

## SEEKING INDIVIDUALITY AND “OVERALL EFFECT” IN FRENCH POST-IMPRESSIONIST PAINTINGS AND FRENCH URBAN POETRY

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### Abstract

In this paper I have attempted to explore the connections between “the visual” expression that is painting and “the verbal” that is literature, poetry to be particular in this case. The artist I have chosen is French Post-Impressionist Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and the poet with whom I have drawn parallels with Cézanne’s art is French urban poet and critic Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). The associations between Cézanne (the visual) and Baudelaire (the verbal) are drawn in terms of subject matter chosen by both the poet and the painter and the innovative techniques employed by both as a quest for individual expression which necessitates their departure from traditional modes of artistic expression. Both, the artist and the poet, also share deep associations, in terms of the “overall effect” they wanted to achieve in their respective arts and, last but not least, their profound affinity to their roots that connects them even more profoundly. All these factors converge in this paper to substantiate a close link between “written word” and “painted image”: a true culmination of the verbal and the visual.

**Keywords:-** verbal, visual, painting, culmination

[Baudelaire’s poetry]...may be regarded as one of the earliest and most successful examples of a specifically urban writing, the textual equivalent of the city scenes of the Impressionists, embodying in its poetics of sudden and disorienting encounter that ambiguous “heroism to modern life” that Baudelaire celebrated in his art criticism.

The above mentioned analytic comment of Richard D.E. Burton appropriately brings out the objective of this paper, which is, establishing a close link between the written word and painted image. This paper attempts to investigate associations between the Post-Impressionist Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and the urban poetry as well as art theory of Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). The associations will also be examined between the verbal and the visual in terms of subject matter chosen by both the poet and the painter and innovative techniques employed by both as a quest for individual expression which necessitates break from the tradition.

Firstly, defining the term Post-Impressionism is necessary to demarcate it from Impressionism: “[The] movement in France that represented both an extension of Impressionism and a rejection of its’ inherent limitations.” (Britannica) English art critic Roger Fry coined this

term for 19<sup>th</sup> century painters like Paul Cézanne, Georges Seurat, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Impressionism is defined as: “an attempt to accurately and objectively record visual reality in terms of transient effects of light and colour” (Britannica). The Post-Impressionists rejected these attempts and Cézanne was the pioneer who withdrew early from the Impressionism in 1878.

Paul Cézanne, the French Painter born in Aix-en-Provence, is regarded as one of the greatest among the Post-Impressionists. His artistic manifesto was “to make of impressionism something solid and durable like the art of museums.” (Murray 95) Equally important is his move from Paris to settle in his native Provence in 1886 at the age of forty seven which is seen as a *retour au pays* by Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer (Kallmyer 2). This individual trait of affinity towards one’s roots will also be one of the focal points of this paper.

Abandoning the Impressionist technique of evanescent light effects, Cézanne became preoccupied with “the underlying structures of natural forms and the problems of unifying surface patterns with spatial depths” (Britannica). The early method of Cézanne was, as his comment signifies: “I wished to copy nature. I could not. But I was satisfied when I had discovered that the *sun*, for instance, could not be reproduced, but that it must be represented...by *colour*” [my italics] (Denis 275).

It is evident that Impressionists were deeply entrenched in the “science of colour.” However, it would be incorrect to say that Cézanne was absolutely offbeat. He and other Post-Impressionists are indebted to Impressionism for technique like “short brushstrokes of broken colour” (Britannica), unconventional subject matters and even a vibrant palette.

Cézanne had rejected the colour and effects of light as a primary end and began his exploration into subtle nuances of composition and modelling form with colour. The energetic virtuosity of brushwork was put to service for an “overall effect” then. This is an important concept or objective which drove Cézanne to almost conjure up paintings charged with emotion, as Clive Bell explains:

Post-Impressionism is not a matter of technique. Certainly, Cézanne invented a technique, admirably suited to his purpose, which has been adopted and elaborated, more or less, by the majority of his followers. The important thing about a picture, however, is not how it is painted, but whether it provokes aesthetic emotion.

What Clive Bell says of technique can only partially be agreed to. It is the technique which sets a school of art apart. Cézanne’s definition of painting shows how important colour was to his *oeuvre*: “Painting is the registration of one’s coloured sensations.” (Denis 279)

Cézanne is presented by many critics like John Rewald and Nina Kallmyer as an artist who proclaimed his artistic manifesto almost militantly through his art. Cézanne’s quest for individuality began when he asserted himself in 1858 when he was sent to law school as his father wanted him to become a banker like himself. He resisted and persuaded his father to allow him to study art in Paris. But the quest for individuality demands prices to be paid. Cézanne remained financially dependent and emotionally unstable throughout his life. The same is the case with the radical poet Charles Baudelaire.

Both are undoubtedly connected in terms of technique as well as subject matter but what we must not forgo the most crucial connection between them, that is, their longing for an idyllic haven: Provence in the case of Cézanne and Paris (of the past) in the case of Baudelaire. They are also connected in experiencing similar agony of their choice to be pioneer risk-takers while most creative men of paint and letters chose an easy path which was well trodden and financially

rewarding. Both depicted everyday life stripped off all glamour of their precursors and resisted the straitjacket of trendy copying of nature and Parisian elite culture.

Cézanne's painting techniques evolved steadily throughout his life. His styles can be divided into two main periods. The first period (early 1870s) is his early period of experimentation as an Impressionist where his analysis only "sought to capture the surface of the impression", requiring him to paint with great violence where the colour is "often piled on with a palette-knife." This is when Cézanne imbibed the Impressionist theories of colour and light. The second period is where he searches for his individual idiom and aims at "an ever more subtle analysis of colour and tone". He forayed into a prolonged and laborious analysis where colour becomes the only mode for modelling the "underlying forms of visible objects". The Cubists' idea that an artist must "look for the cone, the sphere, and the cylinder in Nature" is anticipated in Cézanne's second phase after 1886 (when he had settled in Provence) and through his fresh artistic expression as seen in *The Bathers* series. (Murray 95-96)

*The Snow has Melted: L' Estaque* (1871) is one of Cézanne's early experimental landscape with a dramatic contrast of light. Cézanne devoted himself to landscapes, still lives, and portraits with fellow artist Pissarro in 1874. He had also participated in the first official show of the Impressionists (1874) but his work was relentlessly criticized then. In his mature phase (1870s to early 1890s) he proclaimed: "I seek to render perspective only through colour." *Gardanne* (1885-86) is a remarkable landscape of this phase. *Portrait of Mme. Cézanne* (1888-90), *Woman with Coffee-Pot* (1890-94) and *The Card Players* (1890-92) are also remarkable. What is unique is the attempt to get an "overall effect" for which the artist can even accede to sacrifice the subjects in foreground for a harmonious total composition. He chose scenes from daily life of people as his subjects. From 1888 to 1905 he churned out masterpieces like *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1904-06), *Boy in Red Waist-Coat* (1888-90), numerous still lives and *The Bathers* series (1890-94).

Before charting out evolution of the second phase of Cézanne, it is essential to address the country- city debate in terms of the urban poetry of Baudelaire and the mature phase of Cézanne in the Provence. Both painter and poet/critic are deeply attached to their roots and they found both models as well as inspiration from there. Baudelaire's emotion is of disenchantment, despair and lament on the modernization of old Paris. Similarly Cézanne's move from Paris to Aix-en-Provence is seen by Nina Kallmyer as "a meaningful gesture"- a rejection of the city as well as a *retour au pays*: a homecoming (Kallmyer 2). Cézanne was attached to the "culture, people, landscape, and sunny climate" of Provence. He wrote to Monet on 6 July 1895: "So I have ended up back in the Midi, which I should perhaps never have left, to hurl myself in the chimerical pursuit of art."

Cézanne painted three portraits (1865, 66 and 70) of his banker father Louis-Auguste Cézanne. Kallmyer's description of these three portraits informs of Cézanne's pride in his tradition and placid lifestyle of the Provence:

In all three images, Louis-Auguste appears at home, at the Jas de Bouffan. He wears a shapeless jacket of coarse brown wool, a white cotton shirt open at the neck, wrinkled pants, and wooden clogs. His head is covered with a leather cap (Kallmyer 29).

*Jeune fille au piano : Ouverture du Tannhauser* (1869-70; *Opening of Tannhauser*) is a double portrait of his mother and sister Marie at the piano which again fondly depicts the Provencial setting.

In 1880s, Cézanne focused on the rural life and their daily activities. The five versions of *The Card Players* (1890-92) are good examples of rural portraits with a narrative where Cézanne has begun to seek assiduously for the “overall effect” mentioned earlier. This quest finds its culmination in the important series, *Baigneurs* (1890-94; *The Bathers*). The male and female figures in the series anticipate the Cubist manifesto of seeking geometrical shapes in nature. The composition is more important in these paintings than the separation of figures in the foreground from the background. This is also seen in Baudelaire's art theory, too, when he talks of achievement of an “overall effect” than focusing on a detail. The figures and shapes are sacrificed for the sake of harmony and composition. Kallmyer describes this effect most eloquently: “the women meld into earth, the earth merges with the trees, and these in turn vanish into a sky mirrored in the gray-blue river.”

Cézanne has deep associations (both in terms of a pioneering vision in art as well as a longing to go back to his roots) with French poet, translator, literary and art critic Charles-Pierre Baudelaire. His *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857; *The Flowers of Evil*) is known as the most influential poetry collection published of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe. However, he had established himself as an art critic much earlier. His prose poem collection *Petits Poemes en Prose* (1866; *Little Prose Poems*) is equally substantial.

The verbal in Baudelaire dovetails very neatly with the visual of the Post-Impressionists in his essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (anthologized in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*). He emphasizes on portrayal of urban life and talks of its evanescent nature which forces a painter to work with haste: “But there is in the trivial things of life, in daily changing of external things, a speed of movement that imposes upon the artist an equal speed of execution” (Baudelaire, *Writings* 393).

He broadens painter’s area of work and links it to literary creativity: “Sometimes he [the painter] may be a poet, more often he comes close to the novelist or the moralist; he is the painter of *the fleeting moment* and of all that it suggests of *the eternal*” [my italics] (*Writings* 393). He further emphasizes the painter’s need to record the daily urban life as his subject: “...the crowd is his domain...his passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd. For the perfect idler, for the passionate observer it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, *the fleeting* and *the infinite*” [my italics] (*Writings* 399). He also asserts the indispensability of sunlight: “[The Artist]...opens his eyes and sees the sun beating vibrantly at his window panes, he says to himself...what a fanfare of light...and endless numbers of things bathed in light that I could have seen and failed to!” (*Writings* 400).

Baudelaire is closest to Cézanne in his statement about the pursuit of holistic effect in a painting and the verbal and the visual come together here: “I refer to a sort of inevitable, synthetic, childlike barbarousness [which] derives from the need to see things big, to lock them particularly from the point of view of their *effect as a whole*” [my italics] (*Writings* 406). In *The Salon of 1859*, Baudelaire rejects the fashionable notion of copying nature in both the verbal and the visual. He also calls imagination as “the queen of the faculties” (*Writings* 298). He says: “It is imagination that has taught man the moral significance of colour, contour, sound and scent. In the beginning of things, imagination created analogy and metaphor” (*Writings* 299). He also says that man should be faithful to “his nature” which is his artistic vision instead of blindly aping nature. This is similar to the motto of the Post-Impressionists.

In 1831, Baudelaire began his education at College Royal and went on to Lycée Louis-le-Grand in 1836. He was a student with promise but a loner due to lack of parental nurture. He led a life of depravity with intermittent moments of profound dejection. In Collège Saint-Louis he

had established first contact with the literary world and also a terminal venereal disease. In 1842, he came to his inheritance and began to experiment with hashish and opium which explains the hallucinatory imagery in his poetry.

But irrespective of his idiosyncrasies, his self-conscious attempts to bring coherence to his poems in anthologized form in *The Flowers of Evil* is very similar to Cézanne's desire to bring coherence and to create paintings "worth museums." Also like Cézanne initial exhibitions, *The Flowers of Evil* brought Baudelaire an instant notoriety and six of the poems were banned after a trial in 1857.

"Tableaux Parisiens" ("Parisian Scenes") from *The Flowers of Evil* is *sui generis* as it does not describe the day-to-day urban life but deals with human suffering and isolation. The poem *Landscape* has a slight architectural description of Paris, such as: "The chimney pipes, the steeples, all the city's masts". But, the rest of this poem is more of a mental landscape, a personal and interior treatment which reminds of Cézanne's treatment of L' Estaque, Gardanne and Saint-Victoire. *The Sun* reminds of the Impressionist preoccupation with the way sunlight renders objects: "When shafts of sunlight strike with doubled heat / On towns and fields, on rooftops, on the wheat". There are poems devoted to Victor Hugo, such as, "The Swan", "The Seven Old Men" and "The Little Old Women". These are notable as they showcase Baudelaire's preoccupation with the chaos of the city and the misery of old age, disease and death.

Some poems in "Petite Poemes en Prose" deal with urban life and the teeming masses but they also topple into derangement and dereliction and show telltale evidence of his use of psychoactive drugs. "The Stranger" and "The Double Room" have descriptions which come quite near to the "slice of life" treatment (which is considered as bereft of any artifice) like the Post-Impressionists practised. His imagery is more important than his rhetoric. Baudelaire's urban poetry is suggestive as well as symbolic and anticipates Symbolism in French poetry.

Baudelaire was a daring innovator and catered to the demands of new means of literary expression on the wake of ascendancy of the metropolis. Although the tone in his poetry is full of lament, but his concerns for the modern human predicament makes him a true urban poet as Kallos says: "One of Baudelaire's 'modern' themes is the paradoxical mixture of disgust and fascination with the metropolis. Eccentricity, absurdity, horror and ecstasy intermingle here to give a true insight into modern urban life." His innovative techniques like his conversational style, apostrophe (direct address to the reader) and his prose poetry sets him apart from his contemporaries and the same was the case of Cézanne when he broke off from the Impressionists who were also his contemporaries.

Both the artists under critical enquiry in this paper share deep associations, not only in terms of subject matter and technique, but also the "overall effect" they wanted to achieve in their respective arts and last but not least their profound affinity to their roots. All these factors converge to substantiate a close link between "written word" and "painted image": a true culmination of the verbal and the visual.

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