

Introduction

An artist is a person who has invented an artist.

Harold Rosenberg

IT COULD be argued that modern poetry was invented by the painters. Certainly when in 1913 Ezra Pound reviled the mannered blur of Victorian verse and called for the “shock and stroke” of a new poetry based on the *image*, he defined it with a canvas in mind: “An ‘Image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” Only such an image, such a poetry, could give us “that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.” (By “greatest,” Pound means both oldest and newest, both Giotto and Gaudier-Brzeska.) All the paraphernalia of modernism, in fact, seems largely pictorial. The convulsive energy of the high modernist poetry, its use of collage and cubist fractioning, its *vers libre* expressivity, its sense of the natural object as adequate symbol, of technique as content, of organic form, of dissociation and dislocation—these derive from the example of painters. When Pound demanded “direct treatment of the ‘thing,’” and William Carlos Williams urged “no ideas but in things,” the *thing* they had in their mind’s eye might as well have been the painter’s motif.

The impressionists and then the cubists had set the Academy on its ear (and the surrealists next turned the

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Academy into an ear), first by challenging the rules and then by making new ones—rules that became a dispensation for the poets. “How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?” Williams asked in an early poem. And it is important to remember that during certain periods painters and poets together form part of a larger group. During the 1920s and 1930s both were part of the avant-garde. “No one knew consistently enough to formulate a ‘movement,’” wrote Williams. “We were restless and constrained, closely allied to the painters. Impressionism, dadaism, surrealism applied to both painting and the poem.” Again in the 1950s and early 1960s there was an alliance, under the banner of the School of New York.

A great deal has been written about “the sister arts,” their history and sibling rivalries. The whole heritage of Horace’s famous tag *ut pictura poesis* has been analyzed and anthologized: backward to its philosophical and theological sources in a view of experience as an “image” of its own idea or of nature as a divine allegory to be unriddled; forward to the emblem poetry of the Renaissance or to yesterday’s concrete poem. The long line of poet-painters is also familiar, from Ben Jonson’s court masques to Yosa Buson’s calligraphic landscapes, from William Blake to Henri Michaux, all of them artists for whom the text portrays, the picture speaks. In my favorite of Buson’s works—“Broom, Poems, and Poet”—the figures and the text not only comment on one another, they are part of one another: in a single brushstroke the broom’s straw becomes a line in the haiku beside it.

“One of the characteristic symptoms of the spiritual condition of our age,” wrote Baudelaire about Delacroix, is that “the arts aspire, if not to take one another’s place, at least reciprocally to lend one another new powers.” The nineteenth century forged this alliance of powers: leaving aside Goethe or Baudelaire, in English alone there are poems by Keats, Shelley, Browning, and Rossetti that attest to

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it. But it is our own century, the age of mechanical reproductions and of available museums, that is especially rich not only in poems that seek to “resemble” imaginary pictures but also in poems that seek to interpret existing ones. The example of the modernist pioneers has been taken up and refined by nearly every contemporary poet of note. In this country the roll call, drawn from every school of thought, would run from Ashbery and Berryman through to Gregory Corso, Irving Feldman, Louise Glück, Donald Hall, Robert Hass, Anthony Hecht, John Hollander, Richard Howard, Randall Jarrell, Frank O’Hara, Sylvia Plath, W. D. Snodgrass, May Swenson, Richard Wilbur, and Charles Wright. For these and for most poets paintings are primal, as “real” as the bread and wine on the table, as urgent as a dying parent or concealed lover in the next room.

Poems about paintings may be trying one of several tasks. It is a way to copy and to learn. The young Delacroix copied paintings by Poussin to learn the lessons of that master; in a similar manner, by “describing” a painting a poet may study figurative problems: the composition of subject matter, color, and scale, or the relationship between chance occurrence and formal patterns. Describing is also homage; to trace the beloved’s body is a traditional poetic feat, and a painting is as beguiling as any idealized lip or lash, any fetish. By writing about a contemporary painting, a poet may cannily have found a useful way to let the poem talk about itself. Often, writing about an old painting may prove to be the best way to write about the past, about something at once over with and ongoing, something framed, distanced, even miniaturized.

But this collection offers something more unusual: *prose* by poets about paintings. An altogether different kind of meditation about art, it is more a Continental tradition. There one finds intimacies, not just interpretations. Mallarmé daily visited the studio of his friend Degas. Rilke

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served as Rodin's secretary. In England or America, there is nothing comparable to the extraordinary associations, bridged by prose, of Picasso, Braque, or Matisse with Apollinaire, Éluard, Aragon, Char, Reverdy, Marteau, or du Bouchet. In Spain there is Lorca on Dali; in Latin America, Paz on Duchamp.

Most of the writings of these poets are well known; it is an available tradition. What I have sought to assemble here is the Anglo-American tradition that has paralleled the European. It has been a vital and perhaps unrecognized line of force in the arts. One reason for its neglect is that, by contrast with the other tongues, English is more diffident—not least because it has been used to write about an art that is, so to speak, in a foreign language. Not that “our” art is inferior, but it has seemed so to us, at any rate until the Second World War. The essays in this book abound with French and Italian examples, and a distinct sense of *longing*—of north for south, newer for older, near for far—gives a peculiarly haunted edge to many poets' views. That is a measure, too, of the ways in which English and American poets have in this century opened up our literature to new energies and expropriated for their own use the art of other cultures. Much of the groundwork for those transformations can be discovered in these essays.

The first essay in this book begins, “Two days ago I was at the Tate Gallery.” The last sentence of the final essay ends, “we become part of what we behold.” What are poets looking *at*, looking *for*, when they walk into a room of pictures? Above all, they have their eye on the pictures themselves, on the presence of images, and not on critical fashions. The essays in this book, though sometimes polemical, are rarely theoretical. They avoid both the pedantry of the standard art-historical approach and the fuzziness of conventional “appreciations.” They do not offer, in Robert Frost's phrase, merely “copy speech,” but

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“counter-love, original response.” The poets bring to their task a fresh eye and a freshened language, vivid with nuance and color and force. Their essays are flecked with poetic asides and startlingly apt phrases, as when Frank O’Hara calls Jackson Pollock’s *Number 12* (1952) “a big, brassy gigolo of a painting” or when James Merrill wonders if the women in Corot’s landscapes might be either the last of the Lamias or the first patients of Freud. Image evokes image. Nowhere do we find language about art that is, in Auden’s phrase, “pawed at and gossiped over.” The paintings, whose appeal is that they both instruct and provoke, work on the poets as a continuous inspiration. Stephen Spender speaks in his essay of “a relationship of love and envy between the arts,” and it may be that what focuses the poet’s ambivalent emotions and prompts such brilliant speech is the very silence of the paintings.

At the same time, the poets move quickly to context. The paintings in these pages are part of the culture of objects and icons, the society of connoisseurs and consumers. We are offered several eccentric but compelling “histories” of art, such as Gertrude Stein’s detailed chronicle of her taste and D. H. Lawrence’s inquiry into the industrialization of the human body in painting. Elsewhere a painter is made over, sometimes as a stand-in for the poet, into a type of the bold innovator or of the outsider (Elizabeth Bishop does this). There is an iconography at work too; one can watch, say, St. Cézanne and various donors being painted into the panel depicting the elect.

The point is, the poets are more attracted by the possible meanings of a painting than by the evident means used to make either painting or meaning. The picture as object yields to the subject for interpretation. And the question to ask is, what kind of instruction does the poet seek from the painter’s images? When does the picture become a looking glass? Even before they write about it—and prose brings its

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own set of pressures and reliefs to their writing—the poets have sensed the emblematic value of a picture. First, it represents a portrait of the artist's mind, an image for states of feeling and planes of thought, an embodied temperament. Second, by praising or analyzing the painters, these poets have found a sure way (their objectified correlative, let's say) to describe themselves, or, more generally, to describe the creative process itself. That is one reason prose is appropriate for these meditations: it catches the simmering, explosive, luxuriating moments in transit—the moment before a painting has been made, the moment after it has been seen. Thus enabled to describe a process so visibly and dramatically objectified, the poets take advantage of it. They give themselves the chance to expand on what their eye remarks. Their essays are not just elaborate captions. Sometimes, in fact, it seems the poet wants to replace what he or she sets out to render. This is true with Williams on Matisse and with Kenneth Rexroth on Léger, and the results are a fascinating superimposition. At other times—I am thinking of John Hollander on Thomas Cole—the poet seems, with a wave of the hand, to have removed the film of misconception obscuring an artist's true ambitions.

If this book has a single, or rather a singular, point of reference, it is this: all these essays are—or should properly be read as being—about *style*: the way artists use art and invent it. The “experience” of any artist—painter or poet—consists of what is *in*, not just in front of, the artist's eye. Life and ideas about life; ideas about ideas; the intention to work on art; and what Yeats defines as the only masterpieces—“the old images, the old emotions, awakened again to overwhelming life by the belief and passion of some new soul”: these are what an artist, and in turn an audience, seizes on or is seized by, shapes and is shaped by. And these are the subject of the essays that follow.

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A word about my selection: as I have already explained, my purpose is to reveal a tradition, an extensive and a continuing one. Any specialized view is necessarily narrowed, but for that same reason it is less random, richer, and more representative. For lack of space, not all the poets I would like to have included are here; Isaac Rosenberg, David Jones, Stanley Kunitz, and Paul Goodman are among those excluded. But within the compass of one century and one language there is an extraordinary variety. I have, with an anthologist's open arms, tried to gather several different kinds of poet. Where their literary convictions divide them as poets, the opposing points of view they bring to these essays are often exhilarating. Although roughly chronological, the essays have been pointedly juxtaposed. As the reader would expect, the tone of these pieces is highly personal. Even when whimsical or combative, they display an intense imaginative spirit, fixed on the topic and simultaneously freed by it into an absorbing elegance. That spirit drew me to each essay. They have been culled from their fugitive appearances in newspapers, magazines, catalogues, and books. The living poets have given me their second thoughts; these are included in the brief headnotes to each essay. The result is an anthology of forms of tribute—homage, memoir, anecdote, tirade, full-dress study, and cultural dressing-down. That several poets have written about the same artist, or the same sort of artist, though with different emphases, makes the book a form of conversation. It is a marvelous conversation to overhear. Charles Tomlinson speaks up for this entire meeting of poet with painter, of reader with essayist: "You may write with a pencil, but once you come to draw with it, what a diverse end those marks serve. But the fortuitous element is still there—the element of meeting something you didn't expect, something that isn't yourself."



Paul Gauguin, *Contes barbares*, oil on canvas, 51 x 35 in. Folkwang-Museum, Essen. Photograph Bildarchiv Foto Marburg.