

Against the Amnesiacs: The Art Criticism of Jean Bazaine, 1934-1944

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In his treatise on the practice of painting published in 1948, *Notes sur la peinture d'aujourd'hui*, Jean Bazaine argued that the purpose of painting is not simply to capture the simulacral surface appearances of an object, but to give a viable form and authentic meaning to a life that is experienced as a symbiotic engagement with the exterior world and with interior, or spiritual, imperatives. To this end, Bazaine opened his argument with a condemnation of “what is commonly known as naturalism in painting:”

It is this refusal or this impossibility of a permeable universe: an art without *abstractions*, that is to say deprived of profound contact with the universal, a flesh that is no longer armed with signs that surpass it. The decadence of an art, like that of man, always consists of this passage from the object-pretext, crossroads of forces, to the object as an end in itself, to a closed economy, to the object that has become so dumb that it devours its own feet, to the object-catoblepas.¹

Bazaine’s *Notes* articulated the premises of a “third way” route for painting that could transcend the stylistic and ideological conflict between abstraction and realism and maintain the essential connection between representation and nature; and in doing so, revivify the French national tradition. The appeal of his arguments to many artists during the 1950s stemmed from his advocacy of a practice of painting founded in the subjective engagement of the person with the world, retaining pictorial

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¹ Jean Bazaine, *Notes sur la peinture d'aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1948), reprinted in *Le temps de la peinture (1938-1989)* (Paris, 1990), 83. Bazaine’s italics. The catoblepas is described in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a species of a savage buffalo-like beast of African origin, referred to ancient Greek texts and their translations.

autonomy and avoiding the partisan group politics and inflexible ideals that plagued the interpretation of painting in the post-war period.

Bazaine was not a newcomer to the practice of writing about art. The ideas sustaining his treatise, as well as his poetic eloquence and ability to craft a persuasive polemic, were introduced in a series of art critical texts written between 1934 and 1944, written for the monthly journal *Esprit* and the weekly newspaper *Temps présent*. This essay returns to these early texts in order to consider how Bazaine's art criticism operated within an agenda of critique and renovation of the avant-garde, and contributed to a significant group effort by artists and intellectuals to reframe the possibilities for art in a post-industrial society. Surprisingly, Bazaine's art criticism has only occasionally been mentioned by art historians. On first glance, this may be because his paintings and art critical texts seem best situated within the domain of modernist aestheticism: his adamant anti-Surrealism, the privilege bestowed upon painting and the character of its tradition, and his concentration on issues of light, color and form, could place him comfortably amongst conservative modernists fighting for the autonomy of art and adhering to an aesthetics of formal purity.² However, slotting Bazaine into the category of "return-to-order" reactionaries ignores the ways in which his art criticism participates in the *prise de conscience* that characterizes the crisis years between 1929 and 1939, engaging artists and intellectuals in attempts to revise the political and cultural structures of bourgeois, technocratic democracy and to propose a "new order" for modern society.³

Moreover, the inclusion of regular commentary on contemporary art in *Esprit* and *Temps présent* has been only summarily noted by historians of the "non-conformist" intellectual movements of the 1930s with which these publications are associated.⁴ Yet, it is clear that art criticism was viewed as a means of reflecting on the role of the artist and the functions of art in the building of a harmonious civic society. In particular, the philosophy of Personalism elaborated by Emmanuel Mounier and the program of critique and social reform set out in *Esprit* proposed a radical reconstruction of French society where the artist will play a key role. Consequently, this essay argues that setting Bazaine's art criticism within the context of its production for two significant press forums that were defined by their progressive Catholic outlook and "third-way" political positions, reveals the formation of an alternative circuit between modernism and politics whose nuances have yet to be fully explored.

Through a sequence of exhibition reviews, Bazaine pursued the goal of establishing a viable pictorial and political opposition to Surrealism and to the geometric abstraction promulgated by the groups *Cercle et Carré* and *Abstraction-*

² The most influential interpretation of the division between the avant-garde and modernism has been proposed by Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, 1984) with the important foreword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse, vii-xxxix.

³ See Bernard Ceysson, "Peindre, sculpter, dans les années 30 en France," in *L'art dans les années 30 en France* (Saint-Etienne, 1979), 16-17; and Jean Laude, "La crise de l'humanisme et la fin des utopies," *L'art face à la crise. L'art en occident, 1929-1939* (Saint-Étienne, 1979), 317-318.

⁴ The term "non-conformist" derives from Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle's study, *Les non-conformistes des années 30* (Paris, 2001 [1969]). Michel Winock, '*Esprit*.' *Des intellectuels dans la cité 1930-1950* (Paris, 1996), 159, only briefly mentions a "group of artists" in the milieu of Personalism that met at a café on Place Saint-Sulpice. This group may have been the one described by the former Futurist painter Gino Severini, who in the 1920s was known for his classicism and sacred art. Severini describes an attempt in 1932 to write an arts manifesto for *Esprit* in *Témoignages. 50 ans de réflexion* (Rome, 1963), 244-250. He lists the artists and art critics involved in addition to himself, as Marc Chagall, André Baudin, Gilles de la Tourette, Edmond Humeau, Ivan Denis, Pablo Gargallo, Suzanne Roger, and Pierre Courthion.

Création. At the same time, this new route for painting, yet to be fully defined, issued a challenge to *pompier* and “return-to-order” modes of realism, whether associated with left-wing politics or with the academy. It was also intended to contribute towards the reinvigoration of the sterile, anachronistic formulas of *art sacré* in offering new, possibly non-realist, modes of representing spiritual experience. Although his own painting would only make the transition from figuration to a fully “non-figurative” style between 1941 and 1944, Jean Bazaine used his exhibition reviews as a means of establishing the premises of these tasks for modern painting. The ideal was to retain the benefits of tradition for painting whilst allowing it the freedom to extend into new realms of non-figurative representation. The move to non-figuration was not conceived of as a purely pictorial transition but a strategy of liberation that would enable the practice of painting to act once more as the binding glue between the individual and society. The social and political implications of this re-orientation of pictorial style are highlighted in this essay by the inclusion of excerpts from a largely unpublished set of letters from the painter and critic Marcel Gromaire to Bazaine and by a preliminary discussion of Bazaine’s war-time articles for the *Nouvelle revue française* and *Comoedia*.⁵

Bazaine’s decision to not only paint but to write about painting entailed an understanding of art criticism as a polemical and pedagogical tool. Later in life, Bazaine denigrated the value of his early art critical texts.⁶ Notwithstanding his retrospective disavowal of the desire to write about art, opposing it to painting itself, Bazaine wrote a sequence of nine exhibition reviews for *Esprit* between 1934 and July 1938.⁷ In addition, he contributed a regular column of art criticism to the progressive Catholic newspaper *Temps présent*, starting with the second issue of 12 November 1937 through to November 1938. During the 1920s, he was as engaged with literature and writing as with painting, studying for a degree in literature, art history and history of religion at the Sorbonne. In 1930, he exhibited his work for the first time at Galerie Jeanne Castel in a group of independent, modern painters that included the young French “expressionist” Jean Fautrier, the slightly older painter of powerful realist works, Marcel Gromaire, and the Russian-born former constructivist, Ivan Pougny. Also in 1930, Bazaine met Micheline Fumet, sister of the erudite young editor Stanislas Fumet, who provided a further introduction into the bohemian world of Montparnasse artists, composers and writers.⁸ Fumet’s own writing on art, including a preface for Bazaine’s first solo exhibition at Galerie Van Leer in 1932, would also provide an important model for Bazaine, with its emphasis on the artwork as a spiritual manifestation and the importance of form and technique.⁹ And, around this time, either through Gromaire, or through the Fumet family, Bazaine came into contact with the Catholic philosopher Emmanuel Mounier, who founded the journal *Esprit* in 1932, and who became a close friend.

⁵ Some excerpts of letters from Gromaire to Bazaine are reproduced in the invaluable exhibition catalogue edited by Marie-Odile Briot, *Marcel Gromaire 1892/1971* (Paris, 1980). The Archives Bazaine contains the full sequence of letters that date from 1938 to 1963.

⁶ Jean Bazaine to Roger Lesgards and Vonick Morel, *Couleurs et mots. Entretiens avec Jean Bazaine* (Paris, 1997), 13.

⁷ See the bibliography by Jean-Pierre Greff appended to *Le temps de la peinture (1938-1989)* (Paris, 1990 [2002]).

⁸ Micheline Fumet met Jean Bazaine in 1930 in Brittany and subsequently left her husband to live with him. They married in 1944 following her first husband’s death during the war. Stanislas Fumet was also close to Gromaire, whom he met prior to World War I.

⁹ See Fumet, *Le procès de l’art* (Paris, 1929); and *Histoire de Dieu dans ma vie* (Paris, 2002); and further, Marie-Odile Germain, dir., *Stanislas Fumet ou la présence du temps* (Paris, 1999).

In what may be considered his first art critical text, written in 1928 as part of his university studies and titled “La densité dans le dessin et dans la peinture,” Bazaine argued that the quality of *densité* in the pictorial work of art has two aspects: firstly, the reconstitution on the canvas of concrete objects from the world, and secondly, the depiction of the *truth* or essential character of the objects. The challenge for the artist is to negotiate the two modes of apprehending the object; for Bazaine, the exterior appearance of the object is less important than obtaining a deeper, interior understanding: “True density in art is thus felt and founded upon belief, much more than it corresponds to reality.”¹⁰ Though he does not specify the exact nature of this “belief,” Bazaine suggests that the painter should act as an active filter or medium through which the essential, spiritual grain of the natural world becomes a visible, tangible reality, over and above surface appearance.

The emphasis placed by Bazaine on the revelation of a spiritual essence in nature, and his admiration for the philosophical works of Henri Bergson, especially *L'évolution créatrice*, made his candidature for the job of exhibition critic for *Esprit* an appropriate one.¹¹ The role of the art critic, Mounier stated in 1934, should be a directive and combative one, seeking “to provoke contact between the artist and the public, guiding the public, and even if he cannot claim to direct the inspiration of the artist, he can nonetheless help him in the necessary struggle against his blind spots, weaknesses, and complacencies. ... In all these cases, criticism must be a work in the second degree.”¹² Bazaine’s initial review followed Mounier’s guidelines and indicates his participation in a widening circle of intellectuals and writers linked to the desire of the neo-Thomist philosopher, Jacques Maritain, to instigate a “new Christianity.” He discussed an exhibition of recent work by Marek Szwarc, a Polish-born artist who met Maritain in 1922 and subsequently converted from Judaism to Christianity. Szwarc was a welcome guest at the apartment of Stanislas Fumet as part of a circle of Catholics dedicated to integrating Judaism and other religious traditions within a universal conception of Catholicism.¹³ Bazaine’s commentary on Szwarc’s sculptural reliefs depicting Biblical episodes in beaten copper (*cuivre de l'estampage*) focused on the values of authenticity and seriousness indicated by the artist’s reversion to an artisanal technique dating back to the Middle Ages. For Bazaine, the strength of Szwarc’s reliefs was concentrated in the linear clarity obtained by the special properties of the shiny, hard, metal and a reduction of the composition to simplified, inscribed lines that indicate the subject-matter with the utmost legibility.¹⁴ His praise of Szwarc’s work sets up the artist as a model to be emulated in the move by Maritain and other progressives within the Church to renovate the forms and the content of religious art. Bazaine himself, in his second review, railed against the dishonesty and sterility of much contemporary *art sacré*, whose decadence “began the

¹⁰ Archives Bazaine, Jean Bazaine, “La ‘densité’ dans le dessin et dans la peinture,” *Travaux des étudiants du groupe d’histoire de l’art de la faculté des lettres de Paris* (Paris, 1928), 31. Bazaine’s italics.

¹¹ Viveca Bosson suggests that it was Bazaine’s interest in and debt to Bergson that brought him into contact with the *Esprit* milieu in Jean Tardieu, Jean-Claude Schneider and Viveca Bosson, *Bazaine* (Paris, 1975), 36.

¹² Emmanuel Mounier, “Préface à une réhabilitation de l’Art et des Artistes,” *Esprit* (Oct. 1934), 21.

¹³ Philippe Chénaux, “Fumet éditeur,” in Germain, 41; and *L’école de Paris 1904-1929, la part de l’Autre* (Paris, 2000), 363.

¹⁴ Bazaine, “L’exposition Marek Szwarc,” *Esprit* (May 1934), 339.

day where it [sacred art] named itself as such, that is to say, it became a form of art, and no longer the complete expression of the life and preoccupations of man.”¹⁵

Bazaine’s evocation of a world to come when the spiritual and the material worlds will be united, with the work of art the emblem of such unity, should be read alongside Mounier’s “Préface à une réhabilitation de l’Art et des Artistes” in the October 1934 special issue of *Esprit* that bore the title “L’art et la révolution spirituelle.” The revolution envisaged by the writers and artists of *Esprit* entailed the theorization of a re-organized, organic community whose social structure no longer depends upon monetary and utilitarian values, class oppression, or mercenary individualism. In outlining the philosophy of Personalism, Mounier asked for a community that privileges the unique attributes of each *person*, against the selfish isolation of the *individual*, within a societal collective working for common goals: the world to come to which the artist can contribute in a preparatory sense and art appears as the paradigmatic example of a spiritualized form of experience and labor.¹⁶ Mounier asks that art play a crucial communicative role in acting as the interface between inner life, or poetic life and the physical world. In this action, art will function as a kind of natural prayer, in contrast to abstract art that loses itself in games of pure form, art that is produced only for an elite minority, or realist art that is instrumentalized by the state as propaganda.

Mounier’s manifesto preceded a roster of articles by various critics that treat each art as a singular medium (literature, poetry, theatre, painting, architecture, music, cinema), for, he says, it is only through an examination of the specific properties of each art that an artistic reform compatible with the “movement of spiritual reform” can be achieved:

While waiting for the Host, it is necessary to put back a bit of order in the House of the Arts ... to rediscover the direction of each artistic essence is a preliminary task of putting things in their place, perhaps accentuating distinctions for a while in order to see clearly, to avoid misrecognition of the resonances between one order and another, without giving in, above all, to the academic superstition of the “genres.” Which today is a task of urgent priority.¹⁷

Mounier’s arts manifesto sought to establish the Personalist position as a new and authentic voice for change and as an avant-garde intent on societal and aesthetic revolution. He clearly distinguishes the principles of his group from Surrealism, which he praises for its rebellion against mediocrity and conformism, but criticizes for its decline into either anarchy or bending the knee to Moscow. He also damns the Association des Artistes et Écrivains révolutionnaires (AEAR) for their adhesion to Communism and its cultural policies.¹⁸ As an alternative, Mounier proffers the seductive but elusive goal of a socially and politically renovated world in which the artist, as a free *person*, becomes the paradigmatic emblem of “an inner life within a

¹⁵ Bazaine, “Note sur l’art religieux ‘Moderne’—A propos de quelques expositions,” *Esprit* (July 1934), 658-9. On the efforts to modernize sacred art, see Père P.-R. Régamey and Père M.-A. Couturier, “Bilan de l’époque 1920-1940,” *Art sacré* 3-4 (Mar.-Apr. 1948): 49-80.

¹⁶ The thought of Charles Péguy was an important influence on Mounier. Regarding Péguy’s reflections on art, see David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture* (New Jersey, 1994), 51.

¹⁷ Mounier, “Préface,” 35.

¹⁸ The hostile opposition between the Catholic milieu of *Esprit* and *Temps présent* and the Communist milieu is made clear in the journal of the A.E.A.R. See Gérard Servèze, “Notes sur la revue ‘Esprit,’” *Commune* 1 (July 1933), 76-85.

community life.”¹⁹ Like the Surrealists, Mounier offers a strong critique of the dual oppression of the artist by liberal capitalist society on the one hand and by fascism on the other. But his manifesto is also a radically conservative “return-to-order” maneuver that situates self-awareness in a pre-technological world and reminds artists of their responsibility to their specific skills and imposed limits of their chosen art. Bazaine’s name is found, along with Szwarc and Gromaire, in the list of signatories to Mounier’s call-to-arms/call-to-order that signified, indicated Mounier, “a common will for revolt and research.”²⁰

After a short hiatus that seems due to his involvement in Popular Front initiatives,²¹ in September 1937 Bazaine dedicated his appraisal of the Exposition Universelle’s policies on painting to his fellow painters and critics-in-arms, Gromaire, Goerg, Labasque and Vérité.²² In addition to writing for *Esprit*, he also contributed a regular column to the new weekly Catholic newspaper, *Temps présent*, edited by Stanislas Fumet.²³ First up came a lively review praising two anti-academic salons and rallying the public around young modernist painters such as Maurice Estève, Maria Elena Vieira da Silva, André Marchand and Charles Walch.²⁴ Two months later, Bazaine let loose with a powerful attack on Surrealism, co-authored with Maurice Morel, on the occasion of the Exposition surréaliste at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts. The attack functions on several levels: artistic, political, and ethical. Although the authors make no mention of factors aside from artistic ones, Bazaine’s involvement in the effort to rejuvenate sacred art and the Catholicism of *Esprit* and *Temps présent* implies a repudiation of the anti-religious attitude of the Surrealists and of their particular methods of accessing and representing “interior life.”²⁵ Another aspect of Bazaine’s distaste may relate to the association of the Surrealists with the

¹⁹ Mounier, “Préface,” 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

²¹ Bazaine and Jean le Moal created a large foyer mural, “L’eau et le ciel,” for a prototype *Auberge de Jeunesse* that was funded through the 1937 Exposition Universelle. The decoration of the youth hostel was entrusted to artists from the “Mai 1936” group, a militant SFIO cultural collective whose libertarian and pacifist bent led to conflict with SFIO leaders. See Ory, *La belle illusion. Culture et politique sous la signe du Front populaire, 1935-1938* (Paris, 1994), 115-116, 357, 406-7, 779. Bazaine also worked on costume and décor designs for the theatre during this period: see Jean-Pierre Greff, ed., *Bazaine et le théâtre* (Bourges, 1992).

²² Bazaine, footnote to “Préface à une chronique de peinture,” *Esprit* (Sept. 1937), 801. See then, “La peinture à l’exposition,” *Esprit* (Dec. 1937), 450-455.

²³ *Temps présent* was founded in late 1937 to succeed *Sept*, a newspaper run by the Dominicans and suppressed by the Holy Office in August 1937 for reasons of interior discipline to do with the newspaper’s attitude towards the Spanish Civil War. See Aline Coutrot, *Un courant de la pensée catholique. L’hebdomadaire ‘Sept’ (mars 1934-août 1937)* (Paris, 1961), 290-305, who notes that while the episcopate was favourable to *Temps présent*, the newspaper’s content and editorial line were independently directed. It claimed an apolitical, “catholique d’abord,” stance that rejected party politics.

²⁴ Jean Bazaine, “Les surindépendants et le salon du temps présent,” *Temps présent* (12 Nov. 1937), 4. Bazaine’s praise is related by contrast to the venerable Salon des Indépendants, whose academic nature he criticizes in “Les Indépendants,” *Temps présent* (25 Mar. 1938), 4.

²⁵ Père Maurice Morel was known for his writings on Georges Rouault. In 1937 Bazaine made his first design for a stained glass window for a private chapel, *Les instruments de la passion* (realized by J. Hébert-Stevens). This initiated the life-long creation of mosaic and stained-glass designs for churches and chapels, including the Eglise d’Assy alongside Braque, Léger, and others (1942-47), a monumental mosaic for the church at Audincourt (inaugurated in 1951) and seven windows for the Saint-Dominique chapel in Paris (1994-1995). See Jean-Pierre Greff, *Jean Bazaine—vitraux et mosaïques* (Berne, 1994); and Greff, “L’art sacré en France depuis 1939: conditions et significations d’un renouveau,” in *Asse Bazaine J. Bony .. Collot Guthertz Elvire Jan Lautrec Le Moal Manessier C. de Rougement—Maquettes de vitraux de la Cathédrale et oeuvres récentes* (Musée de Saint-Dié, 1988).

A.E.A.R and Communism. But most importantly, in both this article and in a second review for *Esprit*, Bazaine argued that Surrealism gave nothing to painting with its reliance on a recondite naturalism, its weak, literary narratives, and its fabrication of a falsely pre-established real that claimed to represent the world of dreams and the unconscious. Surrealism thus avoided the intrinsic tasks of painting involving the genuinely pictorial problems of color and space. In direct relation to this failure, Bazaine and Morel state that the crime of Surrealism was its exhibitionist betrayal of the original intention (an intention parallel to that of the *Esprit* group) to produce “the total liberation of man and the immediate social consequences that that would entail, and, finally, a revelation of the unknown.” The grudging admiration expressed for certain works and efforts of the Surrealists recedes before the verdict that their “bits and pieces constructed in an epoch of disgust ... finish up at the decorators, the ad-man’s, the hairdresser’s, and the fashion designer’s. When one thinks of what they’ve done with all that they touched, with such a craving for of purity, such indignation, one wants to cry out: *A d’autres!*”²⁶

Two months later Bazaine lauded an exhibition of medieval illuminated manuscripts, likening their surface to wall murals and stained glass in the perfect match between means and expression, color and ornament. In the realism of later fifteenth-century manuscripts, Bazaine diagnosed a decline rather than an advance, which he argued turned the illuminated page into an “illustration” as opposed to “a sumptuous arrangement of lines and colors which become one with the paper and the letters.”²⁷ In this evaluation, Bazaine explicitly indicates that the way forward to an authentic revitalization of French painting, a tradition stretching back its origins to such manuscripts, stained glass, and murals, might diverge from the conventions of naturalism and revert to the foundational elements of color and the planar structure of non-illusionistic space. This radical suggestion is tempered by its situation within a powerful strand of conservative tradition-making during the 1930s that glorified the French medieval period and claimed an unbroken genealogy of French art built upon an implicit and untainted set of universal principles that had been present throughout the ages.²⁸ Beyond the aesthetic, the making of this tradition was driven by nostalgia for an imagined perfect community, a world before the machine age where men are united by one faith and artists work in tandem with artisans in a harmoniously integrated society. Nonetheless, Bazaine’s advocacy of non-naturalistic principles of representation posed a significant alteration to the conventions and principles of an ancient French tradition many art historians and artists believed to be founded in realism. Bazaine was suggesting that non-figuration, rather than being a rupture in tradition, could in fact recover and restore the foundational, traditional values of painting.

The stakes of Bazaine’s challenge to the realist tradition and its concurrent political and ethical implications are highlighted by documents surviving from his

²⁶ Bazaine and Maurice Morel, “Faillite du surréalisme,” *Temps présent* (28 Jan. 1938), 4. Bazaine reiterated his opposition to Surrealism in “Exposition surréaliste,” *Esprit* (Mar. 1938), 950-952 (an article appreciated by Gromaire, in a letter to Bazaine dated 8 Mar. 1938), in articles such as “Peinture et réalité,” *Figaro* (30 Dec. 1944); and at length in *Notes sur la peinture d’aujourd’hui* (1948) reprinted in *Le temps de la peinture* (Paris, 1990): 86-92. For a detailed analysis of this issue, see Jean-Pierre Greff, “Jean Bazaine et le ‘repoussoir’ du surréalisme,” *L’écrit-voir* 11 (1988): 62-75.

²⁷ Bazaine, “Les enlumineurs français,” *Temps présent* (4 Mar. 1938), 4.

²⁸ See Bernard Ceysson, “L’histoire et la mémoire. Tradition et modernité,” in *L’art en Europe. Les années décisives, 1945-1953* (Geneva, 1987): 36-47; Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *L’art de la défaite, 1940-1944* (Paris, 1992), 248-54; and Jean-Pierre Greff, “Les arts du Moyen-Age, source du XXe siècle,” *L’écrit-voir* 13 (1990).

friendship with Marcel Gromaire. Gromaire's robustly figurative images of nudes, peasants and workers, were seen to be anchored in the "northern" line of artists whose dedication to realism, nature, and the quotidian objects and experiences of human life, constituted an ethical foundation for art.²⁹ In May 1934, alongside Bazaine's review of Szwarc in *Esprit*, Gromaire published a feature article titled "L'art, invention du concret." Like Mounier, Gromaire decried the state of "extreme disorder" of society that is equally manifest in the domain of art. At the heart of this disorder, he argues, is the loss of a real connection to "the extraordinary concreteness of life, this quivering pulp."³⁰ He holds responsible the debility of academic art teaching and the funereal museums and damns the "illusory discovery" of abstract art that he argues is propped up by Kantian delusions of meaningful geometry, poetic and literary fantasies, and the ultimate sin of individualism. Extolling the virtues of the unknown medieval artists of Vezelay and Chartres, and the examples of Fouquet and Poussin, Gromaire argues instead for a return to an art taking inspiration from "the immense concreteness of nature in which we bathe, surpasses and escapes us" whereupon the painting becomes an authentic participatory experience and "an approximation of palpitating life."³¹ This argument contains a formidable paradox: art must be concrete, which is to say, in Gromaire's terms, a direct and recognizable representation of the real, an emblem of genuine spiritual connection with the objects of the world, and at the same time an approximation of this palpitating pulp which is life. The crux is the degree of abstraction that a painting can sustain in order to depict a recognizable reality and simultaneously faithful to painting's status as a pictorial proxy or approximation of that reality. The painter must strive to achieve what Gromaire called the "sur-concret"—a deeper reality than that supplied by the inherited pictorial tradition of mimesis.

Though Gromaire boldly questioned the pictorial laws of realist representation in public debates, his own paintings reveal no doubt as to the capacity of line and volume to legibly render the experiences of the world for the benefit of a collectivity.³² But, in Bazaine's experimental watercolor and ink works from 1934-1937, where the figure is re-worked in traced lines and washes of color, the solid veracity of the subject becomes an object of doubt. Paintings such as *Jeune fille au bouquet* (1938) begin to articulate the limits of naturalistic realism, repudiating the traditional Beaux-Arts skills of drawing, modulated color and smooth facture for a roughened, smudged surface and a figure delineated in rudimentary form, produced not by line but through the abrupt junction of colors. Turned towards us, the oval head of the *jeune fille* startles, for she is seemingly bereft of features; she has dark blue hair across which a jagged triangle of red falls, one eye indicated by a blur of red paint, a yellow jaw line and where the right eye would be, a blur of pale blue that suggests a shaft of blinding light falling across the face. Her body is similarly composed in a mosaic of red, blue, white and yellow smudges, blocks and streaks that interleave with

²⁹ See Briot, and further, Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-garde* (New Jersey, 1993); and Christopher Green, *Cubism and its Enemies: Modern Movements and Reaction in French Art, 1916-1928* (New Haven, 1987), 65-67, 203-10.

³⁰ Marcel Gromaire, "L'art, invention du concret," *Esprit* (May 1934), 250.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 253. His deployment of the term "concret" contradicts the usage of the word by the *Art concret* group who were advocates of pure abstraction where "un élément pictural n'a pas d'autre signification que 'lui-même.'" See no. 1 of the journal, *Art concret* (1930).

³² See Gromaire's contribution to the first debate in the "Querelle du réalisme" held at the Maison de la Culture in Spring 1936, reprinted in Serge Fauchereau, ed., *La querelle du réalisme* (Paris, 1987): 56-69; vis-à-vis the position of artists associated with *Esprit*, see also the statements by Edouard Goerg and Jean Labasque (pp. 69-85, 135-148) and Goerg, "Liberté de l'artiste," *Esprit* (Dec. 1936): 476-483, followed by an editorial statement supporting the views of the three debaters.

the predominantly red and blue ground. Shards of white light bounce off the surface of the girl's outer form, the shattered shallow space of the wall and floor, and the spiky, jagged leaves and blooms of the bouquet. The shift away from naturalism was continued in the series of still-lives dating from 1937-1938. As Bazaine commented a little later, "An object, such as it is, poses the great problem of form, so deeply anchored within itself, in a pure state, in an *abstract* state, in an elementary and direct way without possible cheating."³³ The irrevocable turning point came in a series of paintings of the human figure made during 1942-1943, such as *The Swimmer* (1943), where Bazaine progressively worked out the dissolution of corporeality through the fragmentation of space and form. A pleading letter from Gromaire in July 1942 apologized for his harsh criticism of Bazaine's new efforts while seeking to direct him back to the essential principles of realism: "I very much regret it if I have upset you, but I believe that we owe each other absolute sincerity; of course, you are right—art (even that by children and from the cave era) is abstract, always, in its means; but I believe that its goal must be a form of concreteness, *sur-concret*, that differs with each sensibility."³⁴

Gromaire and Bazaine's discussion about the problems of figurative and non-figurative representation continued unresolved and bore a significant relation to the defeat of France and the beginning of the Vichy regime. Despite expressions of despair and fatigue, both artists conceived of the war as a crucial rupture with a corrupt and disappointing society that had run its course. Their debate speaks to an ill-defined but unceasing desire for a "communal effort" dedicated to finding the right pictorial catalyst for the return of French society to a spiritual, collectively oriented and socially just structure.³⁵ In February 1940, Gromaire wrote to Bazaine: "You are right, one must go on now more than ever in spite of everything. Each spiritual current is necessary and must be made as effective as possible."³⁶ A few months later Gromaire encourages Bazaine: "We have a great task to fulfill if events permit. We will need your help."³⁷ This statement was made just after the establishment of the Vichy state on 10 July 1940. Its tone of prognostication would seem to fit with the initial hope of many that the war had provided the opening for a political and spiritual revolution that would produce a new kind of national community for France.³⁸

This "great task" of building an organic community where new forms of modern art would be reintegrated into the daily lives of the people and the lamentable chasm between artists and artisans would be closed remained a cherished but unfulfilled utopian hope. For a moment perhaps, Bazaine and a number of colleagues from *Esprit* thought that the cultural organization Jeune France, funded by the Vichy government in the un-occupied zone, would provide the impetus for the initiation of collective projects. His leadership of the "Arts plastiques" section resulted in some employment for several artists and in the exhibition *Vingt jeunes peintres*, also known by the title *Jeunes peintres de tradition française*, at Galerie Braun in May 1941. This exhibition was, for Bazaine, a positive result that enabled modernist paintings to be shown in occupied Paris.³⁹ However, despite this small success, the association with

³³ Bazaine, "Le décor et l'objet," *Nouvelle revue française* (May 1941), 735.

³⁴ Archives Bazaine, Gromaire to Bazaine, 3 July 1942. My italics with the original French word.

³⁵ See Daniel Lindenberg, *Les années souterraines 1937-1947* (Paris, 1990).

³⁶ Archives Bazaine, Gromaire to Bazaine, 16 Feb. 1940.

³⁷ Archives Bazaine, Gromaire to Bazaine, 26 July 1940.

³⁸ Regarding the discussion on the views and actions of Mounier and *Esprit* in relation to the Vichy regime, see Winock, "Esprit," 210-234, 436-447.

³⁹ Bazaine, interview with Natalie Adamson, Clamart, 27 Jan. 2001. Bazaine lists the participants in "Tour d'Horizon," *Nouvelle revue française* (Aug. 1941), 225.

Jeune France had rapidly soured as Bazaine realized the impossibility of independence under Vichy strictures. In October 1941, he offered his resignation to the director, Paul Flamand.⁴⁰ The organization was suppressed by the government shortly afterwards for contravening its cultural mission.⁴¹

At the same time as he organized the Galerie Braun exhibition, Bazaine exhibited alongside the painter Edouard Pignon at Galerie Jeanne Bucher in Paris and resumed his activity of art criticism. *Temps présent* had ceased to appear and the connection with *Esprit* seems to have been weakened by distance or disaffection, so Bazaine required an alternative venue.⁴² Through the intercession of André Lhote, art critic for the *Nouvelle revue française*, Bazaine asked to place his articles in this elite literary journal. After publishing its last number in June 1940 with Jean Paulhan as editor, the *NRF* was revived six months later and continued to appear until June 1943 as an “apolitical” publication under the editorship of the right-wing writer Drieu la Rochelle.⁴³ Bazaine published a sequence of eight articles in the *NRF* between April and December 1941. They include an innocuous review of an exhibition of Matisse and Dufy drawings, an article highlighting the false premises of Maurice Vlaminck’s violent attack upon Picasso, a biting critique of the lack of quality in the modern painting on show at the opening of the Musée d’Art Moderne, and a direct attack upon the intention of the authorities to control the activity of artists through corporatization. Bazaine recalled that Drieu la Rochelle turned a blind eye to such flagrant critiques of the Vichy regime.⁴⁴

Bazaine’s wartime articles make it clear that he intended his reformulation of the relationship of modernism to tradition in painting to respond to a “common effort” whereby painting can mean something important and spiritual to the national collective. But, effecting a visible betrayal of tradition in the views of a realist painter such as Gromaire, and a sin of decadence with regards to Vichy taste, the kind of painting Bazaine envisages as a renewal of a nation’s spiritual resources was one that built upon and extended the achievements of avant-garde painters such as Matisse, Bonnard, Braque, Dufy, Rouault, and Picasso. Bazaine’s first article in the *NRF* , entitled “Guerres et évasions,” did not hesitate to revive a tone of combat in the face of resignation to military defeat and the demise of the Third Republic:

⁴⁰ Archives Bazaine, Bazaine to Paul Flamand, 10 Oct. 1941.

⁴¹ Laurence Bertrand-Dorléac, *L’art de la défaite 1940-1944* (Paris, 1993): 223-243, judges that Jeune France could not be described as “résistant” but contained many “intransigeants” holding to earlier values of apolitical communitarianism. Henry Rouso, “Vichy. Politique, idéologie, et culture,” *Cahiers de l’institut d’histoire du temps présent*, 8 (June 1988), 18-19, describes Jeune France as “une espace de liberté” but that those who profited from such spaces “le font au prix d’une vision borgne du régime.”

⁴² The last number of *Temps présent* appeared on 14 June 1940. Fumet began a successor, *Temps nouveau* in Lyon in Dec. 1940 that was shut down by the Vichy government in Aug. 1941. A letter from Gromaire to Bazaine dated 16 Feb. 1940 indicates that Bazaine had written and submitted an article to *Esprit* but it does not seem to have been published. After moving to Lyon, the last number appeared in July 1941. John Hellman, *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left* (Toronto, 1981), 153, describes the line of *Esprit* in 1940 as anti-democratic and notes that Maritain was sending his essays elsewhere.

⁴³ Letters from Bazaine to André Lhote contained in the Archives André Lhote detail the role Lhote played in helping Bazaine to establish himself as both a painter and a critic. On the *NRF* see Jean Paulhan, *La vie est pleine de choses redoutables. Textes autobiographiques* (Paris, 1989), 255.

⁴⁴ Bazaine, interview with Natalie Adamson, Clamart, 27 Jan. 2001. Bazaine was able to see documents detailing the corporatization reforms thanks to the poet Jean Follain, son-in-law of Maurice Denis who was designated president of the Comité d’études chargé des arts graphiques et plastiques until his firm withdrawal from the office. See Bazaine, “Masques corporatifs,” *Nouvelle revue française* (Dec. 1941), re-printed in *Le temps de la peinture*, 33-37; and Bertrand Dorléac, *L’art de la défaite*, 159-163.

Each war trails after itself its own contingent of amnesiacs. This is not a sufficient reason for all those who in France have still a bit of courage and freedom of thought to appear to have suddenly forgotten that French painting was for the last thirty years our only act of presence in the world and one of the rare living ferments of our time.⁴⁵

Bazaine fired this challenging barb towards those people—art critics, bureaucrats in the arts administration, curators, and fellow artists—whom he saw as deniers of the achievements of the avant-garde. He envisaged the war as an electric-shock therapy for the collective conscience, returning the artist to a civic purpose and to the essential questions and traditions that require constant rebirth in order to remain alive. The amnesiacs, he says, are those people who submit to the war as an excuse for living basely, retreating behind the “return to” slogans such as a “false realism where one shamefully escapes into illusion.” Bazaine’s fear is of a mediocre and conformist art, bereft of tradition, purged of identity, and “spoiled by prejudices, tangled in its pride at being neither red, nor white, nor Jewish. Nothing. Not even French.”⁴⁶

In addition to his pointed remarks about the conservative prejudices of the arts world under the Vichy regime, a number of Bazaine’s articles were written as publicity, manifesto, defense, and exegesis for the diverse works presented in the Galerie Braun exhibition in May 1941. Following two lengthy articles explaining the goals of the new generation of young painters, Bazaine could not refrain from responding to the inquiry “Où va la peinture française?” launched by the critic Gaston Diehl in the broadsheet daily newspaper *Comoedia* in November 1942. Refusing the consolidation of the *Jeunes peintres* as any kind of a school, Bazaine stated that it is the individual confronted by experience which creates art, not “these ‘team efforts’ that are so in fashion where one finds yet again a feeble reaction, a ruse on grandeur.”⁴⁷ Group or not, Bazaine’s aim was to establish the *jeunes peintres* simultaneously as legitimate successors to avant-garde innovators of the past and as genuinely modern innovators in their own right. To this end, he posits the 1930s and the war as an amnesiac period in which the lessons of the masters were temporarily occluded, including the Cubists, until discovered anew by Bazaine’s generation.⁴⁸ Bazaine’s second major article for *Comoedia*, after another text on the proposed Beaux-Arts reforms was refused, deployed an overtly patriotic didacticism to explain that the exultant rainbow of colors and spatial distortions of the *Jeunes Peintres* should be understood as a message of revolt against the Vichy regime and the edicts controlling artistic style and production.⁴⁹ In a time of national crisis, the combined rhetoric of colors and words was seized upon by pro-Resistance artists, writers, and the small public for this art, who celebrated red and blue as the attributes of an imperishable France over and beyond the German Occupation.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Bazaine, “Guerres et évasions,” *Nouvelle revue française* (Apr. 1941), 617.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 621.

⁴⁷ Bazaine, “La peinture d’aujourd’hui,” *Comoedia* (24 Dec. 1942), 6.

⁴⁸ Bazaine, “Recherches des jeunes peintres,” *Formes et couleurs* 6 (Lausanne, 1943), 42-3.

⁴⁹ Jean Bazaine, “La peinture bleu-blanc-rouge,” *Comoedia* (30 Jan. 1943), 1. The rejected article was “A propos d’un décor,” reproduced in Greff, *Bazaine et le théâtre*, 55-57.

⁵⁰ The problems raised by Bazaine’s arguments and the rise to prominence of the *Jeunes peintres* group, especially after the war in the context of what Henry Roussio has called “resistancialism,” are discussed by Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *L’art de la défaite*, 244-260; Michèle Cone, “‘Abstract art’ as a Veil—Tricolour Painting in Vichy France,” (1992) in *French Modernisms: Perspectives on Art Before, During, and After Vichy* (Cambridge, 2001), 81-99; and Natalie Adamson, *The Identity of the École de Paris in Painting and Criticism, 1939-1964* (PhD Dissertation, University of Melbourne, 2003), 52-85.

After 1944, Bazaine did not return to writing a regular column of art criticism although he continued to respond to surveys and inquiries. His major postwar text, *Notes sur la peinture d'aujourd'hui*, presented a summative account of his arguments for a practice of painting that is able to surpass the insufficiencies of naturalism and abstraction as representational devices for the *interior* of perceptive experience. Bazaine deploys the language of Bergson, Péguy, Mounier, and Gromaire to demand a form of painting that derives its power, not through premeditated ideological motivations, but through a phenomenological act of engagement with the world that he names *incarnation*: “this power of interiority and of surpassing the visual plan—implied in the process of creation—does not vary according to the degree of faithfulness with which the work of art depicts exterior reality, but according to an interior world which englobes the exterior and opens itself completely to the ‘pure rhythmic motifs of being.’”⁵¹ *Notes sur la peinture d'aujourd'hui*, and Bazaine’s last major text, *Exercice de la peinture*, evoke a practice of painting as a spiritualized engagement with nature and as a site of memory where a sense of national belonging is sublimated into color and rhythm and the obscure parameters of a French national tradition may be discerned.⁵²

This essay argues that Bazaine’s art criticism performs a series of maneuvers that straddle the categories of progressive and traditionalist in seeking to create an alternative circuit engaging modern art with politics and positioned against and in relation to other avant-garde groups during the 1930s. Bazaine’s choice of *Esprit* and *Temps présent* itself is fraught with interpretative problems stemming from the questionable position of these journals on the “left.”⁵³ Certain elements in their intellectual presentation—the ties to the Church, the reference to an organic hierarchy within society, the nostalgia for a pre-industrial world—take *Esprit* at least to the point of concurring with the initiatives of the Vichy regime. Bazaine’s adherence to the notion of a French tradition that can be, at least in some facets, defined by its visible, stylistic attributes, refers back to an essentialist and nation-defined conception of art-making that in its more extreme forms sought to exclude any foreign-born influences. But, at the same time, Bazaine fought for a modernized tradition of painting that rejected the pictorial and ideological prejudices constraining the acceptance of non-figurative art, and established a personalist and libertarian ethics for painting that would reintegrate the individual within the wider community. The ideas that Bazaine advanced in his art critical texts remind us that we must take account of the central position, political and aesthetic, of the complex forms of traditionalism which permeate the modern and which propose alternative forms of avant-garde intervention into the social and political sphere.

⁵¹ Bazaine, *Notes sur la peinture d'aujourd'hui*, in *Le temps de la peinture*, 105.

⁵² Bazaine, *Exercice de la peinture* (Paris, 1973).

⁵³ On *Temps présent*, see Yvon Tranvouez, “Chrétiens de gauche ou gauche catholique? A propos de l’hebdomadaire *Temps présent* (1937-1947),” in *Histoire et politique. Mélanges offerts à Edmond Monange* (Brest, 1994): 339-351; and Étienne Fouilloux, “Sept et *Temps présent*. Des ‘rouges chrétiennes?’” *Lettre* 231 (November 1977): 2-5.