baudelaire, Guillaume Apollinaire, Rainer Maria Rilke, Wassily Kandinsky, and Gertrude Stein⁴ — illustrate what Aniela Jaffé calls a “psychological fact,” that the artist has been both the “instrument and spokesman of the spirit of his age” (285). Much of the regenerative power to affect the world by being affected by it, which painters and poets possess, abides in the imagination. As imaginative beings, painters and poets create images. The images a poet creates are not transmitted through the eyes intact, but through the mind as symbolic codes of language. The poet assembles these codes to enable the reader to “see” the image in the mind. This ordering of

the symbolic code of letters and words into language that makes images and meaning, which is the nature of the poet's work, gives the poet an added insight into seeing abstracted images in paintings as symbolic codes that, reassembled, create meaning. Usually, however, for most art viewers, only concrete, tightly-painted, representational images hold and have held meaning, especially before the onset of the abstracted image, a movement in the visual arts that began with Romanticism. Thus, when images in the visual arts moved from tightly-rendered representations to the "blurred" emphasis on color, then on to greater abstraction until, finally, the image was no longer recognizable, viewers were not sure what effect the painter was making.

The poet, however, who had the insight to penetrate these modern works of art possessed the qualities to make astute critics — qualities that proved to be more beneficial than having only formal training in the visual arts. Apollinaire apparently was a "self-taught" analyst of "painting and sculpture" (Breunig xxi). Leroy C. Breunig states that one of Apollinaire's "adversaries in the battle of cubism," critic Louis Vauxcelles, in a "eulogy of 'poet-critics' ... admits that poets are often more perceptive than his own confreres, the professional art critics" (xxi). Frank Anderson Trapp states that Baudelaire wrote "what may well be the most brilliant criticism of the century" (339). Poet, painter and art critic Gabriel-Albert Aurier (1865-1892), who recognized the abilities of and championed the work of artists Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh, stated that "la meilleure critique picturale sera toujours celle faite par un poète" ("Henry de Groux" 225) ["the best pictorial criticism will always be that done by a poet" (Mathews 91)]. According to Patricia Townley Mathews, Aurier made this claim because he believed that the "aim of good criticism ... is to illuminate fully the 'essential conditions' of the work of art" and the "language of the poet is best suited for this task" (Mathews 91). Mathews refers to the following quote by Aurier, in which he articulates why the "ideal critic" is a poet:

Ces ensembles d'idées, ... il les précisera, lui, le poète, en les transposant dans son langage propre, vers ou prose, langage évidemment plus clair et plus intelligible, puisqu'il est plus familier à la masse des hommes, que le langage universel, mais assez ésotérique, des lignes et des couleurs. ("Henry de Groux" 225)

[These ensembles of language, ... he will specify them, he, the poet, by transposing them into his own language, verse or prose, a language evidently clearer and more intelligible, since it is more familiar to the mass of men, than the universal but quite esoteric language of lines and colors. (Mathews 91)]

The desire to communicate effectively to others this "esoteric language" is a goal of the poet-art critic. Hence, for poets, being art critics may be less about profes-

sion, authority, or power than it is about simply communicating to other viewers what it is that has moved them so profoundly. Poets, open to the art, look for its encoded messages and feel a positive influence. Too often, art critics trained to be art critics have approached art almost combatively, looking for nothing but its technical flaws, a claim diplomatically made by Eugène Delacroix in 1829: “L’artiste n’en paie pas moins les frais de toute cette guerre d’esprit, attendu que ses juges sont toujours d’accord sur ce point: c’est de lui montrer charitablement de combien il s’est trompé” (170) [“It is the artist who nevertheless pays the costs of this war of wits, since his judges are always agreed on one point, that of showing him, very charitably, how bad are his mistakes” (Pach 7)]. Poets and painters are bound by a common mission: to communicate to others “the spirit of his age” (Jaffé 285). Therefore, informing the viewing public about the art that holds inspiration, innovation, and even redemption is what interests the poet-art critic more than negatively criticizing the ability, or inability, of the artist. This was particularly important in the modern age, when art became so fragmented that its symbols were sometimes completely arcane, holding an “esoteric language” within “lines and colors,” as Aurier stated — what this study is suggesting is the redemptive power of the compositional elements of color and shape.

Poet-art critics in modernity, as the “priests” of secular symbols that held the meaning that religious symbols once held, understood that the human need for redemption remains even when the traditional ideas of how one gains redemption diminishes. Jaffé writes that Jung “observed the Christian God-image fading in his patients’ dreams — that is, in the unconscious of modern men” (295). Or, as Aurier stated in 1892: “L’amour de Dieu ne nous est plus permis” (“Préface” 332) [“The love of God is no longer permitted us” (Chipp 88)]. This casualty of the modern psyche was more significant than it may seem, as Jaffé writes that the “loss of that image is the loss of the supreme factor that gives life a meaning” (295). The image of God and other religious figures, impressed into the human psyche from thousands of years of religious imagery created through art, was not the exclusive holder of a redemptive power, however. Art, no longer expected to be a service medium for conveying traditional religious imagery, still seemed to serve a religious purpose — through its symbolic power. This is partly due to the power of what Jaffé calls the “symbol-making propensity” of humankind. She writes:

Man, with his symbol-making propensity, unconsciously transforms objects or forms into symbols (thereby endowing them with great psychological importance) and expresses them both in his religion and in his visual art.... Even today, as modern painting and sculpture show, the interplay of religion and art is still alive. (257)

What modern artists were conveying and poet-art critics were feeling was the redemptive power behind, or instilled within, the image: the compositional elements that construct the image, specifically the “symbols” of color and shape. Hence, poet-art critics of modernity felt in the abstraction of the images, through intense and effective rendering, a transforming power similar to the religious idea of grace. Simultaneously, these symbols spoke for themselves, as art elements being important in their own right. And, to poet-art critics, their importance was significant: they offered salvation. Art as salvation, according to Aurier, was humanity’s last hope. “Un seul amour nous est encore loisible, celui des œuvres d’art,” Aurier wrote. “Jetons-nous donc sur cette ultime planche de salut. Devenons les mystiques de l’art” (“Préface” 332) [“One love alone is still allowed us, that of works of art. Let us, therefore, fling ourselves upon this last plank of salvation. Let us become mystics of art” (Chipp 89)].

While poet-art critics became enthusiastic “mystics of art,” most professional art critics and the general public showed no such fervor. There can be a fear of art by the general public, no less than the fear of God. In his book *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, David Freedberg explores the effects of images upon the viewing public. Freedberg writes that “we fear the strength of the effects of images on ourselves” (429). The mutilation of masterpieces, or “attacks on images” as Freedberg writes, is due to the combination of “Moralizing disapproval,” “political motivation,” and “fear of the senses” (410). Conversely, the public historically has looked to art for the God-image, including images before and other than the images of the Christian God, such as “Phidia’s statue of Zeus” (Freedberg 44), for a positive influence, for a faith connection, for a redemptive power. Concerning this human tradition, Freedberg refers to the following passage from *De pictura*, 1435, by Leon Battista Alberti, concerning the effect of “God-images” in painting on the public:

Nam habet ea quidem in se vim admodum divinam non modo ut quod de amicitia dicunt, absentes pictura praesentes esse faciat, verum etiam defunctos longa post saecula viventibus exhibeat, ut summa cum artificis admiratione ac visentium voluptate cognoscantur.... Quod vero pictura deos expresserit quos gentes venerentur, maximum id quidem mortalibus donum fuisse censendum est, nam ad pietatem qua superis coniuncti sumus, atque ad animos integra quadam cum religione detinendos nimium pictura profuit. (Alberti 60)

[Painting possesses a truly divine power in that not only does it make the absent present (as they say of friendship), but it also represents the dead to the living many centuries later.... We should also consider it a very great gift to men that painting has represented the gods they worship, for painting has contributed

considerably to the piety which binds us to the gods, and to filling our minds with sound religious beliefs. (Grayson 61)]

While the viewing public of modernity may have looked to paintings to fill their minds, the images to create “sound religious beliefs” were no longer obvious. By the twentieth century, Jaffé states, “The pioneers of modern art ... apparently understood how much they were asking of the public. Never have artists published so many ‘manifestoes’ and explanations of their aims” (287). However, nearly a century before artists began their proliferation of manifestoes, the abstracted images of modernity were asking viewers to stretch their thinking beyond the concrete image. Without the God-image, and eventually without any representational image at all, viewers were being asked to search their own souls for their religious beliefs, and that is a task of which the general public is hesitant or fearful. Most professionally trained art critics were not helping the public to understand the change, which is the first step in alleviating fear. The poet-art critic, however, appeared to help the public first to understand this new and powerful phenomenon and then to formulate “religious” ideas, for the poet is accustomed to going to the places that he or she fears most and then putting the experience into words. And because such a search causes fear, but ultimately can lead to redemption, the poet-art critic can guide the reader, as Virgil guided Dante: a scene depicted by a Eugène Delacroix painting, *The Barque of Dante*, 1922 — titled in French, *Le Dante et Virgile aux Enfers* [*Dante and Virgil in Hell*] — that caused an uproar from the public and from most critics, but not from poet-art critic Charles Baudelaire.

The art criticism by poets as the unveiling of the redemptive symbols of modern art, which simultaneously promoted compositional elements as important in their own right, emerged with significant impact upon the convergence of the abstracted passionate technique of Romantic artist Delacroix and the admiration of the technique by redemption-seeking poet-art critic Baudelaire (1821-1867). Baudelaire, who began publishing art criticism in 1845, published in 1857 his signature book of poetry, *Les Fleurs du Mal* [*Flowers of Evil*], and in 1862 for *La Presse* a collection of prose poetry, or as he referred to them *Petits Poèmes en prose*. As is vividly shown in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Baudelaire was tormented by his own inability to reject his religious training, particularly that of the church’s dogmatic insistence upon human guilt and sin and the opposing forces of good and evil warring within human character. In “Charles Baudelaire the Catholic,” François Mauriac writes of Baudelaire’s need for redemption and his expressive *Les Fleurs du Mal*: “Down to his dying day, he listened to his poor soul and he confessed it. The flowers of evil are the flowers of sin, of repentance, of remorse and penitence”

(30). Continually he was seeking redemption from what he viewed as the horror of his humanness. He wrote in his journal, “Tout enfant, j’ai senti dans mon coeur deux sentiments contradictoires: l’horreur de la vie et l’extase de la vie” (*Les Fleurs* 260) [“As a child, I felt in my heart two contradictory sentiments: horror for life and ecstasy for life” (Fowlie 261)]. Baudelaire found solace in what he viewed as modern art, for it offered “spiritualité” and “aspiration vers l’infini” (“aspiration toward the absolute”); (*Salon de 1846* 879; Mayne, *Art* 47). He wrote in his famous critical piece, *Salon de 1846*, “Qui dit romantisme dit art moderne, — c’est-à-dire intimité, spiritualité, couleur, aspiration vers l’infini, exprimées par tous les moyens que contiennent les arts” (*Salon de 1846* 879) [“To say the word Romanticism is to say modern art — that is, intimacy, spirituality, colour, aspiration towards the infinite, expressed by every means available to the arts” (Mayne, *Art* 47)]. In Romanticism, what Baudelaire called modern art, he saw and felt the ecstasy of life, and his ever-present need for those moments of grace came when viewing this powerful art.

Throughout the *Salon de 1846*, Baudelaire writes art criticism with poetic finesse. In section III, “De la Couleur” [“On Color”], Baudelaire wrote a passage that reads as if it were a poem, what Roger Shattuck refers to as Baudelaire’s “first” prose poem (Shattuck 140). In this section, Baudelaire extolled color and its effects on the viewer, and in this sense he, as art critic, explained and promoted the use of color rather than critiqued a particular artist. In this “prose poem” of section III, selections of which follow, emphasized is the art element of color rather than what the color represents, which is what non-representational art will do nearly seventy years later, as well as his suggestion of the redemptive power that color has on the psyche:

— le rouge chante la gloire du vert; le noir, — quand il y en a, — zéro solitaire et insignifiant, intercède le secours du bleu ou du rouge. Le bleu, c’est-à-dire le ciel, est coupé de légers flocons blancs ou de masses grises....

Quand le grand foyer descend dans les eaux, de rouges fanfares s’élancent de tous côtés; une sanglante harmonie éclate à l’horizon, et le vert s’empourpre richement. Mais bientôt de vastes ombres bleues chassent en cadence devant elles la foule des tons orangés et rose tendre qui sont comme l’écho lointain et affaibli de la lumière. Cette grande symphonie de jour, qui est l’éternelle variation de la symphonie d’hier, cette succession de mélodies, où la variété sort toujours de l’infini, cet hymne compliqué s’appelle la couleur. (*Salon de 1846* 881)

[—red sings the glory of green; black (where it exists — a solitary and insignificant cipher) intercedes on behalf of blue or red. The blue — that is, the sky — is cut across with airy flecks of white or with grey masses....

When the great brazier of the sun dips beneath the waters, fanfares of red surge forth on all sides; a harmony of blood flares up at the horizon, and green turns richly crimson. Soon vast blue shadows are rhythmically sweeping before them the host of orange and rose-pink tones which are like a faint and distant echo of the light. This great symphony of today, which is an eternal variation of the symphony of yesterday, this succession of melodies whose variety ever issues from the infinite, this complex hymn is called colour. (Mayne, *Art* 48-49)]

What Baudelaire has done in the above passage is significant to deciphering “a new code” in the following ways.

First, he asks the viewer of art to reconsider how paintings should be seen and assessed. Unlike the organization by genre according to the manner of the Academy (i.e. History, Portraits, Landscapes, Drawings and Engravings) of his first art critique, *Salon de 1845*, Baudelaire ordered *Salon de 1846* according to the standards he believed a new, modern art should display. Expounding on color and on Delacroix, each in a section of their own, he wanted the viewing public to see art for the element of color and to understand Delacroix’s passionate ability to display color. In the previous year’s more traditional critique, he seemed frustrated with the selection of art he was critiquing, and finally, in one paragraph, he asked for “l’originalité” (*Salon de 1845* 835) in technique.

Second, he promotes the significance of color in its own right, writing of color as primary and the image it represents as secondary, such as in “Le bleu, c’est-à-dire le ciel, est coupé de légers flocons blancs ou de masses grises” [“The blue — that is, the sky — is cut across with airy flecks of white or with grey masses”].

Third, he discusses synaesthesia in art. He suggests that what one sees in the world, or in a painting, is color that is synonymous with melodies. Thus, Baudelaire claims that the viewer can see music; we can see a symphony playing before our very eyes. In addition, he states that he is seeing simultaneously the symphony with the sunset, by seeing, feeling, noticing color and its intense interplay for itself rather than for what it represents. This was a major step toward modern art, when images became so abstracted that the viewer could see or feel or even nearly hear the colors more so than what the colors depict.

Ultimately, the passage exhibits the positive impact of color on the viewer, and Baudelaire chooses to describe this positive emotion with words that have traditionally held a redemptive power: “la gloire” [“glory”], “sanglante” [“blood”],⁵ “la foule” [“host”], “la lumière” [“light”], “l’éternelle” [“eternal”], and “cet hymne” [“this hymn”]. Additionally, the passage is written as if the viewer were involved in a beautiful, stunning ritual that has a powerful purifying effect. This is the ritual of life as seen through art that captures the power of color displayed by nature,

each hue not being separate or exclusive from the others, a type of “blurring” technique of which Delacroix was champion. In the passionate symphony of life of Baudelaire’s passage, one experiences an ecstatic moment while being caught up in the color, and in this ecstasy, all is eternally beautiful and right.

In section IV of Baudelaire’s *Salon de 1846*, titled “Eugène Delacroix,” which strategically follows the section “De la Couleur,” Baudelaire states his endorsement of Delacroix’s new technique. Baudelaire wrote, “Jusqu’à présent on a été injuste envers Eugène Delacroix. La critique a été pour lui amère et ignorante; sauf quelques nobles exceptions” (*Salon de 1846* 888) [“Up to the present, Eugène Delacroix has met with injustice. Criticism, for him, has been bitter and ignorant; with one or two noble exceptions (Mayne, *Art* 55)].⁶ Baudelaire was seeing with uncommon eyes: Delacroix was creating with a passion of style and emphasis on color that defied the accepted “finished” style of strictly delineated objects. Delacroix’s art created a sensation. Bernard S. Myers writes,

For the first time, the conservative viewpoint of moneyed people and the almost malevolent misunderstanding of critics, both implacably opposed to innovations in art, emerged to plague the future development of painting. Delacroix, who at the age of twenty-six had already painted his sensational *The Barque of Dante* ... and *The Massacre at Scio* ... was to remain for the rest of his life a controversial figure. (54)

Baudelaire proceeded to banish ignorant criticism by explaining the originality of Delacroix’s work that was based on such combined qualities as “la couleur” [“color”], “la naïveté [“naïveté”], “sa poesie” [“his poetry”], “les conséquences d’une grande passion” [“the consequences of a grand passion”], and “la douleur” [“anguish”] (*Salon de 1846* 885-894; Mayne, *Art* 52-67). Only the first of these qualities, color, is one of the compositional elements of painting, which also include balance, shape, space, proportion, weight, texture, rhythm, repetition, and line. Thus, according to Baudelaire, criticism of Delacroix had been ignorant in part because his paintings had been judged according to the strict dictates of the French Academy concerning technique. Delacroix’s works *are* masterfully composed, employing meticulous use of balance, space, shape, proportion, weight, rhythm and repetition. His subject matter that was based on literary, Biblical and classical themes often *did* meet with Academy regulations. Though his work merited and was awarded state patronage, his use of color to “draw” and blur the divine line challenged — even defied — Academy standards in technique. Further, Delacroix allowed his brushstrokes to show, giving a new concept to texture. Ultimately, the Academy had no standards for the artistic display of ardent emotion that Baudelaire listed as Delacroix’s additional strengths as an artist. Delacroix called these quali-

ties “spontaneous inspiration,” writing in defense of such a style: “Le pauvre homme de métier, celui surtout qu’on critique au nom de cette inspiration toute spontanée, a très mauvaise grâce à en appeler d’un jugement où la passion n’est censée entrer pour rien” (169) [“The unfortunate artist, especially one who is criticized because of his spontaneous inspiration, is badly placed for appealing against a judgment from which passion is supposed to be entirely absent” (Pach 6)].

Seventeen years after Delacroix wrote this passage, Baudelaire publicly supported Delacroix’s “spontaneous inspiration,” “passion,” and his rebellious use of color and blurred “line.” Nine years later, after devoting an entire section of his critique to the importance of color, Baudelaire was still insisting on its prominence in art and was still crediting the emergence of its significance as an element in its own right with the style of Delacroix.⁷ Of the *Chasse aux Lions* [*The Lion Hunt*], 1855, Baudelaire wrote in the same year: “La *Chasse aux Lions* est une véritable explosion de couleur (que ce mot soit pris dans le bon sens). Jamais couleurs plus belles, plus intenses, ne pénétrèrent jusqu’à l’âme par le canal des yeux” (*Exposition 972*) [“*The Lion Hunt* is a veritable explosion of colour (the word is intended in its good sense). Never can colours more beautiful or more intense have penetrated to the soul through the channel of the eyes!” (Mayne, *Mirror* 216)]. He added that Delacroix’s color “pense par elle-même” (*Exposition 973*) [“thinks for itself” (Mayne, *Mirror* 216)]. Baudelaire explained with words that could jar art viewers who were unaccustomed to strong, immediate emotional sensations into new ways of experiencing and judging art:

On dirait que cette peinture, comme les sorciers et les magnétiseurs, projette sa pensée à distance. Ce singulier phénomène tient à la puissance de coloriste, à l’accord parfait des tons, et à l’harmonie (préétablie dans le cerveau du peintre) entre la couleur et le sujet. (*Exposition 972*)

[It almost seems as though this kind of painting, like a magician or a hypnotist, can project its thought at a distance. This curious phenomenon results from the colourist’s special power, from the perfect concord of his tones and from the harmony, which is pre-established in the painter’s brain, between colour and subject-matter. (Mayne, *Mirror* 216)]

The argument in the early to mid-1800s over whether line should take precedence over color was an important one, fought largely in favor of color by Delacroix’s art and Baudelaire’s art criticism. If this argument could be won, then art could break from the classical insistence upon line and a modern art could begin, giving artists the license to break from the past in all compositional techniques. Delacroix wrote of the resistance by critics to such a change:

Il faut vois s'ouvrir alors l'arsenal des autorités, et se déployer la série imposante des grands modèles qui mettent à rien votre éloquence et tous vos efforts. Celui-ci combat pour le contour et vous terrasse avec la ligne de beauté : ils discutent sans fin sur la préséance du dessin ou de la couleur.... (170)

[And so a whole arsenal of authorities opens up, and great models, in an imposing series, are paraded before you, reducing to nothing your eloquence and your best efforts. Here is a fighter for contour: he floors you with the line of beauty. Endless discussions rage over the primacy of drawing as against color.... (Pach 7)]

Again, unlike other critics, when Baudelaire entered the milieu of art criticism in 1845, he endorsed and applauded Delacroix's use of color over strict line. In 1846, Baudelaire wrote: "Delacroix est le seul aujourd'hui dont l'originalité n'ait pas été envahie par le système des lignes droites; ses personnages sont toujours agités, et ses draperies voltigeantes.... et pour les coloristes, qui veulent imiter les palpitations éternelles de la nature, les lignes ne sont jamais, comme dans l'arc-en-ciel, que la fusion intime de deux couleurs" (*Salon de 1846* 892) ["Delacroix is the only artist today whose originality has not been invaded by the tyrannical system of straight lines; his figures are always restless and his draperies fluttering.... for colourists, who seek to imitate the eternal throbbings of nature, lines are never anything else but the intimate fusion of two colours, as in the rainbow" (Mayne, *Art* 59)]. Still combating the supremacy of the line in 1855, Baudelaire wrote:

Du dessin de Delacroix, si absurdement, si naïvement critiqué, que faut-il dire, si ce n'est qu'il est des vérités élémentaires complètement méconnues; qu'un bon dessin n'est pas une ligne dure, cruelle, despotique, immobile, enfermant une figure comme une camisole de force; que le dessin doit être comme la nature, vivant et agité.... (*Exposition* 973)

[Of Delacroix's drawing, which has been so absurdly and so banally criticized, what am I to say, except that it is one of those elementary truths which are completely misunderstood? What am I to say, except that a good drawing is not a hard, cruel, despotic and rigid line, imprisoning a form like a strait-jacket? that drawing should be like nature, alive and in motion? (Mayne, *Mirror* 217)]

By the end of the century, when Pablo Picasso appeared on the art scene, the insistence by critics of strict line as an artistic standard was abating to the insistence of artists for greater abstraction, and thus, lines no longer defined an object, and colors expressed deep emotions, longing, searching. In praise of Picasso's style that demonstrated deep feeling, Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) wrote criticism that sounds like poetry. After meeting Picasso, Apollinaire wrote an essay on the young artist as a new painter for *La Plume* in Paris of May 14, 1905 which was "the first serious piece to appear on the Spanish painter" (Breunig xxii). The

first line of this piece lyrically begins: “Si nous savions, tous les dieux s’éveilleraient” (Apollinaire 35) [“If we knew, all the gods would awaken” (Suleiman 14)].⁸

Describing paintings from Picasso’s Blue Period of 1901-1904 and his ensuing circus themes that began in 1905 — an example being *The Family of Saltimbanques*, 1905 (Walther 91)⁹ — Apollinaire continued this critique that could second for a prose poem. Notice how Apollinaire intersperses description and facts with poetry and with suggestions as how to read the paintings in the following selection of lines from the critique [emphasis added]:

Picasso a regardé des images humaines qui flottaient dans *l’azur de nos mémoires* et qui participent de la divinité pour donner des métaphysiciens. Qu’ils sont pieux ses ciels tout remués d’envolement, ses lumières lourdes et basses comme celles des grottes.

D’autres mendiants se sont usés à la vie. Ce sont des infirmes, des béquillards et des bêtîtres. Ils s’étonnent d’avoir atteint *le but qui est resté bleu et n’est plus l’horizon*.

L’espace d’une année, Picasso vécut cette peinture mouillée, *bleue comme le fond humide de l’abîme* et pitoyable.

Le calme vint après cette frénésie.

Le arlequins vivent sous les oripeaux *quand la peinture recueille, réchauffe ou blanchit ses couleurs pour dire la force et la durée des passions*, quand les lignes limitées par le maillot se courbent, se coupent ou s’élancent.

On ne peut pas confondre ces saltimbanques avec des histrions. *Leur spectateur doit être pieux*, car ils célèbrent des rites muets avec une agilité difficile. (35-38)

[Picasso has looked at human images that floated *in the azure of our memories* and that partake of the divine to the damnation of metaphysicians. How pious are his skies stirred by the movement of wings, his lights heavy and low like the lights of grottoes.

Other beggars have been worn out by life. They are the cripples, the disabled, and the knaves. They are astonished at having reached *the goal that has remained blue yet is no longer the horizon*.

For the space of one year, Picasso lived this painting, wet and *blue like the humid depths of the abyss*, and pitiful.

Calm descended after this frenzy.

The harlequins live beneath their ragged finery *while the painting gathers, heats up, or whitens its colors in order to tell of the strength and the duration of passions*, while the lines outlining the costume curve, soar up, or are cut short.

One cannot confuse these saltimbanques with mere actors on a stage. *The spectator who watches them must be pious*, for they celebrate wordless rites with pain-taking agility. (Suleiman 14-16)]

By choosing the word “l’azur” [“azure”] and repeating the word “bleue” [“blue”], Apollinaire reinforces the importance of Picasso’s singular passion during his Blue Period. Apollinaire also describes how Picasso, through the nearly exclusive use of blue and through his style, infuses the painting with a humanity that simultaneously embraces the divine and performs rituals that provide redemption; he asks that the spectator who watches the saltimbanques, and the painting, do so with a reverent attitude.

In another sentence from the preceding critique, Apollinaire separates the action of the subject matter, the harlequins, from the action of the elements of composition [emphasis added]: “Les arlequins vivent sous les oripeaux *quand la peinture recueille, réchauffe ou blanchit ses couleurs pour dire la force et la durée des passions, quand les lignes limitées par le maillot se courbent, se coupent ou s’élancent*” (37) [“The harlequins live beneath their ragged finery while the painting gathers, heats up, or whitens its colors in order to tell of the strength and the duration of passions, while the lines outlining the costume curve, soar up, or are cut short” (Suleiman 15)]. Such separation helps the viewer to see the composition as expressive in and of itself, thus being more than a mere technique for creating the subject of harlequins. In this way, Apollinaire furthers the idea that Baudelaire promoted and that signals a modern art — that elements of composition are as important as subject matter. Two years after Apollinaire writes this critique, Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, 1907, will highlight this idea and will be instrumental in initiating what Matisse will label “Cubism.”

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) did not write art essays for publication; however, he did write many letters of what translator Jane Bannard Greene calls “enthusiastic discovery” (179) describing paintings to his wife Clara, who was a sculptor, that are now read by art viewers. Going to the “storeroom” of a “Mr. Bernheim” (Greene 185), Rilke viewed “some Van Goghs,” one description of which follows:

— und endlich: eine von den Landschaften, wie er sie immer verschob und doch immer wieder schon malte: untergehende Sonne, gelb und orangerot, umgeben von ihrem Schein aus gelben, runden Bruchstücken: voller Auflehnung Blau, Blau, Blau dagegen der Hang geschwungener Hügel, durch einen Streifen beschwichtigender Schwingungen (ein fluß?) von der Dämmerung abgetrennt, die durchsichtig in dunklem Altgold, im schrägen vorderen Drittel des Bildes ein Feld und aufgehockte Garben aufrecht erkennen läßt. (35)

[And finally one of those landscapes such as he always thrust aside and yet kept on painting: setting sun, yellow and orange-red, surrounded by its glow composed of round, yellow daubs. Full of rebellious blue, blue, blue, on the other hand, is the curving slope of the hill, separated by a strip of soothing vibrations (a river?) from the transparent dark antique gold of the dusk in which is visible,

in the slanting lower third of the foreground, a field and a huddle of upright sheaves. (Greene 185-186)]

Rilke's word choice and composition, such as repetition of the word "Blau," help give the feel of Van Gogh's painting, describing and echoing Van Gogh's style. Moreover, Rilke understands the simultaneous yet opposing human emotions ("rebellious" yet "soothing") that are symbolized in the artistic composition of shape and color (the "glow composed of round, yellow daubs"; an excess of "blue" being "rebellious"). Interestingly, Rilke describes "a strip of soothing vibrations" as just what they are: the rhythmic shapes that effect the viewer by "soothing" him — and in this, the important claim that these are more important than the object being depicted by the shapes. Unsure if the shapes are supposed to represent a river, Rilke expresses that the shapes themselves are important; they are symbols, "soothing vibrations" that bestow peace on the viewer. If the depiction is supposed to be a river, Van Gogh abstracted the image to the point that the abstracted image itself is what holds the redemptive power over the viewer.

However, Rilke did not immediately understand the arcane symbols of abstracted art, and deciphering this new code may not have been immediate for other poet-art critics. In a letter of October 10, 1907, Rilke wrote: "Ich war heute wieder zwei Stunden vor einzelnen Bildern; mir ist das irgendwie nützlich, fühl ich" (26) ["Today again I spent two hours in front of certain pictures. This is somehow useful to me, I feel" (Greene 183)]. Trying to unlock for himself Cézanne's work, Rilke continued:

Aber man braucht lange, lange Zeit für alles. Wenn ich mich erinnere, wie befremdet und unsicher man die ersten Sachen sah, als sie mit dem neugehörten Namen zusammen vor einem waren. Und dann lange nichts, und plötzlich hat man die richtigen Augen.... (26)

[But everything takes a long, long time. When I remember how strange and disconcerting the first things seemed to me when I looked at them and saw them before me associated with a name I had never heard before. And then nothing for a long time, and suddenly one has the right eyes.... (Greene 183)]

Developing "die richtigen Augen" ["the right eyes"] to experience and interpret life was essential to Rilke, and he apparently did so by viewing art. One of his most famous poems, "Archaischer Torso Apollos" ["Archaic Torso of Apollo"], was inspired by his study of a sculpture. Writing of the stunning sculpture, though "defaced" (and thus somewhat "abstracted"), Rilke describes its power as art. The last stanza of the poem states that the viewer cannot help but be affected by the art. Without its brilliant power, Rilke writes, this art:

und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern

aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern.
(lines 12-14)
[would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.
(Mitchell 61)]

With this poem, Rilke asserts that art “sees” the viewer and searches the viewer’s life and soul. And if the art is “dazzling” enough, it asks the viewer to change. In this dazzling exchange of viewer-to-art-to-viewer interaction, art offers viewers the chance to look at themselves, then to change their lives to be as authentically illuminated or enlightened as the art itself. Thus, art offers redemption to viewers. This may be the most significant reason why poets write about art, for the work of a poet and the work of an artist are similar — both look with imagination for a life with meaning, a life of change in search of the “new.”

Within just a few years after Apollinaire’s understanding of Picasso’s emphasis on the symbolic qualities of color and shape and Rilke’s comprehension of Van Gogh’s similar emphasis, Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) led the way to art as “pure abstraction” or “non-representational.” Such works show that the elements of composition are the subject matter and, for Kandinsky, held a spirituality. This spiritual sense of abstract art, Kandinsky believed, was the ability of abstracted images to stir the soul and offer harmony to life, which is also one definition of redemption. In 1911, Kandinsky’s book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* [*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*] was published, a selection of which compares the effect of word repetition in poetry to the effect of image abstraction in art: both techniques, he claims, disconnect the established meaning to allow a spiritual element to emerge. He writes:

Ebenso wird sogar der abstrakt gewordene Sinn des bezeichneten Gegenstandes vergessen und nur der reine *Klang* des Wortes entblößt. Diesen «reinen» Klang hören wir vielleicht unbewußt auch im Zusammenklange mit dem realen oder später abstrakt gewordenen Gegenstände. Im letzten Falle aber tritt dieser reine Klang in den Vordergrund und übt einen direkten Druck auf die Seele aus. Die Seele kommt zu einer gegenstandslosen Vibration.... (*Über* 46)

[Similarly, in drawing, the abstract message of the object drawn tends to be forgotten and its meaning lost. Sometimes perhaps we unconsciously hear this real harmony sounding together with the material or later on with the non-material sense of the object. But in the latter case the true harmony exercises a direct

impression on the soul. The soul undergoes an emotion which has no relation to any definite object.... (Sadler 15)]

It is interesting to note the similarities with the “prose poem” passage written by Baudelaire “De la Couleur” [“On Color”] and the following one, written in 1913 by Kandinsky, who, in addition to being a painter, was a poet and a critic of art. This passage, from his essay “Rückblicke” [“Reminiscences”], reads as though he is describing a composition he will paint three years later, titled *Moskau I* [*Moscow I*], 1916, and relays, like Baudelaire’s passage, a redemptive feel about the beauty and power of the color found in daily life:

Die Sonne schmilzt ganz Moskau zu einem fleck zusammen, der wie eine tolle Tuba das ganze Innere, die ganze Seele in Vibration versetzt. Nein, nicht diese rote Einheitlichkeit ist die schönste Stunde! Das ist nur der Schlußakkord der Symphonie, die jede Farbe zum höchsten Leben bringt, die ganz Moskau wie das *fff* eines Riesenorchesters klingen läßt und zwingt. Rosa, lila, gelbe, weiße, blaue, pistaziengrüne, flammenrote Häuser, Kirchen ñ jede ein selbständiges Lied — der rasend grüne Rasen, die tiefer brummenden Bäume, oder der mit tausend Stimmen singende Schnee, oder das Allegretto der kahlen Äste, der rote, steife, schweigsame Ring der Kremlmauer und darüber, alles überragend, wie ein Triumphgeschrei, wie ein sich vergessendes Halleluja der weiße, lange, zierlich ernste Strich des Iwan Weliky-Glockenturmes. Und auf seinem hohen, gespannten in ewiger Sehnsucht zum Himmel ausgestreckten Halse der goldene Kopf der Kuppel, die zwischen den goldenen und bunten Sternen der andern Kuppeln die Moskauer Sonne ist.

Diese Stunde zu malen, dachte ich mir als das unmöglichste und höchste Glück eines Künstlers. (“Rückblicke” V-VI)

[The sun melts all Moscow into one spot which, like a mad tuba, sets one’s whole inside, one’s whole soul vibrating. No, this red unity is not the loveliest hour! It is only the final note of the symphony which brings every color to its greatest intensity, which lets, indeed forces, all Moscow to resound like the *fff* of a giant orchestra. Pink, lavender, yellow, white, blue, pistachio green, flame-red houses, churches — each an independent song — the raving green grass, the deep murmuring trees, or the snow, singing with a thousand voices, or the allegretto of the bare branches, the red, stiff, silent ring of the Kremlin walls, and above, towering over all like a cry of triumph, like a Hallelujah forgetful of itself, the long white, delicately earnest line of the Ivan Veliky Bell Tower. And upon its neck, stretched high and taut in eternal longing to the heavens, the golden head of the cupola, which is the Moscow sun amid the golden and colored stars of the other cupolas.

To paint this hour, I thought, would be the most impossible and the greatest joy of an artist. (Herbert 23)]¹⁰

Kandinsky made possible painting such an hour by his technique of highly abstracting the scene to express the intensity of the day through its colors and shapes. Such poetic expressions by Baudelaire, Apollinaire, Rilke, and Kandinsky rely on strong imagery that emphasizes artistic elements and their redemptive effect on one's inner self, an effect that "das ganze Innere, die ganze Seele in Vibration versetzt" ["sets one's whole inside, one's whole soul vibrating"] and leads to "ein Triumphgeschrei, wie ein sich vergessendes Halleluja" ["a cry of triumph, like a Hallelujah forgetful of itself"].

Through a type of "seeing" that they express through symbols, many artists have gained the recognition as visionaries — and thus the quasi-religious significance of their art — and often from poet-art critics who also have the visionary ability to decipher these codes, even if, like Rilke, they had to stand in front of a painting for two hours to develop "the right eyes." A true champion of innovative artists, poet-art critic and art collector Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), wrote the following, in her unique poetic style, about the visionary qualities of Cubist artists:

So the twentieth century is not the same as the nineteenth century and it is very interesting knowing that Picasso has never seen the earth from an airplane, that being of the twentieth century he inevitably knew that the earth is not the same as in the nineteenth century, he knew it, he made it, inevitably he made it different and what he made is a thing that now all the world can see. When I was in America I for the first time travelled pretty much all the time in an airplane and when I looked at the earth I saw all the lines of cubism made at a time when not any painter had ever gone up in an airplane. I saw there on the earth the mingling lines of Picasso, coming and going, developing and destroying themselves, I saw the simple solutions of Braque, I saw the wandering lines of Masson, yes I saw and once more I knew that a creator is contemporary, he understands what is contemporary when the contemporaries do not yet know it.... (Stein 49-50).

Stein writes of a scene above the world "seen" by an artist who had never flown. Such artists had "come to the edge of the world" and climbed above.

A century before this climb, when humanity had come to the "edge of the world" and faced a modern age that left behind tightly executed representational images that for thousands of years signified faith and soul-beliefs, modern age artists were stating on canvas that religious ideas were not lost. Rather, they were to be found in the elements of our lives, as in the elements of art, the "color" and "shape" of our lives. Redemption could happen, through recognizing and feeling the joy of the color of the yellow pulsing sunshine or the red blazing sunset or the blue vibrating curves of a river — or, specifically, of yellow pulsing in circles or red blazing in arches or blue vibrating in curves. Whether it be in the beauty of a

day of interacting hues or of the richness of people moving with reverence of their lives in blue, or just shapes and color that display harmony, the abstract emotions of faith — redemption, grace, salvation — were emitted through the abstracted image. Poet-art critics, as “mystics of art,” saw this and felt this leap of faith into, and above, a new world, articulating it for others, so they, too, could experience the pleasure of these moving sensations and their transforming intensity in this seemingly godless age. ✨

Notes

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¹ Apollinaire is writing about Picasso.

The title phrase, “Redemptive Power,” in part is taken from David Freedberg’s 1989 work, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. His sentence reads: “Perhaps we must admit that it is in this transcendence of death wrought by the form that should not have been capable of being made by human hand, that should not be made by it — that it is in this that the redemptive power of images lies” (440). Freedberg’s study concerns the power of representational images, images that represent a person or an object. My study, however, theorizes the power of abstracted and non-representational images. “Abstracted,” meaning “from the whole,” can apply to the depiction of images created with a representation of an object in mind, ranging from recognizable but not tightly executed images to images so highly abstracted from the whole that they are no longer apparent. Non-representational refers to no object being apparent or even in the mind of the artist during creation, sometimes also called “pure abstraction” or “complete abstraction.” While these terms are often used synonymously, pure or complete abstraction implies that an object has been abstracted to its parts while non-representational refers to no existence of a representational object that is being abstracted into parts or elements; thus, the elements themselves are the representation. However, these distinctions are not exclusive, as we cannot know what was in the mind of the artist during creation, unless the artist has documented those ideas. Thus, while to the viewer no concrete or representational image at all may be apparent, the artist may have had one in mind and abstracted it so fully that only the elements remain. Or, the artist may have wanted to merely paint colors and shapes.

Concerning the use of the term “modern art” in this study: while Delacroix is not considered a modern artist according to the categories of art history, this study includes him as one of the originators, through his technique, of the movement toward modern

art. In addition, Baudelaire referred to Romanticism as modern art, a distinction important to this study.

² This study is concerned with Western images, art, and history. Thus, due to the integral impact of Christianity on the God-image of Western art, the term “God-image,” in this study, refers to Christian images. However, it is certainly not my intention to imply that the term God-image refers exclusively to those images of a deity created in the context of Christianity.

³ I use the terms “color” and “shape” to describe how images are created and what the viewer sees when images are abstracted. Other writers may refer to what I call “shape” as “line,” such as the discussion by Aurier. However, I find the word “shape” to be more descriptive of how abstracted images appear to the viewer of art. In addition, the use of the word “line” for the shape of objects or abstracted objects would become confusing in this study, as “line” refers more to “outline” or “drawing,” which has a specific and significant meaning that opposes the overt use of color and shape.

⁴ I have ordered the discussion of poet-art critics chronologically according to their art critical poetic excerpts, not by the artist being discussed in their writings. Thus, Rilke’s discussion of van Gogh comes after Apollinaire’s writing on Picasso. However, van Gogh was still being discovered or understood in ways, such as for his abstracted technique, into the early twentieth-century.

⁵ This word is actually “bloody,” but I am referring to the translator’s choice of the word “blood” for this passage.

⁶ Baudelaire was not the only art critic who supported Delacroix, a fact that he acknowledged in his *Salon of 1846*. Baudelaire quoted a large passage written in 1822 by critic Adolphe Thiers that hardily praises Delacroix’s *The Barque of Dante*, 1922 — titled in French, *Le Dante et Virgile aux Enfers* [*Dante and Virgil in Hell*] — and commended Thiers for his boldness in supporting Delacroix. Baudelaire records that Thiers had written the following about Delacroix and *The Barque of Dante*:

Aucun tableau ne révèle mieux, à mon avis, l’avenir d’un grand peintre, que celui de M. Delacroix, représentant le *Dante et Virgile aux enfers*. C’est là à surtout qu’on peut remarquer ce jet de talent, cet élan de la supériorité naissante qui ranime les espérances un peu découragées par le mérite trop modéré de tout le reste.... auquel des juges sévères, *mais peu avisés ici*, pourraient reprocher de manquer de noblesse. Le pinceau est large et ferme, la couleur simple et vigoureuse, quoique un peu crue....

Il jette ses figures, les groupe et les plie à volonté avec la hardiesse de Michel-Ange et la fécondité de Rubens. Je ne sais quel souvenir des grands artistes me saisit à l’aspect de ce tableau; je retrouve cette puissance sauvage, ardente, mais naturelle, qui cède sans effort à son propre entraînement....

(qtd. in Baudelaire, *Salon de 1846* 885-886)

[In my opinion no picture is a clearer revelation of future greatness than M. Delacroix's *Le Dante et Virgile aux Enfers*. Here above all you can recognize the spurt of talent, that burst of dawning mastery which revives our hopes, already a trifle dashed by the too moderate worth of all the rest.... stern judges — in this case ill-advised — might perhaps criticize it for a lack of nobility. It is painted with a broad, firm, brush, and its colour is simple and vigorous, if a trifle raw....

He throws his figures on to the canvas, he groups and bends them at will, with the boldness of Michelangelo and the abundance of Rubens. Some strange recollection of the great masters seized hold of me at the sight of this picture; once more I found that power — wild, ardent, but natural — which yields without effort to its own impulse.... (Mayne 52-53)]

⁷ By 1857, Delacroix received acceptance by the Academy, thirty-five years after he showed his first painting, and six years before his death. Lorenz Eitner writes: “The Universal Exposition in 1855 showed thirty-six of his paintings, a tribute to him (together with Ingres) as one of France’s two preeminent living artists. Having long been denied admission to the Academy, of which he privately took a coolly realistic view, he was at last admitted to this body of distinguished mediocrities in 1857” (220).

⁸ Some of Apollinaire’s poetry was visually expressive, as he arranged the words on a page to create the image of the poems’ subjects, as can be seen in his book of poems, *Calligrammes*. For example, his poem “La Mandoline l’Ceillet et le Bambou” [“Mandolin, Carnation and Bamboo”] (*Calligrammes* 112; Greet 113) correlates in style, subject and time of creation with some of the synthetic cubist works of Picasso and Braque.

⁹ Leroy C. Breunig states that Apollinaire’s review was actually “Accompanied by reproductions of five paintings, including the masterpieces *Woman with a Crow*, *The Two Friends*, and *Two Saltimbanques with a Dog*” (Breunig xxii).

¹⁰ Robert L. Herbert states that this translation of “Reminiscences” was done by his wife (iii).

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