

## Abstract Expressionism in Context

Abstract Expressionism, the glorious American art movement of the late 1940s and 1950s, is a sophisticated debate on the nature of the unconscious. In this essay, I will demonstrate why such a debate was compelling, and present the arguments that were used at the time to promote each of the three competing descriptions of the unconscious: the Jungian, the Freudian, and the Zen. I will note the appropriateness of the formal strategy chosen for each view: biomorphic shape for the Jungian, line for the Freudian, and color for the Zen.

### The Context:

After the barbarism of war comes the question of man's basic nature. After World War I (so long a war with so many casualties among friends and neighbors, so much destruction of the European landscape, so many frightening new weapons), Dada hoped to strip the very thin veneer of culture and show the irrationality lurking beneath. Surrealism, which followed shortly afterward in Europe, hoped to expose the twisted logic and repressed desire that drove the actions of individuals and nations. It is not surprising, then, that after World War II a similar question of human nature would arise, especially because it had been essentially a genocidal war. The Germans tried to kill not only all the Jews, but all the people in London. The Allies tried to kill all the people in Dresden and Berlin, and the Americans managed to kill just about everyone in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Gas chambers and aerial bombardment of civilians were the new barbarisms.

*The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Sloan Wilson's best selling novel of 1955 and the Academy Award-winning film of 1956 were so widely read and viewed that they epitomized a brand of the 1950s corporate employee. The book and the movie are usually assumed to be a simple indictment of drab conformity, but actually, the story has a more sophisticated message. Tom Rath, the hero of the book, played by Gregory Peck in the movie, applies for a public relations job at a broadcast network. Asked to write his biography in a few pages during the interview, Tom sits in a room to reflect on his life. The story is largely told in a series of flashbacks (just before, during, and after this

interview) of his experiences in World War II: of the seventeen men he killed in close-quarter battle, his accidental fragging of his best friend and fellow paratrooper, and his girlfriend in Rome and the child she may have had by him. In the end, however, Tom writes only two sentences, saying that he is there to work, and that is all they need to know about him. That was the right attitude; Tom got the job he needed. He could join the soulless men making economic progress,

The story first lauds the desire to put the past behind us. Look forward. Live the rest of your life. As Tom says in the novel: “Between peace and war a clear line must be drawn. The past is something best forgotten; only in theory is it the father of the present. In practice, it is only a wildly unrelated dream, a chamber of horrors. It is a disconnected world, or it is better to believe it that way if you can” (97).

But the past is always with Tom, and rejecting it, rejecting his memory (and his unconscious), has turned Tom into a drudge. In the film, his wife complains that he has lost his integrity and his courage, that he makes love without passion. Opportunities are seen as problems. It is only when the past reemerges in Tom’s life in a concrete way that cannot be avoided (as his young son in Italy turns up in need of his help) that Tom reintegrates as a person and turns away from the prospect of being a corporate man like his unhappy boss. *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, then, is an argument for the utility of knowing and accepting one’s unconscious.

In general, 1956 was the time of Levittown, the G. I. bill, and the Marshall Plan, which was so good for American business, as well as for Europe and Japan. The loss of ethnic and regional identity seemed a small price to pay to join the productive march of the economy. Fireside chats from the White House had unified the country and flattened the diversity of accents. The media had to address all America evenly. Conformity, even homogeneity, was embraced. The blowback from this uniformity was a need for an individual identity to be nurtured within and, consequently, for a counter-culture probing for a definition of the unconscious.

Three Views of the Unconscious:

In her impressive *Artforum* article of November 1972, “Jungian Aspects of Jackson Pollock’s Imagery,” Judith Wolfe quotes Pollock as saying “I’ve been a Jungian

for a long time.” As she recounts, Pollock interest in Jung’s work probably started in 1934 through a friend when he was only 22, and also when he was being treated for his alcoholism by the Jungian psychiatrist Joseph Henderson in 1939 for 18 months; he was later treated by Jungian Violet Staub de Laszlo from 1941 to 1942. Pollock may have been more interested in the ideas than in the treatment, for his work during this period, even as it set the stage for Action Painting to follow, was steeped in the images and ideas of a Jungian search for a collective unconscious of symbols that reached beyond individuals to all times and all cultures. As Wolfe recounts, images of male and female, of night journeys or underground journeys, of birth and rebirth, of mixed humans and animals, of feminine moons that interact with humans, of kings and gods that are both good and bad (all part of Jung’s system) predominate Pollock’s painting of this period.

Wolfe quotes Pollock’s friend Alfonso Ossorio in the 1951 catalogue for a Pollock exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery: “The present group of paintings is done with an austerity of means that underlies their protean character: thin paint and raw canvas are the vehicles for images full of the compulsion of dreams and the orderliness of myth. . . . [The paintings] both reawaken in us the sense of personal struggle and its collective roots and recall to us the too easily forgotten fact that ‘what is without is within’ (65).

Wolfe comments that “Ossorio’s final quote is probably from Jung.” Jung’s idea here is that these powerful notions are both part of our basic nature, and are made manifest in various cultures (in objects, myths, and even various institutions and actions) that in turn reinforce the innate notions in the human unconscious. Pollock finds them in American Indian culture, as well as in Jung’s traditional sources, such as alchemy and ancient Greek, Tibetan, and Oceanic civilizations.

Jung probably found support for his ideas in the new discipline of comparative anthropology. In *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, first published in 1890, James George Frazer shows the continuity of myths and religions across cultures. A scared king, a reincarnated god, harvest rebirth, fertility, a marriage of sun and moon, or sun and earth—Frazer claims that these legends are born in primeval agricultural societies and continue in the mythology of modern religions. The wonderfully articulate painter Mark Rothko argues the point of view thus:

[Myths] are the eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas. They are the symbols of man's primitive fears and motivations, no matter in which land or what time, changing only in detail but never substance, be they Greek, Aztec, Icelandic or Egyptian. And our modern psychology find them persisting still in our dreams, or vernacular and our art, for all the changes in the outward conditions of life... Those who think that the world is more gentle and graceful than the primeval and predatory passions from which these myths spring are either not aware of reality or do not wish to see it in art. The myth hold us therefore, not through its romantic flavor, not through the remembrance of the beauty of some bygone age, not through the possibilities of fantasy, but because it expresses to us something real and existing in ourselves, as it was to those who first stumbled upon the symbols to give them life (as quoted in Sandler, pp. 63, 65).

Rothko's last sentence states a corollary to the Jungian conception of the unconscious: We ignore these powerful unconscious and universal symbols at our peril! These symbols work populations (Jung was perhaps thinking about Nazism) and can dangerously disorganize the individual.

By definition these myths are narrative and thus, for the painter, figurative, but Jung himself, in his own painting (shown recently at the Rubin Museum) heavily influenced by alchemy and Tibetan mandala, purports that abstract shapes and arrangements of shapes can carry the meaning. Thus Adolph Gottlieb, William Baziotas, Theodoros Stamos, and even Rothko and Hans Hofmann of the 1940s can all follow Arshile Gorky's lead in making biomorphic or semi-representational shapes floating on an amorphous background and associate those paintings, not with an older European Surrealism, which they resemble, but instead with a new American abstract confrontation with the unconscious.

The painter Knox Martin once told me of an experiment he performed to test the power of his abstract symbols. He scoured encyclopedias to find the scariest symbols, such as the swastika and the hourglass from the black widow spider, and made a small design of these symbols on a paper that could fit in the palm of his hand. He then went to the aviary at Macy's and leaned against the glass. "The birds went crazy!" Frankly, I too

might be rattled if Martin were leaning against my cage. However apocryphal, the anecdote sums up the belief of a segment of the Abstract Expressionist movement that the unconscious is a storehouse of powerful abstract and semi-abstract shapes that engender feelings and actions in humans (and animals.)

To understand the second Abstract Expressionist interpretation of the unconscious, Harold Rosenberg suggests that the viewer become, in effect, a graphologist: “Criticism must begin by recognizing in the painting the assumptions inherent in its mode of creation. Since the painter has become an actor, the spectator has to think in the vocabulary of action: its inception, duration, direction—psychic state, concentration and relaxation of will, passivity, alert waiting. He must become a connoisseur of the gradations among the automatic, the spontaneous, the evoked (“The American Action Painters,” p. 23).

Rosenberg’s essay was first published in the December 1952 issue of *ARTnews*. Earlier, in January of that year, Klara G. Roman had published *Handwriting a Key to Personality* (New York: Pantheon Books). Roman was a well-regarded professor of graphology at New York’s New School for Social Research, and her book was reprinted only eighteen months later, suggesting a wide readership. She begins by quoting other psychologists on the subject of what the graphologist looks for: Werner Wolf—“length, position, and form;” Nina Becker—“size, direction, pressure” (quite like Rosenberg’s “inception, duration, direction”). Roman states that “gesture” is consistent throughout a person, and that writing with the left or right hand or the foot reveals a consistency that the graphologist can identify; consequently, such gestures are expressive of a deep and consistent personality (pp. 13–14).

Parsing Rosenberg’s categories with Roman’s chapters reveals how close the two writers are. For Rosenberg’s *duration*, see Roman on speed: “Fluctuations in pace due to emotional influences revealed by such graphic indices as the following: occasional acceleration or slowing down, delays, or stops; headlong haste reflected in uncontrolled strokes overshooting their expectable limits, or a gesture of vacillation, or a retreating

step shown in leftward turning strokes; breaks, overt or disguised in soldering strokes” (p. 250).

For Rosenberg’s *direction*, see Roman on slant: “Slant is therefore ultimately a personal gesture. After the copybook stage, emotional motivations are its major determinants, as is indicated by graphological studies” (p. 187).

In general, a rightward slant indicates compliance, whereas an extreme rightward slant implies “uncontrollable excitation or the over activity of mania,” and possibly alcoholism (pp. 188–90). Leftward slants show defiance, whereas upright script shows balance and self-reliance.

For Rosenberg’s *concentration and relaxation of will*, see Roman on tension and release: “Every muscle of the body in a certain state of permanent tension, even during rest. . . . A first determinant resides in the needs and desires of the individual. The stimulation arising from hunger, sexual desire, anxiety, ambition, etc. increase tension. . . . Fulfillment of such needs induces a temporary release of tension.” The state of an individual’s pattern of tension can be seen in “graphodyne study of tension-release patterns” (pp. 278–79).

According to Rosenberg, the reward for such connoisseurship of gesture in an Action Painting is to see “its seriousness—and the test of that seriousness is the degree to which the act on the canvas is an extension of the artist’s total effort to make over his experience” (perhaps to make over his unconscious reality). Likewise with Roman, the marks on the page are indicators that may reveal serious “emotional disturbances in puberty, arising from anxiety, shame, or guilt feelings” (p. 276).

Although Klara Roman claims the innovations of Gestalt psychology for her interpretation of graphology, as opposed to the arcane older view (that is, she states that there are insights to be gained by responding to the whole page of handwritten text), her view of the personality and the personality problems that may be manifest in handwriting are old-fashioned Freudian. She does not find Jungian symbols, nor is the Zen model of the unconscious mind at work here. Rosenberg and Roman alike subscribe to the Freudian hydraulic metaphor of flows: blockages, dam-ups, breakthrough releases, and final flow. Rosenberg’s “lucid drama conducted in sign language” describes the artist’s attempt to define his or her essential nature by wrestling with unconscious forces. Both

consider the overcoming of unconscious obstacles to be heroic victories; while Rosenberg revels in the Romantic struggle, Roman honors the resulting evenness and balance.

In Zen theory, the mind is no-mind; it is a completely blank slate. Experiencing that, even for a moment, convinces the Zen student that cultural conventions dominate one's experience, inducing fear and want, crippling an appreciation of the moment by moment beauty of the world. To express this emptiness (*mu* or *wu* in Japanese—the character itself is the subject of Zen calligraphy), Abstract Expressionists had to make an empty painting, a painting without lines or gestures, without biomorphic shapes or symbols or figures of any kind.

With his *Introduction to Zen*, originally published in Kyoto in 1934 and quickly translated into English with a preface by Jung, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki became the prime interpreter of Zen to the West. In a later book, *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind: The Significance of the Sutra of Hui-neng* (1949), Suzuki writes “The spirit is that of Hui-neng, who declares: ‘I establish no-thought-ness (*wu-nein* the Unconscious) as the principle [of my teaching], formlessness as the Body, and abodelessness as the Source.’ This declaration is the foundation of Zen teaching, and can be traced in those varied answers given by the masters either in words or gestures” (p. 101).

Zen entered Abstract Expressionism through Clifford Still, who spent his youth on the north West Coast and moved to San Francisco when he was 37. From 1946 to 1950, Still taught at the California School of Fine Arts, and it was during this period after the war, with G.I.s returning from Japan, when he was in an intellectual milieu, that Still broke through to his mature style. Painter Carl Morris, who knew Still when they taught together at the Spokane Art Center, describes their early interest in Zen:

At the end of the Second World War I think there was an awareness of what was happening in the East .... It was after the war that idea exchanges came, and there was an interest in Zen Buddhism and mysticism and so forth. This was coincidental with Watts and his writing and Suzuki and others. (Archives of American Art, oral history with Sue Ann Kendall, March 23, 1983. Special thanks to researcher Sara Marshall.)

Still showed in New York in 1946, was friendly with Rothko before that, and visited New York for extended stays during the late 1940s. He was reputed to have a personality at once magnetic and irascible and his presence and ideas were sure to make a mark on his contemporaries.

Abstract Expressionists chose color to communicate the Zen unconscious, but color itself in space; otherwise the painting would just be another colored thing. Barnett Newman was clear about this: “Instead of using outlines, instead of making shapes or setting off spaces, my drawing declares the space. Instead of working with the remnants of space, I work with the whole space” (quoted by Sandler, p. 190). Newman’s best paintings present us with a featureless volume of color, defined and energized, by means of vertical line so tenuous as to become mere after images and thus invisible in the color space.

Still’s papers and stock of unsold paintings have been sequestered, pending the resolution of his bequest that they be given to a city that would give him a museum. Denver has done that, and it will be wonderful to finally dig into his papers to see how specifically Still writes about his early influences.

#### Personal Reflections:

The three styles of Abstract Expressionism are three answers to the question of the nature of the unconscious, and each answer comes with a reduction of style to emphasize either line, shape, or color. The general theory of Abstract Expressionism contains philosophical contradictions. Most likely, any theory of art that does not contain contradictions is useless, for otherwise art would be a formula. Still the self-contradictions in the theory of Abstract Expressionism are serious and, in my opinion, caused the work to go into crisis. First, there is no way of resolving which of the three views is correct; no matter how compelling masterpieces in each camp may be, none of them can exclude the viability of the other interpretations of the unconscious. But two more contradictions are far more dangerous to the practitioners: the nugget unconscious and the equating of risk with authenticity. In the bars, artists of that generation (I specifically remember Peter Agostini and Nat Hentoff) told me that *a guy’s only got one or two paintings in him*. To evolve as an artist is to negate in a fundamental way one’s



previous work and its lack of “seriousness.” If you get to the nugget, an unchanging essential self represented by a telltale gesture or shape, then authenticity requires that your “improvisations” always deliver to you the same painting. Creativity is redefined not as change and discovery but as repetition. There is, in my opinion, a similar self-defeating identification of psychological risk with authenticity, propelling artists to desire more and more desperation, seemingly as an end in itself. The beautiful was a concept previously identified with mastery; now the automatic, the untutored, the desperate were seen as a fearful beauty. A lovely romantic notion, perhaps, but not one conducive to prolonged creative satisfaction.

To conclude, theory matters: the working theory that an artist has influences the creativity for good or bad. And, as a final conclusion, even though a style might seem to be esoteric—art for art’s sake—if it is good art, then it is deeply engaged in a central cultural issue of the moment. By “cultural issue” I do not mean a political issue, but something even more basic to a society—in this case, a solution to the crisis of identity arising from the trauma of World War II and its frenetic aftermath of rebuilding lives and economies.

Tony Robbin, Gilboa, 2012. From lectures given at Trenton State College, 1972-75.

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