

THE ART OF JACKSON POLLOCK* Man Restored to the Web

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I hope that, over the course of these essays, at least one valuable recognition will have come to light. And that recognition involves the role of metaphor in art. Those artists I have discussed have been concerned, above all else, somehow to establish their work as a metaphor for the largest orientation which man construes—that orientation by which he understands and governs the world around him, by which he actually determines his own relationship with the matrix of conditions that encompass him. This orientation has, historically, been referred to as «reality».

We are, of course, constantly shaping, revising, or even destroying that orientation. For man, as far as can be known, is the only creature in nature with a highly innovative intelligence, an intelligence whose mandate it is to expand. And this aspect of man's being perpetually changes his knowledge of the world in which he participates, permitting him, as he chooses, to extend his mastery of the physical environment. Those changes which he works on the world, in turn, redound upon the maker, and lead to changes in himself, as well. Eventually, this autonomous cycle of change necessitates a large-scale reorientation, a reconstruction of the general framework he uses to understand how the two, man and world, relate. And it is that relationship that composes what is real.

All authentic knowledge, all valid understanding, is perhaps, as Heidegger suggests, tautological. For the great thrust of intelligence is directed toward uncovering the mystery of the conditions that surround us, discovering what things are. Certainly, once having discovered what things are, we are faced with the more intoxicating prospect of manipulating them to serve our own ends, a capacity which has led to such diverse accomplishments as the surgical laser, the manned space

* The reader is referred to my article, «The Mind behind the Trilogy-Revealing the Voice of the Void», *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 12 (April 1986), pp. 97-111, of which this essay is a direct continuation. My understanding of Jackson Pollock's accomplishment grew from my understanding of the Beckett Trilogy. A deeper appreciation of the present essay, therefore, will depend upon some familiarity with the previous one.

vehicle, and the nuclear ballistic missile. Thus, by discovering what things are, man, at the same time, fulfills his unique role in nature by modifying what *he* is, or, to a certain degree, creating (or destroying) himself.

Therefore, it can never be considered merely fatuous, nor irresponsible, to emphasize the tautological nature of the real. It is imperative for us, now, to understand man as one component of all that is, as one particular entity, one among many, suspended and enmeshed in the web of an environment which provides him his existence. Such an understanding is one possible way of thinking, one which we may choose, or not. It is, however, an orientation which could restore us to the future, in that it gives us to know that whatever we do to our world, we do to ourselves, as well. Is this what our artists, painfully —perhaps even unconsciously— working their way toward a new world-view, have been trying to express? As Heidegger says. «What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way. This circle of understanding is...the expression of the existential *fore-structure* of *Dasein* itself [that is, the being of man]...In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing»¹.

I have previously cited Morse Peckham's hypothesis that art performs a biological role—that the making of art is a functional behavior, in that it constitutes a rehearsal of possible orientations. It is this rehearsal which prepares human thinking to make significant innovations in its historical orientation within the world. Now, perhaps, we are ready to make a slight modification of this idea with the obvious suggestion that art is always, fundamentally, the projection of metaphor.

The urge to make art, in this sense, epitomizes human thought. For thought itself transcends the individual. It is, of necessity, a communal phenomenon which depends, for its manifestation, on the exercise of language. And any language which is complex enough to permit innovation must be a system of metaphors. That which we know, then —beyond mere sensory data— we actually know through metaphor. This is what is meant when we say that the act of thinking alters the environment. For when any phenomenon enters the realm of human thought, it is taken beyond itself and assumes an identity, for thought, within the great unified system of that which is known. Metaphor, then, is the mode itself of thinking. And the act of thinking is a form of transcendence which converts that which is, in itself, into something else, something that takes its place within the abstract realm of knowledge, the composite system of the known. Through metaphor we elaborate our sense of the real.

At a time when our transcendental orientation, our sense of reality, is stable, then art projects more or less easily comprehensible metaphors of that stabilized sense of the real. But at a time like the present, when our most fundamental concepts are having to be re-structured, when the need to express, to project human experience and to define what we are, has no controlling, overall framework, our artists are compelled to project metaphors which are mysterious, unsettling—metaphors of the unknown. Such projections are, as Peckham postulates, essays,

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 195.

«rehearsals» for new orientations, since for us, as perceivers, they offer an opportunity, through creative interpretation, to orientate ourselves before alternative forms of the real.

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Is this an explanation of the phenomenon of non-objective art? For what can pure abstraction be, if not the embodiment of the innate human need to express, dissociated from any controlling metaphor? Instead of *re*-presenting a system of objectively agreed-upon metaphors (a prime example would be the convention of classical perspective), the non-objective artist confronts us with an unfamiliar field of sensory data which elicits our need to inform the unknown with order. Non-figurative painting, then, might be considered an outgrowth of the twentieth century's tendency to primitivism in art, since its ultimate effect, apparently, is to take us beyond any historically elaborated orientations and to restore the human mind to its primordial relationship with the complex environment of natural forces. Literally, it places us, once more, before a disturbing, as yet unstructured world.

We have already seen that Samuel Beckett, by the time of his trilogy, had a deep understanding of this function of abstract art. Indeed, the mysterious relationship between Moran and Molloy can be taken as a metaphor of the conscious mind and its essential need to *construct* meaning from the welter of experience. Moran, in his search for Molloy, personifies the drive to establish meaning, and certainly, in a shifting morass of forces and events that cannot be perfectly known, or controlled. Moran himself, we might recall, has an innate awareness of the essentially *mysterious* character of the world in which he moves. Before he carries out his «missions», which consist, in effect, of distinguishing figure from ground, he sometimes has a disquieting vision:

All is dark, but with that simple darkness that follows like a balm upon the great disrememberings. From their places masses move, stark as laws. Masses of what? One does not ask. There somewhere man is too, vast conglomerate of all of nature's kingdoms, as lonely and as bound. And in that black the prey is lodged and thinks himself a being apart...I get up, go out, and everything is changed. The blood drains from my head, the noise of things bursting, merging, avoiding one another, assails me on all sides, my eyes search in vain for two things alike, each pinpoint of skin screams a different message. I drown in the spray of phenomena².

Now this is a masterful description of the sensory data that abstract art confronts us with. It is, at the same time, a description of the confusion of natural phenomena before they are ordered by the mind. But Moran, since he embodies the directed function of consciousness, dismisses this insight into nature as an illusion. And that is his fatal flaw. By choosing to adhere to a strict empiricism, like Watt before

² Samuel Beckett, *The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1979), p. 102.

him, he destroys himself. For the point of the novel *Molloy* is that man is suspended in a non-human world, and this chaos is therefore a part of his constitution. Moran is actually seeking that irrational realm of experience of which he is a particle. He is searching for an aspect of himself. When the search is unsuccessful, because he cannot accept the irrational, Moran begins to fall apart.

Against this background, that often-quoted dictum of Beckett assumes its full significance: «To find a form that accomodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now»³. Although Moran could not «accomodate the mess», Beckett obviously can. It is a token of his genius that he was able to adopt the Jungian concepts of the individual and collective unconscious as a felicitous metaphor of the need to transcend the classical, or empirical, orientation.

As though to substantiate the historical validity of Beckett's accomplishment, another key artist, roughly his contemporary, independently arrived at what may be interpreted as a very similar position. And he did so, what is more, at precisely the same moment in time. That artist is Jackson Pollock; the moment in time, 1947 to 1950. For just when Beckett achieved the breakthrough of his trilogy, Pollock, after his own breakthrough, was painting the great «poured» canvases upon which his reputation so rightly rests. And those canvases, like the narrative technique of *The Unnamable*, are a metaphor of the unstructured «spray of phenomena» lying just the other side of all orientations—the all-embracing flux of Being itself, from which the being of man arises.

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We do not usually think of Samuel Beckett and Jackson Pollock together. But in fact, there are many considerable parallels in the earlier (pre-1947) careers of the two. Pollock was prodigious in his interests, and his assimilation of influences. One of the most important of these, one which lurks, in a way, behind everything he did, was the example of Surrealism—especially the techniques of automatic drawing⁴. Beckett, as we already know from his «Three Dialogues», had a deep interest in contemporary painting, both Abstract and Surrealist. And it is worth noting that Beckett, in dialogue number two, centers on Masson, whose work is so close to Pollock's in temper and form⁵. But if Beckett was interested in painting. Pollock, for his part, was an energetic, if unsystematic reader. Two of his preferred books were *Moby Dick* and *Finnegan's Wake*⁶. Beckett's connection with the latter need not be expounded here. And there is also, in the form

³ Quoted in Tom Driver, «Beckett by the Madeleine». *Columbia University Forum*, IV, 3 (Summer 1961), p. 23.

⁴ A nice summary of Pollock's involvement with automatist experimentation and other Surrealist techniques is given in David S. Rubin, «A Case for Content: Jackson Pollock's Subject Was the Automatic Gesture», *Arts Magazine*, 53 (March 1979), pp. 103-9.

⁵ For a consideration of this affinity see William Rubin, «Notes on Masson and Pollock», *Arts Magazine* 34 (November 1959), pp. 36-43.

⁶ Brian O'Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth* (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 89 and 105.

of a more tangible nexus, the curious matter of Peggy Guggenheim. For a short time in 1938, in Paris, she and Beckett were lovers⁷. Later, in New York, in 1943, she assumed a much more central role in Pollock's life; she put him under contract and became his dealer.

But undoubtedly, the mutual influence with the deepest and most significant ramifications was their exposure to the thinking of Carl Jung. I have already spoken of this exposure, in Beckett's case, in the previous essay. In Pollock's case, his awareness of Jung may well have begun as early as 1934. Then, at the age of 22, he was befriended by Helen Marot, who, in addition to having a strong personal interest in Jungian psychology, was a friend of Mrs. Cary Baynes, Jung's English language translator⁸. Whether or not he learned about Jung from Helen Marot, and it seems quite likely that he did, Pollock began, in 1937, a series of psychiatric treatments for the alcoholism which had plagued him, to varying degrees, during the previous 8 to 10 years. This treatment culminated in a direct involvement with Jungian ideas and methodology when, in early 1939, he consulted Dr. Joseph L. Henderson, who was a disciple of Jung. He continued this treatment later with another Jungian, Dr. Violet Staub de Laslo, until early 1943.

Another important influence for Pollock, at about this time, was the painter and theorist John Graham. Graham's article «Primitive Art and Picasso», published in *Magazine of Art* in April, 1937, so interested Pollock that he sought out the author on his own. Graham was familiar with both Freud and Jung, and he stressed the importance of the primitive in the work of modern masters such as Picasso and Matisse. Almost certainly, it was through Graham that Pollock acquired his early fascination with Picasso. The exact date of their meeting is not known, but it is probably safe to assume that it took place in late 1937 or early 1938⁹. In fact, Graham's appearance in his life would go far to explain the strange irruption in Pollock's oeuvre of *Birth*, a painting which is dated sometime between 1938 and 1941.

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Up until this point, Pollock had done mostly anecdotal painting in the manner of his teacher. Thomas Hart Benton, and a number of non-objective studies which can, in general, also be attributed to Benton's ideas of compositional rhythm and structure¹⁰. But this canvas marks a new departure for Pollock. As the title implies, it denotes the birth of an independent painter.

⁷ Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1980), pp. 273-80.

⁸ This, and the following information on Pollock's Jungian connection is taken from Judith Wolfe, «Jungian Aspects of Jackson Pollock's Imagery», *Artforum* 11 (November 1972), p. 65.

⁹ According to Irving Sandler in «More on Rubin and Pollock», *Art in America* 6 (October 1980), p. 57.

¹⁰ See Stephen Polcari, «Jackson Pollock and Thomas Hart Benton», *Arts Magazine* 53 (March 1979), pp. 120-4.

What first stands out about *Birth* is that the colors, principally blue and white, are brighter than the generally dark and muddy tones of Pollock's earlier works. What is much more important is that the illusionistic space necessary for anecdotal painting has here been forgone. There is, instead, a shallow Cubistic space, of which the blue areas seem to form a more or less unified backdrop. But the work as a whole conveys a sense of spatial tension in that there is no clear distinction between depth and relief, figure and ground. This spatial ambiguity probably stems directly from Pollock's interest in Picasso, since *Birth* is apparently an abstract of the right-hand section of *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*. The allusion is suggested, first of all, by the vertical composition and the bent leg of the lowest figure, which corresponds to that of the seated woman in the Picasso. A closer consideration, though, will also reveal correspondences in the framework of geometrical patterns spread through both designs, as well as the fact that Pollock chooses a similar, but more intense, color scheme.

By focusing on this particular section of *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*, a painting which was then believed to constitute a sort of disruptive leap into the modern period, Pollock exhibits a fine understanding of the work. For it is these figures, as opposed to the Egyptian profile on the left and the classical figures in the middle, that herald and prepare the new vision to be achieved by twentieth century art, a vision impressed with the primitive. But Pollock, in an act of self-assertion, has supplanted Picasso's African masks with an array of what seem to be Indian totem figures.

It might be said, then, that the title does not really refer so much to the birth canal depicted in the lower right-hand corner, but that the birth canal refers to the title. The painting itself seems to be intended as another «leap». In a statement which indicates his vaulting ambition, this young man is declaring the birth of a new master, one who will inherit the mantle of leadership from Picasso—a specifically American master, as the totem figures attest. And this theme of the ascendancy of American art with Pollock would also be underscored by his new palette, whose principal colors are red, white, and blue.

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With *Birth*, appropriately, Pollock severed in a way his overt dependence on Benton. The brighter colors, the ambiguous Cubistic space, the use of the primitive motif, and his adoption of Picasso as a kind of simultaneous role-model and foil all indicate that he was then embarking on the long struggle to establish his own painterly identity. But we must understand, from the outset, that Jackson Pollock did not, indeed could not, separate his art from his life, his identity as painter from his identity as man.

This unity, for him, of art and life was evident as early as the age of 20, when he wrote to his mother: «Painting and sculpture is [sic] life itself (that is for those who practice it) and one advances as one grows and experience life»¹¹. Pollock

¹¹ Cited in Volume IV of the *Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor and Eugene V. Thaw (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 213.

grew, and experienced life, but he never really altered this belief, as is shown by B. H. Friedman's description of his first meeting with Pollock in the spring of 1955, less than a year before his death. Friedman tells us that, «At one point he said something like: 'A man's life *is* his work: his work *is* his life. That's what's bothering me—I'm not working much anymore. I go to my studio, but nothing happens...No. They're the same thing. They're inseparable»¹².

Pollock's problem with drink, and the therapy it led him to, must, therefore, have been crucial to his art of the early forties. Robert Motherwell's often-used observation on Pollock is worth remembering here, as well: «His principle problem is to discover what his true subject is. And since painting is his thought's medium, that resolution must grow out of the process of his painting itself»¹³.

«Painting is his thought's medium»: perceptive as Motherwell is (the comment was made in 1944), his proximity to Pollock may have blurred his vision. For, since Pollock could not separate his life from his art, I should like to suggest that he always knew that his true subject was himself. His problem, as he entered the decade of the forties, was one of identity—to find himself as an artist and, at the same time, to establish his life as a man. The two were inextricably entwined. Establishing, or creating his identity depended, in the deepest sense, upon «the process of his painting».

This deceptively simple recognition will clarify many aspects of Pollock's art, and the criticism it has fostered. There is, for example, the critical debate, which flourished in the seventies, between the formalists and the so-called «Jungian» historians. As both camps have ably shown, Pollock's work derives from the formal characteristics of a large number of preceding tendencies and schools, from Impressionism onward¹⁴; but it also makes use, in the figurative, pre-1947 canvases, of decidedly Jungian symbols and ideas¹⁵. We have no reason, now, to treat these positions as mutually exclusive. Given the dimensions of Pollock's task, it seems wiser to remember the Principle of Complementarity, and to accept the idea that he was purposefully working from both directions at the same time.

While he applied his art to therapy, he also applied his therapy to art. If, in fact, we view his work as that, as a conscious attempt to meld psychological theory with the most serious of formal considerations —as, I believe, Beckett was also doing in his trilogy— then we have identified one more reason for the undeniable richness and depth of Pollock's art.

¹² B. H. Friedman, *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974), p. xvi.

¹³ Cited in B. H. Friedman, *ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁴ Excellent in his formal analysis of Pollock's style is William Rubin, «Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition», *Artforum* V (February 1967): 14-22; (March 1967): 28-37; (April 1967): 18-31; (May 1967): 28-33; and «Pollock as Jungian Illustrator: The Limits of Psychological Criticism», *Art in America* 67 (November 1979), pp. 104-23.

¹⁵ Some of these critics are Judith Wolfe, *op. cit.*; David Freke, «Jackson Pollock: A Symbolic Self-Portrait», *Studio International* 184 (December 1972), pp. 217-21; and Elizabeth L. Langhorne, «Jackson Pollock's *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle*», *Arts Magazine* 53 (March 1979), pp. 128-37.

And therefore, we are also induced to recognize the essential validity of his adaptation of Jungian symbols and theories to a serious formalistic discipline. It is not, as is sometimes suggested, simply a glorified illustrative anecdotalism, where the artist has substituted the representation of internal image-systems for the representation of an external image-system. It is, instead, a much more dynamic endeavor—an attempt to act out, or to paint out, a process of individuation as Pollock would have learned it through his therapeutic experience. And in this sense we are reminded, yet again, of Eliot in *The Waste Land* or of Beckett in his fiction. Pollock's personal dilemma assumes a transcendental value, for us, as it is projected into art. His search for an identity—because it was ultimately transformed into such magnificent form—takes part in the contemporary search for a new, and more adequate, orientation.

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One of the best examples of Pollock's earlier Jung-infused style is his *Bird*, of 1941. Like the preceding *Birth*, this composition is still based on circular figures. But whereas in *Birth* they were vertically arranged—a nod to Primitivism by evoking the totem pole—here they are disposed in a triangular pattern in the lower, darker half of the canvas. This horizontal division of the picture into two equal sections is, most certainly, a clue to its symbolical aspirations. For as any good Jungian knows, the shadowy inferior portion can be read as the unconscious mind, while the upper, sky-tinted area, suffused with clouds and light, can be read as the realm of consciousness. And as if to underscore the point, Pollock puts there, instead of the sun, a great, unblinking eye—which could very well be a symbol of conscious awareness.

The body of this «bird», which is light in itself, arises from the darker space below to fly into the light of consciousness. Just as a bird taking flight symbolically unifies earth and sky, the two halves of the mind are unified by the emergence of unconscious content into the light of awareness. Indeed, the Jungian idea of the unification of opposites controls the whole design, for there is a horizontal symmetry, as well. The bird's body is divided, on the right and left, into faces which exhibit contrasting characteristics. And although it is difficult, at this point of Pollock's development, to say which is which, it is probably safe to assume that these faces are meant to represent the two opposing sexes¹⁶.

These two circular forms are mitigated by a third, between them, which contains the vague image of a spiral, or coil. This spiral, at the center of the darkness, can be construed as the Jungian *circumambulatorio*, the treacherous circular approach to the unconscious mind, which plays such a fundamental role in the structure of Beckett's trilogy.

¹⁶ As does Judith Wolfe, *op. cit.*, She writes (pp. 67-8), «The differences in the rendering of noses and mouths convinces me that the heads must be female and male. The female nose is marked by nostrils (openings), while the male nose is a protruding shape; the female lips seem fuller and softer than the male».

Now this horizontal symmetry is balanced, what is more, by a vertical symmetry of circular forms. For the spiral of the unconscious finds its equal and opposite counter in the all-seeing eye in the sky. And these two circles are mitigated, at the very center of the composition, by an ambiguous figure to which the wings of the bird are attached. This strange figure seems, if anything, to be a fetus, which would reinforce the over-all theme of the picture: the concept of psychic wholeness which arises, according to Jung, from the integration of those symbolic opposites—male and female, light and dark, right and left, up and down, earth and sky, etc.—that coexist, that pre-exist, within the mind. Pollock's *Bird* can, in a most instructive way, be compared to *Molloy*, since both of them present us with a bisected structure that represents the paradoxical, yet symmetrical relationship between the conscious and unconscious portions of the mind.

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Only one year later, in 1942, Pollock painted what several critics consider to be one of his first masterpieces, *Male and Female*. This work is an extension of many of the Jungian themes of *Bird*. There is a flat, blue backdrop which lends the work a shallow Cubistic space. The vertical element of the composition is even more prominent here, although the canvas itself is very carefully sectioned into both vertical and horizontal areas. Once again, as its title indicates, *Male and Female* expresses the idea of the union of opposites so central to the Jungian concept of psychic wholeness. For while the two central figures are meant to be sexual opposites, they also, and obviously, exhibit a certain number of ambiguous secondary characteristics.

The figure on the left, with feminine eyes turned away from its partner, seems to indicate the traditional qualities of passive introspection; while the one on the right, facing its partner, has an aggressively colored head and open mouth, indicating the extroverted, active attitude traditionally associated with the male. The body of the female is replete with curves, which may indicate pregnancy or fertility, while that of the male is almost completely rectilinear and contains, as well, mathematical symbols, which connote the rationality of consciousness. However, at the edges of the canvas, the part which is, in each case, hidden from the other figure, there are complementary characteristics. The female, for example, conceals a Greek column, which might be both a phallic symbol and an allusion to the rationality of the Hellenic culture. And the male, in the lower right-hand corner, is given a shadow, Jungian symbol of the anima, or the female aspect of the soul.

In fact, this painting is a complex patterning of interrelated formal and symbolic echoes, expanding across the surface from the two central sources which are the figures themselves. Elizabeth L. Langhorne, focusing on the upper left-hand portion, which she reads as an ejaculation, proposes that the theme of the work is the *literal* union of male and female¹⁷. If this is so, then the extreme confusion of sexual characteristics has its specific logic. For this is the moment

¹⁷ Elizabeth L. Langhorne, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

when the two sexes are, unquestionably, closest together, when, both physically and psychically, they merge into one. Therefore, *Male and Female* may well be intended to represent that confused, momentary union of identities on the abstract psychological plane. As Pollock himself once said, «...today painters do not have to go to a subject matter outside themselves. Most modern painters work from a different source. They work from within»¹⁸. Is he attempting, here, to paint that source itself, to project the unconscious contents of that single fugitive entity created when man and woman unite?

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Whether the answer be yes or no, this aspect of *Male and Female*, its jumbled, crowded surface, is important for another reason. It tells us that, in 1942, a key stylistic shift was already beginning to occur in Pollock's work. His previous paintings had exhibited two different types of ambiguity, both of which are basic pictorial devices of the twentieth century tradition. First, in the manner of Surrealism, the images themselves are indefinite, in a way that invites subjective interpretation. We cannot really identify the circular forms that recur in so many of his paintings of the early 1940's, nor can we, for example, describe with any certainty the creature that is his «bird». And second, following the great revolution that began with Cézanne, these forms show an ambivalent relation to the space in which they are set. Pollock's figures, as a rule, are not discrete. They very often merge into each other, or open out (as in *Bird*) into their setting, almost seeming to «respire» the space around them.

In *Male and Female* though, there is a different, more personal level of ambiguity. Here there is something new: the beginning of an *overlaid* sense of confusion. The surface of the canvas is riddled in places with suggestive brushstrokes and scribbles which, as we have seen, can be integral to our «understanding» or appreciation of the work.

These scribbles are the inception of what was later to become his «all-over» style, the first step toward his «classical» poured abstractions. Only a short time later, in reference to another painting, *The Guardians of the Secret* of 1943, Pollock commented, «I choose to veil the imagery»¹⁹. This simple remark is revealing. For when we consider the spectrum of imagery from *Birth* to *Bird* to *Male and Female* to pictures such as *The Guardians of the Secret* and *Pasiphaë* (also 1943), it is obvious that the images, while becoming more complex and involved, have also gradually receded into a more and more complicated texture of design. And this evolution would seem to indicate an important shift of interest. Rather than the images themselves, Pollock was beginning to focus his attention on the *psychological process* from which they emerge, the confusion out of which they resolve themselves. Now if we consider that the painted image is a visual metaphor

¹⁸ From an interview with William Wright, taped in 1951. Cited in Elizabeth Frank, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983), p. 110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

for a concept, or an idea, then it becomes clear that Pollock was already beginning to paint the *context* of ideation, that is to say, the mind itself.

So *Pasiphaë*, for example, still retains what had become, for Pollock, a typical structural framework: two vertical figures, now at the margins, bracketing a central, horizontal container. There is still a shallow indefinite space; but the images have begun, in a sense, to disintegrate into the all-over design which fills, or covers, practically every portion of the painted surface to an equal degree. It is a confusing bazaar of lines, colors, and forms from which the images themselves appear to be caught just in the process of emergence.

At this point, then, George H. Szanto's description of Beckett's narrative technique in the trilogy is equally apt for Pollock: «...a prevocal nonlogicality, a perception of sights and a groping with mental pictures as they begin to turn into concepts...»²⁰ This description might be applied to almost all of Pollock's paintings from 1943 to 1947, since it so clearly evokes the direction imposed by the logic of his development. His choice to «veil the imagery» thus comes into focus as a natural extension of the theme of *Bird*. For these figural, all-over designs provide a more dynamic and immediate metaphor for the emergence of unconscious contents, a metaphor which, in effect, brings him one step closer to capturing the process itself.

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In the autumn of 1945, Pollock and his wife, Lee Krasner, moved from New York City to a small farm in The Springs, Long Island. As we view his life in retrospect, it seems clear that his move, in several important ways, provided the catalyst that brought him to the final breakthrough into the style for which he is so rightly considered one of the great twentieth century masters. For the effect, on his sensibility, of this renewed contact with the natural world, and the open landscape of the country, freed his sense of form and color and inspired his work with a greater feeling of lyricism. In a sensitive essay on Pollock and nature, Ellen H. Johnson describes the effect of this move: «As he had identified himself with his painting and with the act of painting, he now felt himself and his art become one with nature's constant movement, beat and change, as he discovered and absorbed it in the grass, dunes and sea around East Hampton. As he lived 'in' the painting, he lived in nature»²¹.

A very interesting example of this new quality in his painting is *The Key*, of 1946. In general composition, it should be noted, *The Key* is still similar to many of Pollock's earlier canvases. It is buttressed on both sides by vertical forms, apparently references to the human, which serve to enclose a central space that was rectangular in *The Guardians of the Secret*, ovoid in *Pasiphaë*, and here has

²⁰ George H. Szanto, *Narrative Consciousness: Structure and Perception in the Fiction of Kafka, Beckett, and Robbe-Grillet* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1972), p. 106.

²¹ Ellen H. Johnson, «Jackson Pollock and Nature», in *Modern Art and the Object* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 114.

become even more ambiguous. But, most importantly, there is more of a sense of open space, and depth, in this canvas. The forms are less tortuous and secretive and appear to breathe with life and color. Strangely, the emotional effect is one of pleasure and relaxation, which is, I suspect, a successful rendering of Pollock's own emotional reaction to his new life in the countryside.

But why strangely? The colors, it is true, tend to contrast, but that is not unsettling. Pollock uses a similar color-scheme in many of the paintings of 1946, such as *The Water Bull*, a long and rolling landscape. In these works color seems to come loose from form. It flattens toward the picture plane and thus pulls against the tendency of shapes to define a depth. The contours themselves, often in dark, heavy lines, are freer, and a feeling of expansion, of breathing space, enters into the design. This is especially true of *The Key*, where the intense reds that «cloak» the buttressing figures and run along the bottom of the painting stand out against the cooler tones that predominate in the central area and the top, establishing a much deeper space than in the previous works. And yet, there is still a nagging sort of tension in *The Key* which has its origin in this very feature.

For the forms never really declare themselves; there is a perpetual tug-of-war between figure and ground. The focal point of the picture seems to be the more or less human figure on the left. The suggestion of facial elements is there, along with a shoulder and extended arm, and even what may be a reference to the bent leg of *Birth*. But just as it would appear to resolve into a human shape, it also appears to dissolve into its ground and to dispose itself as disparate elements of a possible landscape, a landscape which contains the shapes of houses, or perhaps of mountains, in the distance.

As did Picasso in *Guernica*, Pollock uses a central triangular structure to anchor the composition. The several roof-like forms are echoes of that pattern. But this triangular framework, importantly, *cuts through* all the different planes, violating with a geometrical line the sense of space which is established through color, and thus reinforcing the tendency of figure and ground to merge.

To add to the ambiguity, there is what seems to be a large can of paint at the bottom, just to the left of center, in the same plane as the humanesque figure in the left margin. Should we read this shape as a clever self-referential allusion, like the hand-prints Pollock later placed in some of his pure abstractions? If so, then this haunting figure at the left, who introduces us to the canvas, motions us into it with the wave of an ambiguous arm, becomes the painter himself who is literally, as Ellen H. Johnson described him, a part of the painting and a part of the nature which it evokes.

Now whether we are meant to see Pollock himself in *The Key*, or not, one thing seems fairly certain: this is a painting, like many of Cézanne's *Bathers*, only much more fragmentary and extreme, where references to the human are *structurally involved* in the landscape. In this sense *The Key*, and other paintings of 1946, take us back, as well, to Beckett's *Molloy*. For they put us, as perceivers, in the same problematic position as Moran in his search for Molloy. Molloy himself cannot be detached from the «Molloy country» in which he wanders. Like the figure in *The Key*, he suffuses his environment and embodies a symbol for that

irrational and unconscious aspect of the human composition that unites us with the world in which we are suspended.

* * *

The inherent logic of Pollock's development had brought him, by the end of 1946, to the same point that Beckett would shortly reach after the first two novels of the trilogy. Beckett, who was also concerned with the limits and significance of the identity, finally came to realize that the emergence of any rational verbal structure out of silence, or irrationality, was tantamount to the emergence of the conscious mind from that which remains unconscious. *The Unnamable* is a complex net, cast across the silence, to capture that elusive singularity where what is not yet known transforms itself to the known. The Unnamable is, in itself, that which resides just beyond the borders of language, from which the individual identity emerges, through words, from the unconscious expanse of all that is.

Pollock's abstractions constitute a similar structure on the visual plane. For him to establish a purely personal identity, he finally had to submerge himself into that which was beyond, or behind, all rational *visual* language. In other words, he had to submerge all imagery into the «silence» of pure abstraction, into the allover design which had already become a metaphor, in his previous work, for the unconscious mind.

But we must not forget that the course of Pollock's work was determined by the intense need to *merge* his life and his art, to make them one. He could not long remain content with an art that was *only* the projection of metaphors. If he had focused, before, on painting the emergence into images of unconscious contents, he was now driven even one step further, beyond that representation to the process by which it is projected. For that process, in his case the physical act of painting, is, in effect, the irrational ground from which the metaphor of identity emerges.

His problem at this point was to find a technique which would permit him, in his painting, the kind of immediacy he had earlier experienced with his essays in automatic drawing—the freedom «to circumvent those pictorial inhibitions which derive from habit, expectation, and immersion in a tradition»²². That is, he had to find a way to permit his *body* to pain, with very little conscious interference from the mind, in the same way the hand and arm themselves «compose» the automatic drawing. The discovery of this technique was Pollock's momentous, historical «breakthrough». It came in early 1947 with the literal outpouring of his «drip» or «poured» technique. With that one innovation, he suddenly encountered a liberating unification of mind and body. Such a submergence of the conscious mind into the body is similar to that state of unwilling coenaesthesia which is so often described as the result of disciplined meditation. In a kind of culmination

²² William Rubin, «Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition», *Artforum* V (February 1967), p. 15.

of primitivism, rational thought was transposed backward, to physical intention. Idea was transformed into movement. William Rubin writes of the effect as follows:

...with the poured pictures of 1947 ... Pollock eliminated simultaneously the last vestiges of symbolic imagery and the last manifest traces of borrowed pictorial ideas in a style that realized his full identity ... The gap between an inherited language and a burgeoning new content, between instinct and self-awareness, in short, between the potential and the actual, had been closed²³.

Now this sort of explanation helps to clarify Harold Rosenberg's well-known formulation of «action painting»²⁴ as it applies to the Abstract Expressionists in general. Projecting onto the canvas only an abstract ground, the painter himself becomes a physical adjunct, a natural extension of the work. For each painting is a record, or an imprint, of one small section of the artist's literal existence. The work can be approached much as we consider the fossil record of some forgotten animal, or extinct species: as traces of a passage through the world, which can help us to reconstruct an unknown life.

This is, then, an artform that completely reverses the classical world-view which separated man from nature. The artist is no longer an isolated entity, distinct from the objectivized vision which he re-presents (nor, by extension, is the perceiver). The artist does not impose any accepted imitation or received imagery onto the canvas. Instead, he submerges his conscious identity (not, it is important to stress, his will) into the physical *act* of painting. This submergence, by-passing all *pre-conceived* intention, permits a totally original painting to emerge. And thus, this original painting manifests, in itself, a new and autonomous identity. Just like the slightly changing fictional identities of the Unnamable, the artist emerges subtly altered and renewed from each submergence of the conscious mind into the physical working of the body, the will of the material world.

* * *

But what of the role of metaphor in an art such as this? If, as I have posited, all art must, in some way, be the projection of metaphor, then what sort of metaphors do we find in the abstract painting of Jackson Pollock? On the one hand, it seems that there would be none. Rubin states that Pollock's breakthrough closed the gap «between the potential and the actual». Rosenberg, for his part, goes even further, claiming that «act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's experience. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life»²⁵.

²³ William Rubin, «Pollock as Jungian Illustrator...» *op. cit.*, p. 115.

²⁴ Harold Rosenberg, «The American Action Painters», *Art News*, Vol. 51, N° 8 (December 1952). Rosenberg's thesis has been cited so often in articles on Pollock that I do not feel that it is necessary to recapitulate his argument here.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

We will always encounter such descriptions as these because Pollock's technical innovation takes us *back*, beyond the canvas itself. It focuses attention on the spontaneous process out of which the painting, the artifact, emerged. And in this sense, his technique epitomizes the intimate involvement of man with his environment. More than a metaphor, this *is* the exercise of a new orientation. Pollock's act of painting both re-creates himself and transforms the environment by leaving something unique to take its place as a part of the real.

But Rosenberg's polemic teased us into adopting a one-sided view of this very sophisticated act of creation. For of course, the only reason that the so-called action-painting takes on any significance at all is that it produces that singular, aesthetically controlled artifact which is the painting. And that artifact is not a process. It is, instead, a kind of record—and as such, as well, a metaphor—of that unification of mind and body which made it possible. We are then, in effect, dealing with a completely new kind of imagery.

For each non-objective canvas is one great swirling complex image of that paradoxical process it records, and therefore contains an evocation of the emotional state, whatever it may have been, that brought it forth. It is so difficult, and exhilarating, to talk about these paintings (apart from formalistic description and «etymology») because they are images, or metaphors, of a condition of being which goes beyond what can be rationally known. That is why we can, if we desire, apply the one Great Metaphor of the Collective Unconscious to Pollock's brilliant abstractions. One critic who does so with intelligence is David S. Rubin, who has written that:

The new type of automatic line, that formed entirely from the pouring of paint, was made possible by the discovery of an innovative technique (evolved quite steadily out of the procedures of the preceding years) and could perform several functions simultaneously... (a) the automatic gesture (the pouring of a line of paint) serves as a constructive unit from which to build a new single image; (b) the identity of that image is veiled—not behind the network, but *within* it; and (c) the image as a whole still has meaning in that it represents and conceptualizes the *space* of the collective unconscious, populated now with the «energy» of unconscious matter «made visible» in the form of abstract flows of paint²⁶.

As with all of Pollock's work, the abstract paintings function on various levels of evocation: each one can be read as a welter of emotion and impulse out of which the sense of intellection arises, or as a masterful rendering of the endless flux of energy which forms the ground of all organized matter and visual phenomena. In either case they are a kind of «ground-state» of which our perception itself becomes a continuum by formulating the abstract potentials which each one contains. Like the voice of the Unnamable, these two possibilities, taken together, plumb those depths where the internal and external worlds of subject and object unite. Or, in addition, the painting can be viewed in conjunction with the action

²⁶ David S. Rubin, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

of the artist, as one more symptom of a post-classical age in which man assumes his responsibility as a dynamic factor in the fabric of reality.

* * *

Multiple levels of evocation: precisely here lies the strength of Jackson Pollock's art. His painting is finally, successful because it composes a unification of so many opposites: mind and body, thought and act, conscious and unconscious, process and artifact, artist and art. Thus unifying these categories, it becomes a symbol, or at least a reminder of their essential relatedness. And yet, what is of the utmost importance is that Pollock never lost sight of the aesthetic value of the created object.

Much has been made of Pollock's own descriptions of his poured technique. He wrote, for example, in 1947, «When I am *in* my painting, I'm not aware of what I am doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc, because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through». And elsewhere, when asked whether it wasn't very difficult to control the poured paint, he replied, «No, I don't think so...it seems to be possible to control the flow of the paint to a great extent, and...I don't use the accident...I deny the accident»²⁷. Although he did not impose a pre-conceived objective form, or concept, onto the painting, these comments testify that he never lost his strong aesthetic control of it, either. Each poured painting was, in effect, the ultimate abstract self-portrait, a projection of his own interior contents which had, in turn, been shaped or determined by a strict painterly development. In his own words again, «Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is»²⁸. What he was painting was what he had created of himself: his own unique being as an artist.

The great, and crucial difference between Jackson Pollock and the various types of «process» art —such as the phenomenon of the Happening— that originated from his breakthrough is that most of those who came after have somehow managed —through superficiality, a lack of understanding, or willful irresponsibility— to exclude the artifact, not to mention the notion of aesthetic value, from their idea of art. Ellen H. Johnson has written that

Pollock identifies his inner self so closely with his activity as a painter that one might say he abolishes the distinction between subject and object. Figuratively speaking, the action, the acted upon and the actor become one. Happenings...are a direct outgrowth of this attitude. From being a pictorial record of an act, the art object easily became the act itself²⁹.

The inconsequentiality and shallowness of the Happening —and conceptual art— lie in the fact that they both completely by-pass the artifact, the aesthetically

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁹ Ellen H. Johnson, «Modern Art and the Object from Nineteenth Century Nature Painting to Conceptual Art», *ed. cit.*, p. 36.

compelling object. For we must finally admit that art is not thinking, nor action. These are a part of normal living. And art is a material transformation of life. It must reside in the well-made artifact which functions as a metaphor. Two qualities, then, are essential to our evaluation of art: the mastery of expressive technique and the significance of the projected metaphor—how adequately it reflects, or implies, a historical orientation, man's transcendental relation with the universe around him. These two qualities combine to determine the success, or failure, of the work of art. The art object cannot ever really become the act itself, for the valid work of art must live with us, abide with us in time. It is that paradoxical unity of process *and* artifact, or temporality and permanence, in which the artwork ultimately reflects the endless paradox that animates the nature of man.

