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Linda Goddard. *Aesthetic Rivalries: Word and Image in France, 1880-1926*. Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 2012. xii + 275 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$69.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-03911-879-3.

Review by William J. Berg, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

*Aesthetic Rivalries* is a worthy addition to a long and ever-growing list of studies that deal with the relationship between literature and painting in France.[1] Such studies can contribute substantially to cultural history since they invariably go beyond the properties and confines of one art form or the other to highlight the concerns common to both and thus potentially characteristic of a particular era or a given culture. In the case of *Aesthetic Rivalries*, such concerns range from the various meanings of individual terms current at the time and the always slippery definitions of artistic movements, to dominant themes and epistemological shifts in *fin-de-siècle*/early twentieth-century France. Goddard deals with this entire range of topics with exemplary scholarship, lucid explanations, fine distinctions, and illuminating analyses, making this amply illustrated book an imperative read for anyone interested in French cultural history from 1880 to 1930, especially the notions of symbolism and cubism, which dominate her study.

A brief introduction charts the “Interchange and Rivalry between the Arts” stemming from Horace’s famous simile “ut pictura poesis” (*Ars Poetica*, c. 19 BC)), which suggests the similarity between the “sister arts,” but, over the centuries, spawned claims of supremacy for either painting (Leonard da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, c.1550) or poetry (Gotthold Lessing, *Laokoön*, 1766), up to the beginning point of Goddard’s study (1880), at which time, she contends, literature had gained the ascendancy and painting was on the defensive. She clearly states her insistence on the rivalry between the two art forms and each one’s quest for autonomy, not on the cooperation, coincidence, or analogy that prevail in most interdisciplinary studies. She sets her contentions squarely in the context of critical debates of the time and also in relation to recent criticism of literature, painting, and the interaction of the two. She is especially careful to note the problematic nature of key terms like “literary,” “poetic,” “purity,” and “abstraction,” which, for her, reveal points of contention and are the basis for “making a historical assessment of interdisciplinary debate in this period, to avoid superimposing retrospective re-evaluations” (p. 11).

Goddard begins chapter one, “Hierarchies of the Senses in Symbolism,” with subtle analyses of Paul Gauguin’s portraits of two leading figures in literary symbolism, Jean Moréas and Stéphane Mallarmé, to illustrate the painter’s ambivalence toward the movement, before charting the various strands of the movement that emerge through debate in the periodicals of the time, of which she demonstrates thorough knowledge and judicious selection, noting the particular importance of the writings of Albert Aurier, Charles Morice, Camille Mauclair, Maurice Denis, Émile Bernard, and André Gide (whose later, fictional works are central to the final chapter). She concludes that the prominence of the Idea in symbolism was not entirely compatible with Gauguin’s profound belief in the superiority of vision and his abiding interest in formal concerns, which she nonetheless finds analogous to Mallarmé’s poetry, leading the reader to question whether any rivalry was expressed more within the field of journalism

(perhaps endemic to the medium and linked to public appeal) than in the art works themselves, where certain affinities emerge between painting and literature.

Chaper two maintains the focus on Gauguin by examining his curious work, *Noa Noa*, termed by Goddard a “Creative Conspiracy,” which the painter used to stage his Tahitian experience and contribute to the myth of his primitive self for a European purchasing public. *Noa Noa* (1893-1897), not published during Gauguin’s lifetime despite his best efforts, is a combination of fiction, autobiography, aesthetic theory, and explanations of his paintings, accompanied by quotes and images and later supplemented by poems by Morice. However, as Goddard reveals through subtle analyses of text and images, the paintings often elude or even contradict verbal explanation, thereby highlighting “the discrepancy between word and image” (p. 77) alluded to in Goddard’s subtitle, a disjunction that, in her view, further liberates the image and contributes to pictorial autonomy. A lengthy section on the authorship of *Noa Noa*, for which Morice is often given undue credit, serves to establish Gauguin’s credentials as a writer, which, paradoxically may weaken the supposed conflict between word and image, as does Gauguin’s advice to Maurice Denis to continue fighting “whether with the brush or with the pen” (p. 105). It would seem, rather, that the principal conflict here is indeed between literary writers and painters, but not between their weapons, which, in the case of Gauguin and Denis, may be either visual or verbal.

Goddard begins chapter three, “Art in Theory,” by demonstrating a parallel in the first decades of the twentieth century between the writings of early Cubist critics like Jean Metzinger, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Albert Glazes, based on a reconceptualization of reality termed “conceptual realism,” and the theories of Henri Matisse centered around “pure painting,” all determined to foster the emancipation of painting from literature. Paradoxically perhaps, she then, once again, cites the importance of Mallarmé’s conception of pure poetry and fragmentation of form, linking both to Picasso’s early cubist work, as did pioneer articles in 1911 by Roger Allard and Ardengo Soffici. Although most critics see conceptualism and purity as polarized views of Cubism, Goddard’s approach is more dialectical, as she finds “these categories coexisted in productive tension, combining a commitment to the investigation of reality with a celebration of art as ‘pure creation’” (p. 153). This contention strikes me as particularly interesting and significant in adding needed nuance to the conventional and often rigid distinction between representational and figurative art.

Chapter four builds on the previously established parallel between Mallarmé and Picasso by focusing on the poet’s “Un coup de Dés,” with its multidirectional syntax and word games, and on the painter’s collages, intricate arrangements of disparate components. Goddard sees in both, the “principle of fragmentation and unity” (p. 163), while highlighting, especially, the use and reconceptualization of the newspaper and the problematic theme of gold. This chapter, “The Aesthetic of the Newspaper,” is, in my view, the best in the book, in terms of both depth of analysis and breadth of conclusion, which makes it perhaps the most relevant to cultural historians. Her comments on Mallarmé’s text and on Picasso’s collages are invariably insightful, and she displays the rare ability to complement them by synthesizing the work of the many critics who have covered similar territory, but from different directions. Mallarmé, who decried the regularity of newspaper columns, nonetheless incorporated the technique of multiple fonts and point sizes of headings into his poetry, while Picasso cut up actual newspapers to highlight suggestive terms, including “coup de théâtre” cut off as “coup de thé,” and thus a nod to Mallarmé’s poem. In effect, as Goddard argues, both artists explore the relationship between art and popular culture, suggesting not the divorce but the continuity and “creative tension” of both, another original perspective on an oft-debated question (p. 195). Similarly, “OR” (gold), a word and syllable that run through Mallarmé’s poem and appear in several of Picasso’s collages, suggests the recent move from gold to paper money as currency and thus raises the issue of intrinsic versus arbitrary value, while suggesting the role of art as alchemy in transforming reality. Once again, this telling comparison of writer and painter can be said to suggest affinity more than rivalry.

Chapter five moves the literary locus of discussion from poetry into the novel, based precisely on the preceding links between art with journalism on the one hand and economics on the other. Focusing on André Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (Counterfeiters), Goddard shows how his problematic use of the *fait divers* (newspaper clipping) serves as a contrast with the self-standing nature of modern art, which, by its arbitrary and conventional nature, divorced from reality, Gide likens to a false coin. Thus, for him, art is akin to counterfeiting rather than alchemy, a false yet fascinating replica more than a transformation of reality. Gide's use of the technique of *mise-en-abyme* (a nested structure like a play within a play, or, in this case a novel within the novel), where the work contains another that reflects and illuminates it, contributes to art's autonomy, as does the emblem of the gold coin, a suggestive part of the work that stands for the whole. Similarly, the disparate components of Picasso's collages, detached from their original context, achieve a new and higher meaning purely in relation to each other, not to reality, while showcasing, not hiding, their premises and processes. Thus at this (final) point in Goddard's discussion, each art form appears to have attained the autonomy from the other that accounted for their earlier rivalry.

Indeed, in her "Coda," Goddard arrives at the conclusion that by the late twenties it was widely believed that painting, once subservient, now dominated literature by virtue of the former's freedom from representation. She traces the origins of this reversal of status to a decade earlier in the paintings and writings of Robert and Sonia Delaunay, which promoted simultaneity as the ultimate sign of autonomy, in turn adopted by Apollinaire in his *Calligrammes*.<sup>[2]</sup> Despite a desperate counter-attack in favor of literature mounted by Martin Barzun and Pierre Reverdy, who famously re-defined "image" as a literary device based on the juxtaposition of radically different components, the contention of painting's supremacy prevailed and was sustained by the notion of "literary cubism." Thus, after an initial debt to Mallarmé, cubism becomes the standard against which literary excellence is measured at the end-point of Goddard's study.

From a strict standpoint, one might argue that the title and subtitle of Goddard's book are somewhat misleading. At times the discussion centers less on the rivalry of the arts than on their affinity or their "creative tension"; perhaps terms like "disputes," "tensions," or "interaction" (all used by Goddard in the final paragraph of her study, p. 246) would be less constraining and more accurate. (I would favor "interaction" since it implies a dynamic process, characteristic of her argument, rather than a static opposition). Similarly, the duality of word and image does not match that between literature and painting, since, as her argument shows, the former also uses images (Reverdy) and the latter often contains words (e.g. Picasso's collages).<sup>[3]</sup> Such minor discrepancies are no doubt due in some measure to her including as parts of chapters in the book three previous articles, which are intimately, but not precisely related, and, especially, to the basic truth that a title is nearly always a simplification of, what is in her case, a very subtle and complex discussion. From a broader perspective, the studies spin off one another and form a coherent cluster that hang naturally together, unified, among other things by a "dialectical" approach that far exceeds the simple antitheses suggested by the title.<sup>[4]</sup> Moreover and most of all, it is not the precise nature of the relationships between the arts but their common areas of intersection that are of primary interest to cultural historians, and there are plenty of those, considerable grist for the cultural historian's mill and a rewarding read for those interested in the interrelationship of the arts, particularly in the key period constituting the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth.

## NOTES

[1]. For example, Goddard situates her approach (pp. 2-3, n. 4) in relation to recent studies by Pamela Genova, *Symbolist Journals: A Culture of Correspondence* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002) and William J. Berg, *Imagery and Ideology: Fiction and Painting in Nineteenth-Century France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007).

[2]. In a book that postdates Goddard's study by a few months, Nicolas Valazza traces the admiration of writers for the "sovereignty" achieved by painting to Diderot's eighteenth-century *Salons* in which Greuze's art is seen as self-standing and eluding literature. Valazza goes on to locate occurrences of painting's supposed supremacy in the journalistic writings of a handful of major literary figures, mostly novelists, from Balzac through Proust (whose writings cover a period similar to that studied by Goddard). This study, based primarily on literature, thus provides a nice counterpoint and companion for Goddard's work, which draws more heavily from art history. See Nicolas Valazza, *Crise de plume et souveraineté du pinceau. Écrire la peinture de Diderot à Proust* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013).

[3]. On the problematic notions and relationships of word and image, see, especially, W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

[4]. I realize that "dialectical" is a loaded term, particularly in a journal aimed primarily at historians; as a literary critic, I use it in the broad sense of an intellectual or artistic process that builds on an initial antithesis to evolve a new position that exceeds the limitations of both parts of the conflicted pairing; the process is thus indeed one of "creative tensions," as Goddard terms it.

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