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## POEMS AT AN EXHIBITION

*She is older than the rocks among which she sits;  
Like the Vampire,  
She has been dead many times,  
And learned the secrets of the grave;  
And has been a diver in deep seas,  
And keeps their fallen day about her;  
And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants:  
And, as Leda,  
Was the mother of Helen of Troy,  
And, as St. Anne,  
Was the Mother of Mary;  
And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes.  
And lives  
Only in the delicacy  
With which it has moulded the changing lineaments,  
And tinged the eyelids and the hands.*

That was Walter Pater's famous description of the most famous of all paintings, Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa". The passage is taken from Pater's book *The Renaissance*, which was published in 1878. Almost sixty years later, when William Butler Yeats was compiling his curious edition of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, Yeats took Pater's prose appreciation of the "Mona Lisa", and without changing the order of the words, rearranged the lines into a free-verse poem, giving the new-found "poem" the place of honour in his anthology. To Yeats, Pater's "found poem" was "of revolutionary importance", and because it took as its subject Leonardo's subject, Mona Lisa herself, it was important to Yeats in another way too: as a new kind of writing—the poetry of "private reality".

Is it true that the Mona Lisa has "been dead many times"? If she has, has this aloof and faintly smiling woman "learned the secrets of the grave"? Has she also "trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants"? If she

has sailed such forbidding seas, Pater must somehow be right when he says that all history is to her merely "the sound of lyres and flutes." To Walter Pater, when he stared at this painting hanging in the Louvre, these conjectures were more than useful fictions—they were the reasons that explained his responses to the enigma of the "Mona Lisa." To the modern viewer scrutinizing the "Mona Lisa" in the Louvre or studying a reproduction in the great "museum without walls", the art book, these conjectures seem an obvious starting point for an emotional exploration of the painting's purpose. If the "Mona Lisa" were stolen, and all reproductions of her suddenly faded away like invisible ink, there is a sense in which the painting will remain for all time, a printed record of it at least, in Pater's single sentence and Yeats' patterning of it on the page.

It is in this spirit that these poems were written. A painting or a piece of sculpture is an artifice or invention to take the viewer, listener, or reader on a path of discovery. These poems dramatize the sensation of illusion or hallucination that a work of fine art creates, but they also try to take the reader or listener on the voyage of discovery too.

The first voyage is to Ottawa—and beyond. Outside the National Gallery, there is an iron bird which looks more like an ostrich than it does any known fowl. It is something of a sentinel guarding the art within the Gallery. This fantastic creation is over ten feet tall, and it was sculptured in steel by Louis Archambault of Quebec. Archambault once said that the arts in Canada should be on as vast a scale as the Canadian geography—to hold their own against the tremendous size of this country. Suppose for a moment that this strange, mythological bird has, for some inexplicable reason, been flying in outer space and that, for some equally inexplicable reason, it has made a forced landing in the City of Ottawa, in front of the National Gallery. "L'Oiseau de Fer" by Louis Archambault:

*O great and graceful bird  
whom gravity has grounded  
more metallic than a meteor  
nest now in our northern air*

*You are horrible but heavenly  
with an immense (and immensely  
interesting) body like an egg  
tapering legs and a tiny head*

*You threaten to take us  
into a world even worse  
but the iron of your pride  
rests too heavy for our ride*

*Nest now in our northern air  
more metallic than a meteor  
glorious grace has grounded  
a barbarously beautiful bird.*

It is not more than one step from a surreal bird to Surrealism itself. Someone wrote that the surrealist painters during the twenties were "breaking the sound barrier of reality in order to enter the realm of fantasy." Surrealist canvases abound in literal detail, but the recognizable elements in such paintings are set in a totally fantastic context. In the painting "The Whole City" by Max Ernst, the details turn on lifeless buildings; but the context is one of colours—brilliant orange washes fight off heavy black stencilled lines. "The Whole City" hangs in the Loeb Gallery in Paris. André Breton has called the man who painted it "the most magnificent haunted brain of today." Max Ernst's "A City that Looks like Punched Metal Strips":

*"The Whole City" is another version  
of the same painting by the same artist  
Max Ernst  
which hangs in the Tate  
where it is called "The Citadel"  
a title more in keeping  
with this artist's callous conception  
of man's civilization  
as his concentration camp  
of the world as a citified country  
a metallic spiral of battlements  
terrain on terrain  
terrace on terrace  
turning into an iron acropolis  
upon a blunt mountain  
which is more mountainous  
than any mythic mountain  
on the morning any mythic man  
stood like a pillar at its peak*

*and stared down upon the city's houses  
 into the dead windows of the houses  
 of the whole city of sin  
 before rising on remarkable arms  
 through the waves of the sky  
 disappearing behind the sun  
 which now drips a yellow colour  
 over the whole of this iron wilderness  
 this ironic world of windows  
 this many-windowed world*

From an iron acropolis and windows which peer out into nowhere, it is not too far to leap from Surrealism to Cubism, and then to Pablo Picasso. The spring of 1907 marked the turning point in the life of Picasso, and in modern art, for that year he painted "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)", a big canvas in every sense of the word. Eight feet square, so that not even the Museum of Modern Art in New York houses it successfully.

In "Les Femmes d'Alger", Picasso caught the figures of five women in incredibly grotesque poses. He deliberately turned his back on the smooth symmetry of his earlier art, and faced head-on the stark distortions that would so influence all contemporary painting. Sir Kenneth Clark called "Les Femmes d'Alger" "the triumph of hate"; and, in another context entirely, Harold Rosenberg, the American art critic, observed that in society today voodoo and calculus can exist side by side. These two ideas—the triumph of hate, the co-existence of science and superstition—took shape in this short poem about Picasso's painting. It has eight lines, one for each square foot of canvas. "What Pablo Picasso did in 'Les Femmes d'Alger'":

*He stripped five of our women  
 their eyes were opened like oracles  
 three he broke on beds of geometry  
 two he placed front to back with beasts  
 voodoo and calculus he let loose  
 to corrupt our consciousness  
 this way he circled us into a science  
 this way he unsettled us into a savagery*

Someone has said that Paul Klee was a miniature Pablo Picasso. Behind the kaleidoscope of little birds and twittering machines in this German-Swiss

artist's paintings, there is the mind of a very methodical worker who was attracted to the smallest sensations of life and who made his major art out of these. It is the mind of the man, as much as the colour on the canvases, that captivates one with Klee. "Klee Collage" is an attempt to peer behind the paintings and catch that agile mind at work and play. The poem is a collage, in that it "quotes" other peoples' prose within its own larger structure. The poem is full of direct discourse from Klee's journals, letters, and diaries. Phrases are pirated from the Eleventh Edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* under the entry for "Kairouan", the city in Tunisia, and it concludes with two contrasting quotations—one, a friendly description of Klee by Karl Nierendorf, the art historian, the other, the artist's own credo. Finally, what attracted Klee was the myth-like journey itself to the city of Kairouan, and this holds the collage together. Here his experiences altered forever his dark Germanic world, and brought the light, colour, vitality, and friendly rather than menacing forms of the Near East into his work for all time. "Klee Collage":

*At the beginning of his development,  
the year 1902, his age twenty-two:  
"I want to be as though new-born  
knowing nothing, absolutely nothing."*

*With a certainty, a purpose,  
a companion with him, August Macke  
(who died during the war then beginning),  
they approached the Gates of Kairouan.*

*The genius of the artist,  
the genius of the geographic arrangement.*

*"No longer man as he is", he said,  
"but as he might also be,  
otherwise I would need such a confusion of lines . . .  
such a dimness beyond recognition."*

*So the man from the cantons  
luxuriated among orientalisms  
and architectures, entered mosques  
"where the privilege is granted"  
and took in areas of brightness,  
the desert air, the desert sand,  
minarets full of Moorishness,  
white plaster and alabaster.*

*He recalled his academic masters:  
in Genoa ("with its multitudes of ships  
from all over the world");  
in Naples, with its undersea aquarium  
("unearthly world of the ocean,  
behind glass windows, monstrous fauna,  
weirdly demonic flora"):*

*The form-giving forces themselves.*

*"At Kairouan  
the houses are built around a central courtyard,  
and present nothing but bare walls  
to the street."*

*At Kairouan  
the year 1914, his age thirty-five,  
in the sacred city of Tunisia of the Saracens,  
he found the signature of the sun,  
the limits of light, unlimited light,  
white and red domes,  
the school of the sun.*

*His emotional mind:  
"I create symbols which reassure the mind".  
His outward world:  
"Pictures alone will abundantly fill out this one life".*

*Years later, after the war,  
the year 1919, his age forty,  
visiting in the spring, Karl Nierendorf  
found him in the semi-darkness of his studio,  
at the centre of his room,  
his canvases complementing and completing him.*

*As the visitor described it:  
"I did not want to break the spell of the hour.  
I almost forgot the presence of the artist . . .  
I found him near holiness".*

*As the artist saw it:*  
 "Only I must begin not with hypotheses,  
 but with specific instances,  
 no matter how minute,  
 and the typical will automatically follow  
 from a series of examples."

In Paul Klee we have the painter of fantasy and illusion. Who is the painter of disillusion and phantasmagoria? Those who have read Huysman's *Against Nature* will answer that the description fits the decadent aesthete Gustave Moreau, and they will be right.

When Gustave Moreau died in Paris in 1900, he left behind his house with paintings hanging on every wall. According to his will, he bequeathed this house of art and his valuable canvases to the city of Paris as long as the city would agree to maintain the building and the collection intact as a permanent memorial to his work. The city council agreed, and the first curator of this unusual bequest was one of Moreau's pupils, George Rouault. Moreau himself was something of a recluse, and his desires took strange and elaborate, mythic forms. "To the Memory of Moreau the Man" attempts to convey the total effect of Musée Gustave Moreau, 14 rue de la Rochefoucauld, Paris 9. "To the Memory of Moreau the Man":

*We know the nearness of your knowledge  
 ancient fantasy antique corruption  
 perverse beyond posture  
 the ideal illusion of love  
 heroes who are helpless  
 woman without will or want  
 separate in the paralysis of sleep  
 they dream their obscure desires  
 alarming the senses that sleep  
 one beauty beyond all beauty  
 the suave but sinister spectacle  
 of the great venereal flower unfolding  
 rising from its sacrilegious couch  
 freed from the feel of unfelt flesh  
 moving among us deeply within us  
 where our senses and our sexes meet.*

"A prince in the domain of art" was Bernard Berenson's description of Andrea Mantegna, the sixteenth-century Italian painter whose style, like the film director Sergei Eisenstein's, dignified and imparted a monumental Roman quality to the most intimate and religious of subjects. Behind his sixteenth-century figures, the background extends and extends into infinity, and a whole universe of incredible detail emerges. There is one of these pastoral landscapes behind Mantegna's "Virgin and Standing Child", and this poem attempts to populate one of these landscapes with living forms. "To Recreate the Impossible Landscapes of Mantegna's 'Virgin and Standing Child' and Others":

*The reason it is so complete  
and so indescribably beautiful  
is obvious: it copies  
a celestial one.*

*Both are identical,  
in likeness, in distance.*

*Ferocious beasts no longer lurk  
but are friendly and fed,  
and the birds that take to the air  
almost kiss the moon,  
which is visible alongside the sun and stars.*

*The mountains and the valleys are sunk in fertility,  
in swards of greenery so intricate  
you can count the blades of grass  
that surround the closely cobbled paths which lead  
from trysting place to trysting place.*

*Indeed these landscapes  
are model and likeness  
that fulfill their full intent:  
true images of a higher one.*

*Terrestrial paradises then  
have a spiritual wilderness in common,  
a wild world magnificently and minutely tamed:  
geometric, sensible, intelligent,  
a gardener's, an animal tamer's, delight.*



*The inhabitants as well,  
for the men war not but consider creation  
and, indeed, almost float above it,  
while the women sing for hours at a time  
wearing their garments of whitest white,  
or wearing their robes of flesh and falling hair,  
wearing them well, without nakedness or modesty,  
with gowns occasionally of grasses and leaves,  
to hide what is not really there.*

*The beasts mate openly in the open fields,  
and in the sky the angels, too, are not shy,  
but stand on clouds, water, and even thin air,  
defying the best of mortal acrobats,  
singing from their psalters  
and plucking on their psalteries  
or, to remain within the period,  
their mandolins.*

*Occasionally God himself will appear,  
beneficent, fatherly,  
casting a mild shadow over this  
his miniature creation, his minor model, his human mode,  
when he would wish to whisper to these children of his  
in their profound but promised sleep.*

From Italy returning to Canada is no mean step, and moving from the loving details of Mantegna's backgrounds to the bold and almost belligerent foregrounds of one of Gerald Gladstone's sculptures is willingly becoming a speck of dust in some twentieth-century juggernaut. Gladstone works on a gigantic scale, in steel, and his material explodes in all directions around him. His metal sculptures often upstage the very buildings they were commissioned to adorn.

One two-ton construction, called "Emerging Galaxy", resembles (if anything at all) a cracked pterodactyl's egg. This "new model of the universe" inspired the last poem with its sense of foreboding. Could the "pterodactyl's egg" be the one laid by Louis Archambault's bird which alighted outside the National Gallery? "For Gerald Gladstone who Welded 'Emerging Galaxy'":

*Do you see man moving through a great  
migration, surrounded by intricate spheres,  
entering intelligently strange interminable spaces  
that throw this incredible cosmos far from all others?*

*If so you have manufactured matter,  
masses of forms whose metals must flower  
into that one central sun whose source sucks  
your ingredients, your germ-grown heat and steel.*

*It is ultra-natural, your medium of matter.  
You must have made it up, even conceived it  
in someone's arms on a night when the night sky  
was itself grated and rocked with metallic stars.*

*You must have. Otherwise whose womb erupted?  
Whose egg split from ones to twos, fours, sixteens?  
Whose organism was dislodged by whose ferrous orgasm,  
to account for this birth, this blister of bare steel?*

*You do not know! Who knows? Is it known?  
For between sun and suns, between the mass  
and its molecule, between the great spontaneous  
generation and the continuous breathless creation,*

*you have placed this amazing machine,  
this medium of motion, which proliferates  
vast fierce forms into the vacuum of feeling,  
not reason, unique universe, construction coming.*