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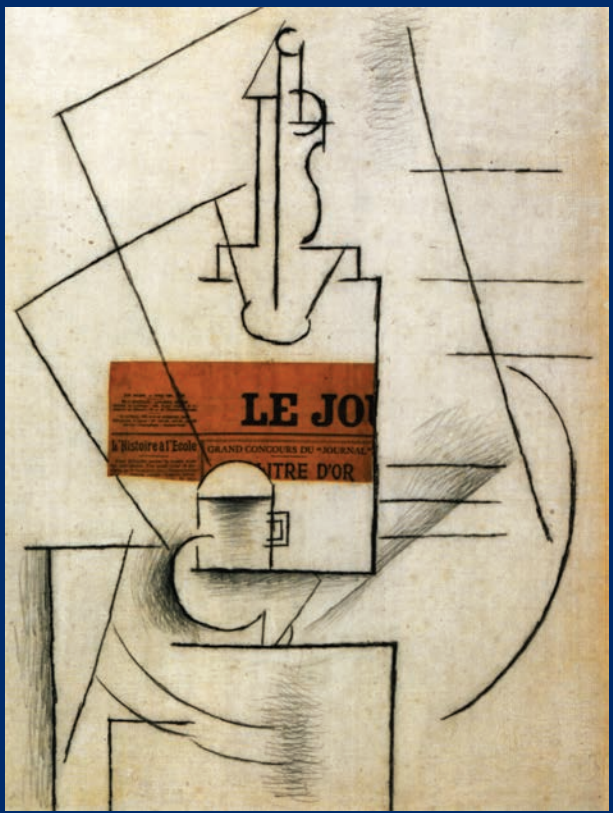


# Aesthetic Rivalries

## Word and Image in France, 1880–1926

Linda Goddard

Peter Lang

# Cultural Interactions: Studies in the Relationship between the Arts

This book explores interaction and competition between painting and literature in France, from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth, offering new readings of works by key figures including Paul Gauguin, Stéphane Mallarmé, Pablo Picasso and André Gide. Combining close visual and literary analysis with a broader examination of critical discourse, the volume uncovers a mutual but often contentious exchange of ideas. The author challenges habits of periodisation, drawing attention to the links between Symbolist and Cubist criticism. Issues such as the debate about 'literary' painting, the role of art criticism and artists' writings, as well as themes such as newspapers and gold, alchemy and forgery, are shown to connect the two centuries. In examining how the rejection of mimesis in painting affected literary responses to the visual arts, the book explores a shift in power from the verbal to the visual in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Linda Goddard is a Lecturer in Art History at the University of St Andrews. She was previously a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the Courtauld Institute of Art, where she completed a PhD in 2004. She is currently working on a book about the writings of Paul Gauguin.

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Aesthetic Rivalries

CULTURAL INTERACTIONS
Studies in the Relationship between the Arts

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Edited by J.B. Bullen

Volume 15

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# Contents

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# Illustrations

INTRODUCTION

# Interchange and Rivalry between the Arts

In 1893, Alphonse Germain, art critic for the Symbolist periodical *Art et critique*, mocked the attempts of literary men to express their thoughts on painting: 'Because they have read a whole library, writers believe themselves readily able to hold forth on anything [...] Alas! Most of them only see paintings and sculptures through their reading'. Literature and painting operated according to such distinct criteria, he explained, that a written account could rarely do justice to a work of visual art:

> Writers talk about painting in the same way that they talk about a book: they borrow their criteria from their own art, an art which has practically no connections with pictorial art. They do not realise [...] that literature evokes images through ideas, by means of *conventional* signs, words; while plastic art can only evoke ideas through images, by means of that *universally* comprehensible sign: Form.[1]

Germain's conviction that 'ideas' are the essence of poetry, 'forms' the substance of painting was central to turn-of-the-century beliefs about the relation between visual art and literature. It appeared to be echoed by Maurice Denis, for example, in an 1895 article recalling the development of Symbolist painting. Referring to the early Synthetist experiments of Paul Gauguin, Emile Bernard and Louis Anquetin, Denis regretted that 'there is a tendency

1 'Parce qu'ils ont lu une bibliothèque, les écrivains se croient facilement aptes à disserter sur tout [...] Las! La plupart ne voient tableaux et statues qu'à travers leurs lectures'. 'Les écrivains parlent d'un tableau de la même façon qu'ils parlent d'un livre: leur criterium, ils l'empruntent à leur art, cet art presque sans rapports avec celui du dessin. Ils ne se rendent pas compte [...] que la littérature évoque des images par des idées, au moyen de signes *conventionnels*, les mots; tandis que la plastique ne peut évoquer des idées que par des images, au moyen de ce signe *oecuméniquement* compréhensible: la Forme'. Germain, 1893, pp. 266–7.

to look for poetic intentions and literary expressions in these paintings' and emphasised instead their purely pictorial concerns: 'They were painters first and foremost. They preferred expression through decoration, form, colour, medium, to expression through subject matter'. Like Germain, Denis deplored the intervention of literary critics: 'young literary men, clever schoolboys, as Gauguin calls them, have taken it upon themselves to discuss painting [...] They have helped to cause the worthy efforts of Pont-Aven School to lapse into literature, into idealist trompe-l'oeil'.[2]

Both Germain and Denis, then, sought to protect visual art from excessive literary influence. However, this shared standpoint masked a crucial difference in opinion. From Germain's perspective, it was the simplified abstraction of Denis, Gauguin and the Pont-Aven school that constituted 'literary' painting, since it privileged theoretical ideas over a respect for natural form. Conversely, for Denis, it was critics like Germain who imposed their 'literary' prejudices on visual art, distorting it with narrative interpretation and demanding that it conform to 'the laws of nature and the Norm of harmony'.[3] If both approved the separation of painterly 'form' from literary 'idea', their understanding of these concepts differed fundamentally.

This book seeks to recover a sense of the competition between painting and writing in *fin-de-siècle* and early twentieth-century France. It contests the widespread view that artists and writers worked harmoniously towards a shared goal of aesthetic synthesis.[4] Instead, it shows how critics presented

2 'on s'est habitué à chercher dans ces peintures des intentions poétiques, des expressions littéraires'. 'Ils étaient peintres avant tout. Ils préféraient l'expression par le décor, la forme, la couleur, la matière employée à l'expression par le sujet'. 'De jeunes littérateurs, des collégiens savants, comme les appelle Gauguin, se sont mêlés de parler peinture [...] Ils ont contribué à faire verser dans la littérature, dans le trompe-l'oeil idéaliste [...] le bel effort de cette Ecole de Pont-Aven'. Denis, 1895, pp. 119, 118.

3 'les lois de la nature et la Norme d'harmonie'. Ibid., p. 118.

4 Most texts addressing nineteenth-century French art and literature from a broad perspective (such as: Goldwater, 1979; Lehmann, 1968; Bowness, 1994; Loevgren, 1971; Rookmaaker, 1959; and Rewald, 1978) concentrate on affiliations between artists and writers, rather than on contemporary perceptions and disputes about the interaction between art forms. Likewise, in her study of Symbolist journals, Genova,

painting as inherently inferior to the non-mimetic form of poetry, and how painters fought back. Modeled on Baudelaire's synaesthestic mingling of the senses in 'Correspondances' (1857) and Téodor de Wyzewa's development of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* theory in *La Revue wagnérienne*, comparisons between the arts were indeed widespread at the turn of the century.[5] However, rather than seeking to unite the common features of each discipline, they tended to promote the 'purest' art form as a model to be emulated by the others. In this way, they reinforced a hierarchy of aesthetic purity, which typically celebrated music as the least mimetic art, and therefore the most autonomous; followed by poetry; while painting remained fundamentally tied to the material world. In their exhibition reviews and theoretical articles, poets and critics repeatedly affirmed that painting was best suited to narrative description, while poetry engaged the imagination.

Accordingly, some critics argued that painting, as an inherently naturalistic art, should not even attempt to emulate the purer disciplines. Writing in *L'Ermitage* in 1894, for example, the critic 'Saint-Antoine' argued that, unlike music, painting's representational qualities rendered it essentially antithetical to Symbolism – a movement predicated on the divorce between art and reality: 'Musical expression is always somehow symbolic, plastic expression never is [...] symbolism is foreign to plastic art because it is as independent as possible from reality'. In his opinion, painting's efforts to cut ties with reality were inadvisable, since 'the plastic arts have everything to fear from literary or philosophical intentions'. Instead, it was the duty of the poet, not the painter, to reveal the significance of an art work: 'It is the poets who discover in retrospect the symbolism of a given

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2002, focuses on connections, rather than rivalries, between the disciplines. Berg, 2007, is less interested in 'boundaries' or 'analogies' between text and image, than in exploring, in a series of case studies, the ideological operations of 'each individual work, whether verbal or visual' (p. 27).

5 The significance of Wyzewa's articles and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* theory for inter-art comparisons has been discussed by Kearns, 1989, pp. 72–4 and Simpson, 1995 and 2000.

portrait or landscape'.[6] As painters at the *fin-de-siècle* increasingly replaced naturalistic depiction with pure harmonies of colour and line, the narrative function of art criticism came under threat. In reaction – as Pierre Bourdieu and Dario Gamboni have shown – art critics, many of whom were themselves poets, adopted a poetic mode of criticism which allowed them to reinforce the sense that painting had simply followed literature in its move away from representation.[7]

However, Saint-Antoine's argument contains an apparent contradiction. While he upheld literature (and music) as superior – able to access a symbolic realm closed to painting – he used the term 'literary' in a distinctly negative sense when describing visual art. Historians have acknowledged this censorious discourse surrounding 'literary' painting, but have not fully explored its paradoxes and inconsistencies. For example, in her book on Symbolist periodicals, Pamela Genova observes:

> Symbolist painters found themselves harshly criticised for the emphasis they placed in their work on the expression of the pure essence of the idea, and they were often accused of dabbling dangerously in the art of literature through the oblique path of colour and line. In fact, the expression 'literary painter' came to be considered from the 1880s as a very derogatory term, used to ridicule the art of the most traditional academic painters whose canvases were described as weak imitations of narrative, anecdotal and derivative.[8]

6 'L'expression musicale est toujours en quelque sorte symbolique, l'expression plastique ne l'est jamais [...] Le symbolisme est étranger à l'art plastique parce qu'il est aussi indépendant que possible de la réalité'; 'les arts plastiques ont tout à redouter de l'intention littéraire ou philosophique'; 'Ce sont les poètes qui trouvent après coup le symbolisme de tel portrait ou de tel paysage'. Mazel (Saint-Antoine), 1894, p. 335.

7 Bourdieu, 1994, and Dario Gamboni, '"Après le régime du Sabre le régime de l'homme de lettres", la critique d'art comme pouvoir et comme enjeu', in Bouillon, 1989, pp. 205–20. See also Kearns, 1989. A number of other studies have traced the ways in which factors such as the expansion of the press, the diversification of exhibiting institutions and stylistic changes in visual art consolidated and shaped art criticism as a professional field in nineteenth-century France. See: White and White, 1965; Orwicz, 1994; and Gee, 1993.

8 Genova, 2002, p. 164.

Genova alludes here to two conflicting interpretations of 'literary' painting, but elides the distinction between them. On the one hand, as we have seen, painter-theorists such as Denis used the term 'literary' to criticise painting that relied on anecdotal narrative or on the mimetic representation of nature. On the other hand, writers like Germain or Saint-Antoine used the same term to denote a style of painting that supposedly infringed on the literary domain by subordinating narrative to formal concerns.[9]

To avoid the negative associations of 'literary' painting (however they understood it) critics distinguished between the 'literary' and the more positive concept of the 'poetic'. However, the latter term was equally open to interpretation and manipulation.[10] For those writers who, unlike Germain or Saint-Antoine, supported rather than condemned the move away from naturalism in painting, comparisons with poetry allowed them to maintain the superiority of their own art form while liberating painting from a purely descriptive function. This resulted, in the writing of critics such as Albert Aurier or Charles Morice, in a kind of 'verbal imperialism' that subsumed painting within the all-encompassing vision of poetry. On the other hand, as we shall see, painters themselves frequently adopted the idea of 'visual poetry' to describe a type of painting whose non-mimetic colour harmonies, they argued, had greater immediacy and autonomy than any form of verbal expression. In this context, the term 'poetry' no longer had specifically literary connotations, but was appropriated by painters who sought to demonstrate the inherent superiority of their own discipline.

9 Junod, 1994, surveys the pejorative connotations of 'literary' painting from the Renaissance to the Surrealist period but only insofar as it denotes a style that is representational, narrative, anecdotal, philosophical, and so on (i.e. painting with literary 'content'). Only Kearns, 1989, p. 55, pinpoints the rationale for contradictory definitions of the term: 'Differences between Symbolist painters and writers concerning definitions of literary painting implied differences between them in their attitudes to the role of subject-matter and its relationship to the expressive potential of formal elements'.

10 Bright, 1985, describes how, from the eighteenth century onwards, the term 'poetry' expanded to encompass 'the intellectual or emotional essence common to all art' (p. 259). On the negative / positive distinction between 'literary' and 'poetic' painting, see also Junod, 1994, pp. 119, 126.

I argue that such ambiguities in critical vocabulary reveal points of contention that complicate traditional narratives of art's progress towards abstraction. While studies of the Symbolist and Cubist movements have frequently described affiliations between artists and writers, few have explored how the relationship between art and literature was theorised in contemporary critical accounts.[11] Chronicles of Symbolist and post-Symbolist aesthetic debate in the *petites revues* have mostly taken the form of general overviews and have focused primarily on literary concerns.[12] Modernist accounts reiterated writers' claims to precedence by privileging the authority of poetic theory over formal developments in painting.[13] This emphasis on literary influence encouraged the view that poetry at the turn of the century was an inherently less material art form. For example, tracing the historical links between French painting and literature, Etienne Souriau declared that, in the Symbolist period, 'poetry seems to leave painting behind, because it

11 Studies of the relations between art and literature in France have primarily taken the form of collected essays, such as Collier and Lethbridge, 1994. Although this multi-author volume improves on the literary bias of earlier anthologies, such as Finke, 1972, and Haskell, 1974, its scope is necessarily limited to isolated case studies, the majority of which emphasise collaboration rather than tension between the arts. Edited volumes on text and image (and more broadly intermedial) relations have proliferated recently, and tend to be chronologically and geographically wide-ranging: witness the regular proceedings of the International Association of Word and Image Studies (IAWIS). Recent examples with a focus on France include Maurer and Hillman, 2006, and Game, 2007.

12 See Décaudin, 1960 and Biétry, 1989; Genova, 2002, deals more explicitly with interdisciplinarity, and notes the 'subtle tensions and even dramatic conflicts' that arose as 'both poets and painters worked to safeguard their own autonomy' (p. 161), but the broad scope of her study leads her to concentrate primarily on key figures and publications, rather than on debates and rivalries.

13 Referring to Gauguin's attendance at the literary gatherings at the Café Voltaire upon his return to Paris from Brittany in 1890, Rewald, 1978, p. 421, proposes that 'Gauguin needed this stimulus to clarify his own ideas, to sharpen them in contact with highly articulate intelligences'. Similarly, Gamwell, 1977, p. 5, argues that 'The Symbolist poets in Mallarmé's circle provided the ideological background for a generation of late nineteenth-century artists' who 'adopted the poet's desire for the interrelation of the arts'.

has itself become a kind of super-painting, an entirely spiritualised painting, which no longer but dreams of visual appearances, and transcends them.'[14] Subsequent attempts to accord equal status to the two art forms by stressing their 'shared theoretical positions, social and political concerns, artistic goals and intentions, and even stylistic approaches' have tended to understate interdisciplinary rivalry in the interests of asserting a unified aesthetic position.[15]

There are notable exceptions. In recent years, a number of monographs have tackled the problematic confrontation between word and image in relation to individual artists or writers.[16] This book expands this interdisciplinary approach to cover a wider range of interlocutors, assessing patterns and developments in relations between the arts across several decades. The few books that have addressed the question of how contemporary critics constructed hierarchies between the arts from a broader perspective have concentrated exclusively on the mid to late nineteenth century.[17] David Scott has shown how, in the Romantic period, writers such as Théophile Gauthier, Victor Cousin and Théodore Jouffroy employed fashionable theories of aesthetic synthesis to assert the universal properties of poetry. In his *Cours de philosophie* (1828), for example, Cousin praised poetry's ability to assimilate other art forms: 'With words, poetry can paint and sculpt; it constructs buildings like the architect; it imitates, up to a point, the melody of music. It is, in other words, the centre where all the arts reunite'.[18] Théodore de Banville followed Cousin's formula very closely when he argued that poetry embraced the properties of all other art forms:

14 'la poésie semble abandoner derrière elle la peinture, parce qu'elle est devenue elle-même une sorte de super-peinture, de peinture entièrement spiritualisée, qui ne fait plus que rêver des apparences visuelles, et les transcende'. Souriau, 1966, p. 28.

15 Hirsch, 1985, p. 95.

16 Notably Gamboni, 1989; Hannoosh, 1995; Tooke, 2000; and Cooke, 2003.

17 Scott, 1988 and 1994; Kearns, 1989 and 1994.

18 'Avec la parole, la poésie arrive à peindre et à sculpter; elle construit des édifices comme l'architecte; elle imite jusqu'à un certain point la mélodie de la musique. Elle est, pour ainsi dire, le centre où se réunissent tous les arts'. Victor Cousin, *Cours de philosophie... sur le fondement des idées absolues du Vrai, du Beau et du Bien*, Paris: Hachette, 1936, p. 290, cited in Scott, 1988, p. 13.

'poetry is at once music, sculpture, painting, eloquence; it must delight the ear, captivate the spirit, convey sounds, imitate colours, bring objects to life [...] as a result it is the only art that is complete, essential, and encompasses all others'.[19]

As James Kearns has demonstrated, this model of poetic prestige was adopted by writers later in the century. Thus in 1886, Léo d'Orfer likewise celebrated the supremacy of poetry: 'it embodies them all, music through rhythm and cadence, painting through lively and colourful description, sculpture through the hewn marble of poems, architecture through the monumental structure of the works.'[20] Three years later, Charles Morice praised poetry on similar grounds: 'Let us skip the never-ending discussion about which of the arts is the greatest and get straight to the point: let first place go to the one that raises itself up closest to that original point to which all others must return: Thought; and closest to thought is the one that expresses itself most precisely. That is obviously poetry'.[21] My investigation charts a growing line of resistance to this prioritization of poetry over painting by emphasizing the role played by *artists* as well as writers in formulating comparisons between the arts. I carry this analysis through into the early decades of the twentieth century, asking how the rejection of mimesis in painting affected literary responses to the visual arts.

In weighing the relative merits of their respective art forms, poets and painters drew on and adapted an ancient and prevailing fascination with the connection between word and image. It is worth reiterating the key

19 'la poésie est à la fois musique, statuaire, peinture, éloquence; elle doit charmer l'oreille, enchanter l'esprit, représenter les sons, imiter les couleurs, rendre les objets visibles [...] aussi est-elle le seul art complet, nécessaire, et qui contienne tous les autres'. Théodore de Banville, *Petit Traité de poésie française*, Paris: Librarie de l'écho de la Sorbonne, 1872, p. 8, cited in Scott, 1994, p. 70.

20 'elle les résume tous, la musique par le rythme et la cadence, la peinture par la description vive et colorée, la sculpture par la taille du marbre des poèmes, l'architecture par la composition monumentale des oeuvres'. Léo d'Orfer, 'La Grande Marotte', *Le Scapin*, 16 October 1886, p. 91, cited in Kearns, 1989, p. 55.

21 'Evitons la sempiternelle discussion de la précellence des arts entre eux; tranchons-vite: que celui-là soit le premier qui s'élève au plus près de ce point de départ où il faudra que tous reviennent: la Pensée; et celui-là est le plus près de la pensée qui parle la plus précise parole. C'est évidemment la poésie'. Morice, April 1889, p. 28.

turning points in this debate here, despite its familiarity, since it provided a crucial frame of reference for commentators at the turn of the century. The parallel between poetry and painting has been evoked since antiquity, most famously in the Horatian analogy 'ut pictura poesis' ('as is painting, so is poetry'), and in a similar phrase attributed to the Greek lyric poet Simonides, who is reported to have declared that 'Poetry is a speaking picture, painting a mute poetry'.[22] Both Horace and Simonides based their comparison between the arts on the Aristotelian concept of mimesis. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defined the poet as 'an imitator, exactly like a painter or any other maker of images' and argued that the sister arts shared the purpose of mimicking nature and human action as closely as possible.[23] Although they usually took the statements of Simonides and Horace out of context, writers in the Renaissance and neoclassical periods frequently evoked the classical tradition of 'ut pictura poesis' in order to reinforce the common mimetic function of painting and literature.[24]

Despite the popularity of inter-art comparisons, however, the parallel between painting and poetry did not go unchallenged. Those who criticised the concept of 'ut pictura poesis' focused on the formal differences between the two disciplines. They argued that painting and poetry used different *means* of imitating reality and that, therefore, each art was better suited to representing different aspects of human experience. In his *Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo da Vinci took issue with Simonides's description of painting as a 'mute poetry', retorting: 'If you call painting mute poetry, poetry can also be called blind painting. Now think, which is the more damaging affliction, that of the blind man, or that of the mute? [...] If the poet serves the senses

22 Horace makes the comparison 'ut pictura poesis' in his *Ars Poetica* (c. 19 BC) and Plutarch cites Simonides of Ceos [c. 556–c. 467 BC] in *De Gloria Atheniensium*, Lee, 1967, p. 3. On the 'ut pictura poesis' analogy and its influence, see also Hagstrum, 1958, and Schweizer, 1972.

23 Aristotle, *Poetics* (c. 330 BC), 1982 edn, p. 74.

24 For an analysis of the legacy of 'ut pictura poesis' in the French context, see: Souriau, 1966; Abel, 1980; Scott, 1988; and Jonker, 1994. Scott, 1988, p. 5, notes: 'neoclassical theorists used [Horace's] phrase to express the idea of the fundamental similarity of poetry and painting's aims. Both were seen as being essentially descriptive arts, the function of which was to imitate "Nature" [...] or "heroic" action'.

by way of the ear, the painter does so by way of the eye, a worthier sense'. Leonardo believed that painting was the highest of all art forms, superior even to poetry, because it relied on the faculty of sight. While the painter could capture a true likeness in a single moment, the poet was obliged to reconstruct the scene in a lengthy description: 'The poet, in describing the beauty or ugliness of a body, will describe it to you part by part and at different times, but the painter will make you see it all at the same time'.[25]

As an emphasis on idealised imitation gave way to a focus on the imagination in the Romantic period, challenges to the parallel between painting and poetry increased.[26] In his 1766 study *Laokoön* (French translation 1802), the German writer Gotthold Lessing adapted Leonardo's division between poetry and painting along temporal and spatial lines, but shifted the focus to the merits of word rather than image. Comparing the ancient Greek statue, showing the Trojan priest Laocoon and his sons being crushed to death by serpents, to Virgil's account of the event in *The Aeneid*, Lessing's study contested the equality of the arts and explored the different functions of visual and verbal expression. He argued that the purpose of painting was to depict static objects in space, while poetry had the capacity to express the invisible. Since the sculptors had at their disposal only one frozen moment in which to portray Laocoon's demise, they rightly chose to mitigate the hero's pain in order to depict instead a moment of ideal beauty. Virgil, on the other hand, was not limited by any temporal restrictions and was therefore at liberty to convey Laocoon's agony, since he could set it in the context of a narrative sequence of events. Like Leonardo, Lessing saw that painting compressed simultaneous actions into a single image, concluding that 'succession in time is the province of the poet, coexistence in space that of the artist'.[27] However, whereas Leonardo presented this as evidence of painting's superior creative powers, Lessing saw it as a limitation. If the noble beauty of Laocoon's expression could stimulate the viewers' imagination, their full comprehension of his plight depended on their knowledge of the legend.

25 Leonardo da Vinci (compiled posthumously, c. 1550), 1956 edn, pp. 18, 27.
26 Steiner, 1982, p. 14.
27 Lessing (1766), 1910 edn, p. 145.

A common thread connects these reinterpretations of the 'ut pictura poesis' formula: whether in favour of painting (Leonardo) or poetry (Lessing), the basic *paragone* relies on the notion that visual images are 'natural' signs while words are 'artificial' ones. To some extent, this essential division has continued to influence modern thinking on the subject.[28] However, it came under intense pressure during the period addressed in this book, as painters increasingly refused to conform to the demands of naturalistic representation. Lessing's rigid classifications of visual and verbal expression have also lost much of their authority in an art-historical context, as scholars have drawn attention to the spatial and synthetic potential of verse and to the impact of visual images on the imagination over time.[29] Furthermore, the recognition that visual images, no less than words, bear an entirely conventional and therefore artificial relationship to objective reality has radically undermined the concept of painting as inherently mimetic that underpins Lessing's argument.[30] Post-structuralist approaches to visual art have brought text and image closer together by analysing painting as a kind of visual language in which the correlation between signifier and signified is mediated by an entirely arbitrary system of signs.[31]

However, if the separation of image and word according to a system of 'natural' and 'conventional' signs no longer seems tenable in the current critical climate, it nonetheless remained, as we have seen, a dominant paradigm for writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is therefore important, when making a historical assessment of interdisciplinary debate in this period, to avoid superimposing retrospective re-evaluations of the relationship between visual and verbal media onto the *fin-de-siècle* context. In his comparative study of the emergence of autonomous literary

28 Even Scott, 1988, p. 36, concludes that 'In a sense, of course, each poet is nearer to the "spiritual" than the painter: language allows the writer to leave the literal world of objects and move into the realm of ideas'.

29 See: Steiner, 1982; Mitchell, 1986; Scott, 1988; and Khalfa, 2001.

30 In his chapter 'Nature and Convention: Ernst Gombrich', Mitchell, 1986, explores the influence and limitations of Gombrich's criticism, in *Art and Illusion* (1956) of the 'nature-convention distinction'.

31 See, for example, Bois, 1993.

and artistic 'fields' in the late nineteenth century, Pierre Bourdieu proposes that, in contrast to painters, 'writers were more directly subject to demands to deliver a "message" since, as employers of language, it was more difficult for them to revoke all communicative function'.[32] From the perspective of an era that has witnessed the development of abstract art this may seem persuasive, but Bourdieu underestimates the extent to which demands for pictorial legibility persisted, even among critics sympathetic to the anti-literary objectives of Symbolist painters.

In this sense, his analysis fits into a tradition of teleological narratives, in which the Symbolist and Cubist movements are seen to point directly towards twentieth-century 'abstraction', at least, as Dee Reynolds suggests, 'in theory if not in practice'.[33] In stressing the 'continuity of Symbolism and abstraction', Reynolds reiterates the linear model of literary influence advanced by writers at the turn of the century, locating the theoretical origins of 'abstract' painting in the Symbolist poetry of Verlaine and Mallarmé.[34] Such accounts ironically attribute visual art's emancipation from the 'literary' to the influence of literature itself, which provides a model for the possibility of abstraction: so that the visual circumvents the verbal only to be absorbed by it again.[35] However, while critics at the turn of the century did use the terms 'abstraction' and 'abstract' repeatedly in their theoretical statements, their specific implications should not be confused with the complete absence of representation implied by the Modernist use of the term. Instead, contemporary references to 'abstraction' adhered to a neoplatonic discourse of transcendence, in which 'pure' combinations of colours and forms pointed to a higher meaning beyond surface appearances.[36]

32 Bourdieu, 1994, p. 34.

33 Reynolds, 1995, p. 33.

34 Ibid., p. 27.

35 Referring to Mieke Bal's and Norman Bryson's 1991 article, 'Semiotics and Art History', in which they present semiotics as a 'transdisciplinary theory' that 'helps to avoid the bias of privileging language' (Bal and Bryson, 1991, p. 175), Mitchell, 1994, p. 99, n. 31, contends that they 'underestimate [...] the extent to which semiotics privileges textual / linguistic descriptive frameworks. Far from avoiding "the bias of privileging language", semiotics continually reinstates that bias.'

36 As Cheetham, 1991, p. 35, has shown, 'the "purity" of Platonism differs crucially from the formal "purity" that, following Clement Greenberg, we commonly take to be central in the definition of Modernism'.

In accordance with their emphasis on aesthetic purity or 'abstraction', artists sought to liberate themselves, not only from narrative subject matter, but also from the 'literary' analyses of art critics. They resisted critical interpretations of their art by insisting that their motivations were exclusively formal. Yet too often art historians conflate this desire for pictorial autonomy with what they perceive to be a deliberately anti-intellectual approach and a natural aversion to theory. For example, Linda Henderson is at pains to distinguish the 'purely painterly interests' of Picasso and Braque from the literary preoccupations of the 'intellectual' Puteaux Cubists, who were 'deeply concerned with theories of painting' and 'very interested in contemporary literary ideas'.[37] Arthur Cohen, editor of the translated writings of Robert and Sonia Delaunay, is (paradoxically) thankful that the Delaunays were 'spared' the humiliation of publication. Noting that 'language is as much a craft as painting, and fluent artists are not infrequently inept speakers', he adds: 'Matisse's dictum that artists should have their tongues cut out comes to mind'.[38] Yet, on closer inspection, such denials of literary expertise are contradicted by ample evidence of artists' theoretical awareness.[39] Following W.J.T. Mitchell's advice that we aim 'not to heal the split between words and images, but to see what interests and powers it serves',[40] I argue that this anti-intellectual posturing was a rhetorical strategy designed to manipulate critical response and subvert literary dominance. When taken at face value, it obscures the substantial contributions that artists made to aesthetic debate, whether through their own theoretical statements, or through their communication with literary colleagues. By exploring the cross-disciplinary activities and influences of Mallarmé, Gauguin, Picasso and Gide, this study aims to break down artificial divisions between the 'purely painterly' preoccupations of visual artists and the transcendent, intellectual pursuits of writers.

37 Henderson, 1983, pp. 66–7.

38 Cohen, 1978, p. xiv.

39 Exceptions to this dismissal of artists' literary activities include Kearns, 1989, Gamboni, '"Après le régime du Sabre le régime de l'homme de lettres", la critique d'art comme pouvoir et comme enjeu', in: Bouillon, 1989, pp. 205–20; Cheetham, 1991; and Hobbs, 1977 and 1996.

40 Mitchell, 1986, p. 44.

The first chapter analyses interdisciplinary debate in the late nineteenth century, particularly as it centred on the critical reception of Gauguin's work, and uncovers the extent to which theories of aesthetic synthesis depended upon the subordination of visual art. As the expression of symbolic 'Ideas' supplanted narrative content in both painting and poetry, rivalry between the arts focused on the distinction between pictorial form and poetic *Idée*. A comparison between the work of Gauguin and Mallarmé shows how, in both cases, a tension between purely formal harmonies of colour or sound and extrinsic 'literary' references complicated this distinction. This sets the context for a case study, in Chapter 2, of Gauguin's fictional Tahitian memoir *Noa Noa*, whose self-consciously 'anti-literary' stance was, I argue, informed by these debates. Scholars have treated Gauguin's writing as primarily autobiographical or exegetical. Drawing out the tensions engendered by its relationship with the paintings it describes, I propose that *Noa Noa* functioned less as an explanatory guide than as a means for Gauguin to provoke his European audiences through a contradictory practice of concealment and revelation.

Gauguin's plea for pictorial autonomy failed to reverse the paradigm of literary supremacy in the early years of the twentieth century. In Chapter 3, I examine how the antagonistic confrontation between the visual and the verbal evolved, and ultimately persisted, in Cubist criticism. The theoretical formulation of a 'conceptual' understanding of reality facilitated painting's progression beyond the realm of surface appearances, into an intellectual domain commonly reserved for poetry. As in the Symbolist period, this led detractors to categorise paintings in which natural objects were notably distorted as overly intellectualised or abstract. Conversely, others championed Cubism's rejection of natural appearances as an indication of painting's growing autonomy, and dismissed conventional depiction as 'literary'. I consider how Cubism's theoretical approach and increasingly non-mimetic formal innovations challenged the ascendancy of literature, while continuing to encourage comparisons with Mallarmé.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore how the themes of gold, alchemy and forgery connect the work of Mallarmé, Picasso and Gide. My analysis develops and critiques the parallels between art, language and economics constructed

by Jean-Joseph Goux and Rosalind Krauss.[41] It contests their opposition between the 'purity' of the non-representational sign, found in Mallarmé's poetry and, for Krauss, in Picasso's *papiers collés* – which is paralleled by the abstract token of the modern economy – and the 'fraudulence' of Gide's attempt to produce an 'abstract' novel in *Les Faux-monnayeurs* (1926). Instead, it argues that all three sought a balance between representation and abstraction that is symbolised by the constant interplay in their work between the emblems of 'newspaper' (the reporter's reality) and 'gold' (the artist's alchemy). Examining the crossover between these symbols, it shows how this juxtaposition destabilized the conventional boundaries between 'high' and 'low', transcendence and materiality; and correspondingly between word and image.

The impact of non-mimetic art on the theme of aesthetic autonomy in Gide's novel indicates the beginning of a shift in the interdisciplinary hierarchy, which I address in the coda. From 1912, the emphasis on simultaneity as an aesthetic and philosophical ideal encouraged poets to emulate the immediacy of the visual image, while critics stressed the increasing influence of visual art on emerging literary movements, leading, for example, to the concept of 'literary Cubism'. Both the unifying principle of simultaneity and the interdisciplinary connotations of 'literary Cubism' suggest an ideal fusion of word and image. However, as in the Symbolist period, this model of aesthetic interaction was compromised by disputes that hinged on a long-standing rivalry between the disciplines. Appealing to traditional distinctions between the spatial art of painting and the temporal art of poetry, painters and poets continued to fight for supremacy. This concluding discussion of interdisciplinary rivalries ties together various thematic threads – references to the authority of Mallarmé, hierarchical syntheses of the arts, and definitions of literary painting – in my investigation of the mutual, but always competitive, exchange of ideas between artists and writers.

41 Goux, 1994; Krauss, 1998.

CHAPTER 1

# Hierarchies of the Senses in Symbolist Criticism

## Birds of a Feather? Gauguin's Ambivalent Relationship with Literary Symbolism

Shortly before his departure for Tahiti, Gauguin completed portraits of two Symbolist writers, Stéphane Mallarmé and Jean Moréas, who had been influential in raising his profile among art critics and the literary community.[1] Situated ambiguously between homage and parody, both portraits combine caricatured features with a dense symbolic iconography attesting to Gauguin's knowledge of literary Symbolism (see figs 1 and 2). Mallarmé and Moréas are both positioned in three-quarter profile, their features enlarged and the curls of their generous moustaches particularly prominent. In each case, the facial feature that Gauguin has chosen to exaggerate most connects the poet to a feathered companion who hovers in the background: Moréas's huge eyes are mirrored in the plumes of the peacock that clutches in its beak a collection of verse by the poet, *Cantilènes* (1886), while Mallarmé's pointed ears reflect the sharp beak of the raven behind his head, alluding both to his own poem *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1876) and to his 1875 translation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*. The portrait of Moréas appeared in a special edition of *La Plume* devoted to the poet in January 1891, while that of Mallarmé was proposed – though not accepted – for another special issue of the same journal the following year.[2] Yet despite these points of comparison, the two images are markedly

1 An earlier version of part of this chapter was first published as 'Birds of a Feather? Gauguin's Ambivalent Relationship with Literary Symbolism', in *immediations*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2005, pp. 55–72.

2 Brettell et al., 1988, p. 200.

different in tone, the caricature of Mallarmé far more delicate, thoughtful and affectionate. When read in terms of Gauguin's sympathies with the differing theoretical positions of their subjects, these ambivalent portrayals shed light on his deeply involved but defiant relationship with Symbolism as a literary movement.

1891 marked both the apotheosis and the demise of Symbolism: at the beginning of the year Jules Huret's series of interviews with writers for *L'Echo de Paris* signalled public acceptance of the movement, but by the end of the year few of its former adherents were willing to accept the label.[3] The lively power struggles that marked the birth of Symbolism, 'from the ashes' of the Decadents, ensured that the movement was determined more by a competitive drive to challenge the status quo than by a cohesive philosophy.[4] 'Pure' Symbolists battled against Decadents, Deliquescents and Instrumentists in the mass of literary periodicals that jostled for attention in an elite market fuelled by rivalry.[5] Sarcastic observations about the proliferation of rival aesthetic parties outweighed declarations of allegiance. In the periodical *Chimère*, 'Roustoubique' summarized the contents of the review *La Libre Critique* as a blend of 'Symbolist rhubarb', 'Decadent senna', 'Parnassian pear' and 'Realist cheese'.[6] One year later, Anatole Baju, former editor of *Le Décadent*, lamented the divisiveness of the literary world in his pamphlet *L'Anarchie littéraire*: 'Symbolism is dying, *Magnificisme* is vegetating, *Magisme* is rambling, and Romanism is hopelessly restless [...]. It's chaos, it's a confusion of ideas, it's literary anarchy'.[7]

3 Huret, 1891.

4 'Les ex-décadents surent des cendres de la décadence, tirer un phénix bien-venu qui s'appela le Symbolisme'. Godeau, 1890, p. 139.

5 Léon Deschamps, editor of *La Plume*, estimated in 1893 that there were 150 *petites revues* in Paris at the time (Deschamps, 1893, p. 113). In 1900, Remy de Gourmont compiled a selective list of 130 periodicals and guessed that there had been at least 100 new *revues* between 1890 and 1898 (de Gourmont, 1900, p. 1).

6 'rhubarbe symboliste', 'séné décadent', 'poire parnassienne', 'fromage réaliste', Roustoubique, 1891, p. 103.

7 'le Symbolisme agonise, le Magnificisme végète, le Magisme divague, et le Romanisme s'agite désespérément [...]. C'est la chaos, c'est la fermentation des idées, c'est l'anarchie littéraire', Baju, 1892, p. 33.

The particular version of Symbolism presented by the special edition of *La Plume* should be seen against this background of factionalism and one-upmanship. Five years before the journal dedicated this issue to 'the Symbolism of Jean Moréas' the daily newspaper *Le Figaro* had published the poet's manifesto, 'Symbolism'. Its timing was calculated with maximum impact to steal the limelight from rival poet René Ghil, whose recent treatise on French poetry, *Le Traité du verbe* (1886), had been endorsed with a preface from Mallarmé. Moréas, in turn, modeled his own aesthetic doctrine on Mallarmé's devotion to the *Idée* in poetry. Essentially a reaction against the descriptive detail and lowly subject matter of Naturalism, Symbolist poetry, according to Moréas, 'seeks to clothe the idea in a tangible form which, however, will not be a goal in itself, but, while serving to express the idea, will remain subordinate to it'.[8]

Critics in the broadsheet press and the periodicals of rival literary groups had immediately rounded on the manifesto and dismissed Moréas as a 'charlatan', but his fortunes were now reversed as *La Plume* definitively crowned him *chef d'école*.[9] The special edition opens with an article by Anatole France, whose description of Moréas as 'a young Homer leading his young Homeridae', and his work, 'highly celebrated in this Latin land', places him firmly within the Greco-Roman tradition on which Moréas would soon base his Ecole romane française.[10] A former detractor, France had been among those who had reacted with venom to Moréas's manifesto in 1886, denouncing the 'profound obscurity' of Symbolist poetry.[11] However, by praising Moréas in 1891, he was not altogether renouncing his former position, for it was the poet's ability to combine innovation in

8 'cherche à vêtir l'idée d'une forme sensible qui, néanmoins, ne serait pas son but à elle-même, mais qui, tout en servant à exprimer l'idée, demeurerait sujette'. Jean Moréas, 'Le Symbolisme. Manifeste de Jean Moréas', *Le Figaro*, 18 September 1886, in Pakenham, 1973, p. 33.

9 'fumiste', A.F. Claveau, 'Les Décadents', *Le Gaulois*, 22 September 1886, in Pakenham, 1973, p. 44. See ibid., p. xix, for details of further attacks.

10 'un jeune Homère conduisant ses jeunes homérides', 'hautement célébrée dans le pays latin', France, 1891, pp. 1–4 (first published in *Le Temps*, 21 December 1890).

11 'obscurité profonde', France, 1886, p. 2.