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Article abstract

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RÉSUMÉ

Après avoir vu l'exposition du Groupe Impressionniste et Synthétiste en l'été 1889, le peintre synthétiste français Paul Sérusier declare, de façon quelque peu surprenante, son adhésion au radicalisme « abstrait » de Paul Gauguin. « J'avais absorbé le poison », a-t-il dit, devenant dès lors un fervent suiveur de Gauguin. Ce « poison », affirme l'auteur, n'est certainement pas qu'une allusion violente aux innovations plastiques de Gauguin. En effet, et c'est là son importance, il s'agit plutôt du poison platonicien, une conception métaphysique qui se trouve à l'origine même de la peinture abstraite. En analysant attentivement la notion de poison — le « pharmakon » magique étudié récemment par Jacques Derrida — dans la pensée de Platon et dans la peinture de Sérusier, l'auteur établit des liens entre la philosophie antique et l'émergence de l'art abstrait, et étudie les conséquences des idées de Sérusier et de sa pratique artistique.

I. THE POISON

During the Universal Exposition in Paris in the summer of 1889, the painter Paul Sérusier attended the "Groupe Impressionniste et Synthétiste" exhibition organized by Gauguin and his circle at the Café Volpini. Sérusier had had previous contact with the Synthetist work Gauguin displayed at this show, but he was reluctant to follow Gauguin's directions. After seeing the Volpini exhibit, however, Sérusier pledged his allegiance to Gauguin with the passion of a convert: I have "imbibed the poison," he told Gauguin; "I am with you from now on."[1] The negative connotations of the word "poison" seem odd in these circumstances. Yet it is the apparent anomaly of this locution that gives us critical access to the nexus of Platonic associations implied by Sérusier's diction—associations that, as I will argue, form the very conceptual foundation of abstract painting.

The "poison" Sérusier refers to was administered initially by Gauguin in Pont-Aven in October 1888, when he gave Sérusier his now legendary painting lesson in the Bois d'Amour. Maurice Denis recorded Gauguin's oft-quoted instructions to his newly acquired pupil: "How do you see this tree, is it really green? Use green then, the most beautiful green on your palette. And that shadow, rather blue? Don't be afraid to paint it as blue as possible."[2] The result was the famous work later named—significantly, as we shall see—the *Talisman*.[3] Gauguin's guidance might appear to us to have been primarily empirical, for he seemed to behave as the quintessential Impressionist by forcing his pupil to attend to nature's appearances. Indeed, only the day before this lesson, Sérusier had approached him for instruction because of Gauguin's eminence as an Impressionist painter. In fact, however, the "poison" was the new Synthetist style, with its attendant philosophy that explicitly denied the empirical premises of Impressionism.

At about the time he was teaching Sérusier, Gauguin painted his *Self-Portrait, Les Misérables*. In a letter describing this work, he invoked a strongly Platonic discourse that began to undermine his Impressionist methods and established the possibility of "abstraction." In his letter, Gauguin has Jean Valjean personify the Impressionist artist who is "shackled always to this world."[4] With this description of the prisoner, Gauguin evokes the image of Plato's Cave, where the captives are condemned to view only the shadows of Reality.[5] Synthetism was his cure or remedy both for Naturalism's arid attention to surface detail and anach-

ronistic subject matter (the "putrid kiss of the Ecole des Beaux Arts," as he says in the letter) and for Impressionism's adherence to nature's mere appearances. Gauguin's Synthetism was thus more than practical, more than a method. Fundamentally, it was *Plato's* poison, the "pharmakon," which in Gauguin's hands was a metaphysical antidote to what the Platonic tradition viewed as our impoverished attention to appearance rather than essence, the outer instead of the inner, the tainted as opposed to the pure. It is to this textual tradition that we must look if we are to read the conceptual ideology of Sérusier's prototypical abstraction.

The term "pharmakon" figures frequently and centrally in Plato's writings. Translated variously as "recipe," "poison," or—like Sérusier's painting—"talisman," it is in every case a potent, even magical facilitator that Plato treats with suspicion. In the *Phaedrus*, writing is the pharmakon that promises nothing less than wisdom to its inventors, the Egyptians. Yet Plato condemns this "recipe" in terms that take us to the heart of his metaphysics. The philosophical lesson we are to learn is couched in the myth[6] of the Egyptian god Theuth's (Hermes to the Greeks) invention of writing and his description of the powers of writing to King Thamus:

> (Theuth): My discovery provides a recipe [pharmakon] for memory and wisdom.
> (Thamus): You . . . have declared the very opposite of [writing's] effect. If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls: they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on what is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks; what you have discovered is not a recipe for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance.[7]

Socrates immediately broadens his mistrust of writing to include painting: "You know, Phaedrus," he says, "that's the strange thing about writing which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive: but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence" (275D). Dead writing is thus opposed to living speech and inanimate painting is disparaged through a comparison with the live model on which, for Plato, it has to be based.[8] In Plato's text these ontological differences are characterized most tellingly by reference to memory.

Memory too can be alive or dead. If living, it is the centre of Plato's doctrine of recollection, whereby the soul knows the Ideas through prenatal acquaintance. Otherwise, it is only a "reminder," as Thamus said, an imperfect trace. Memory and reminder are related, but more importantly, they are also separated by a fundamental ontological gap. This difference parallels the difference between the shadows seen by the prisoners in Plato's cave and the true light of Reality, or—and this is where the reference to painting in the *Phaedrus* takes us—the distinction between the artist who merely "represents" the bed and the carpenter and god who "make" it.[9] Repetition or representation is fundamental to memory, yet here again Plato insinuates his characteristic hierarchy. In living memory, in the reports of the prisoner freed from the Cave, or in the carpenter's bed, there obtains "a repetition of truth (*alēthia*) which presents and exposes the *eidos*," but in the reminder, the shadows, and the artist's bed, there is "a repetition of death and oblivion (*lēthē*) which veils and skews because it does not present the *eidos* but re-presents a presentation, repeats a repetition."[10] True memory, then, brings the soul into the presence of the Ideas: identity, not the difference that defines even repetition, is the soul's ultimate goal. Art cannot bring the soul to this goal for Plato because, as an echo of a repetition, it is mimetic in the lowest possible way. Memory is therefore set against mimesis, and it is in this relationship between memory and mimesis that the crucial link between Plato and Synthetism can best be seen.

In his *ABC de la Peinture*, Sérusier wrote that "we carry from birth the understanding of [the] universal language" of art. This knowledge, he asserts, is obscured by faulty academic education. Thus we are forced to "recover [it] through abstraction and generalization."[11] Memory is the prime vehicle, since our experiences of aesthetic objects "evoke notions previously acquired and preserved by the memory."[12] As these passages show, Sérusier's theory of memory is clearly filiated with the Platonic doctrine of recollection or true memory. Maurice Denis confirmed that Sérusier had linked Plotinus's version of Platonic memory with art theory during their student days together in the Académie Julian in the late 1880s. "Sérusier," he reported in a retrospective article in 1908, "taught me . . . the philosophy of Plotinus before he revealed to me the technique and aesthetic of synthetist painting."[13] Sérusier was, in fact, so infected by Platonism during his studies at the Lycée Condorcet in the early 1880s that he learned Greek in order to read the original texts.[14] Plato's own denial that artists could have access to the Ideas through their work presented no barrier to Sérusier, who in effect mapped Plotinian Neoplatonism back onto Plato. Like most nineteenth-century Platonists, Sérusier would have thought that Plotinus corrected Plato's ideas on art. For

Plotinus, works of art are in effect at the second rather than the third remove from the Ideas. "The guiding thought is this," he claimed in the *Enneads*, "that the beauty perceived in material things is borrowed.... The art exhibited in the material work derives from an art yet higher."[15] Like Plato, Plotinus taught that we should seek to rise to this higher sphere by purging or purifying the material level of existence from our lives. But for Plotinus, art served as an ideal occasion for this process. As an example he uses the story of the sculptor who *purifies* his statue by turning inward to the reflection of the Ideas held in memory for guidance (*Enneads*, I,6,9). "Purity" also becomes the shibboleth for Sérusier's application of Platonic doctrine to painting.

By claiming that art can have access to Platonic universals through memory, Sérusier not only brought Plato up to date via Plotinus but also drew out implications latent in the entire Platonic tradition and developed them into a theory of non-mimetic art.[16] Sérusier seemed to be correcting the notoriously negative view of art found in the *Dialogues*, where Plato condemned mimesis on the basis of the narrow view that art must be representational. In fact, Sérusier was providing the very apology for art called for by Plato in the final book of the *Republic*. Once the artist's idea is allowed to participate in the transcendent Idea, however, the ultimate identity of knower and known—upon which the epistemology of both Plato and Plotinus rests—opens up the possibility that art can be a perfect mimesis, that is, non-mimetic. Plotinus allowed that "beauty comes from participation" (*Enneads*, V,9,2). It follows that "only from itself [the Idea] can we take an image . . . that is, there can be no representation of it, except in the sense that we represent gold—purified, either actually or mentally" (*Enneads*, V,8,3).[17]

Because every soul has images of the Ideas stored in memory, artists must turn inward, away from external materiality, for their models. And because these exemplars are part of the artist, there is no separation, no mimesis. Memory and mimesis are therefore no longer opponents, as they were for Plato. Sérusier has thus inverted the dialectic of memory and reminder set out in the *Phaedrus*, since for him the formerly "external marks" of painting *must* now be endogenous. One of Sérusier's followers, Willibrord Verkade, quoted Sérusier as saying that the soul is "the key of the universe,"[18] and there are many Synthetist images that seem to underline this inward turn by focusing on closed eyes and intense inner experience.[19] Again, it was memory that gave access to the Ideas in which art sought to participate. Sérusier, Verkade reported, taught "the doctrine of the reincarnation of the soul, and of its ascent through a series of successive existences to the Absolute. To '*recollect* yourself' was one of his favorite expressions."[20] His theorizing and teaching about art would become more and more Platonic to the point where, in the *ABC de la Peinture*, he focused on the artistic revelation of mathematical absolutes, very much as Plato did in the *Philebus* (51C).[21] But it was his earlier contact with Gauguin's Synthetist "poison" that made a non-mimetic art conceptually possible.

II. THE GOOD PHYSICIANS

The close ties between Gauguin and Sérusier and the effect of the former's teachings reveal another dimension of the Platonic subtext so crucial to the beginnings of abstract art. In initiating Sérusier into the principles and practices of Synthetism—what the critic Albert Aurier was soon to call "Symbolism" in painting—Gauguin behaved as the "good physician." We can trace the origins of this venerable tradition to Socrates' role in Plato's *Gorgias* (521A), where the physician administers the medicine/poison, the pharmakon. Socrates demands that Callicles distinguish "what kind of care for the city you recommend to me, that of doing battle with the Athenians, like a doctor, to make them as good as possible, or to serve and minister to their pleasures?"[22] As a philosophical doctor, Socrates prefers the painful but enlightening process of dialectic over what he sees as the ultimately vapid pleasures of rhetoric. Therefore, the remedy used by the physician must be dialectic, because it provides patients with the ability to cure themselves. The physician initially dispenses this cure as an antidote to a particular problem. However, patients soon extend what begins as a practical lesson into an encompassing method or system by which they can live.[23]

This is precisely how Gauguin's relationship with Sérusier progressed. Sérusier knew Gauguin only by reputation when they first met in Pont-Aven in the fall of 1888. When approached by Sérusier, Gauguin took the younger artist in hand and showed him how to paint in the radically simplified Synthetist manner that he called "abstract." The lesson seemed simple: paint what you see and be bold about it. We know, however, that Gauguin's advice was anything but offhand. He was consistently preaching a new aesthetic, as Vincent van Gogh discovered when, not long after instructing Sérusier, Gauguin arrived in Arles to impart remarkably similar advice. "The mountains were blue, were they?" Gauguin asked van Gogh. "Then chuck on some blue and don't go telling me that it was a blue rather like this or that, it was blue, wasn't it? Good—make them blue and

it's enough"[24] It is also clear that Gauguin was imploring van Gogh to work from memory—this was the ideal method of whose virtues he would no doubt have tried to persuade Sérusier in Pont-Aven had there been time. Van Gogh came close to this ideal at times: "Gauguin, in spite of himself and in spite of me, has more or less proved to me that it is time I was varying my work a little. I am beginning to compose from memory."[25] But to Gauguin's endless annoyance, van Gogh soon returned to the immediate study of nature.

The contrast underlines how successfully Gauguin's poison took with Sérusier in the long run.[26] What was initially a practical painting lesson became for him a creed of "abstraction" based on the hierarchical and absolute unity of Platonism. Sérusier could then cure himself and others afflicted with the disease of empirical, superficial observation that characterized Impressionism. The goal of the good physician—whether Plato, Socrates, or Gauguin—is to administer the poison so successfully that the lesson will transcend and obviate the master, who becomes merely a medium for higher truth. True to what seems like a Platonic script, Sérusier, the *Talisman*, and the idea of new "abstract" art in general took over from Gauguin the part of the physician. While Sérusier's role was bound to increase after Gauguin abandoned his leadership of the Synthetist artists by leaving for the South Seas, his initiation of Sérusier was crucial because it focused on the transcendence of materiality in art in the name of a higher synthesis. In addition, Gauguin liked to picture himself as the Christ-like messiah—partly because he saw himself as a suffering, misunderstood artist-outcast, and also because he preached aesthetic salvation.

Sérusier continued the role of the good physician when he returned to Paris after his first contact with Gauguin by giving the *Talisman* to Maurice Denis, who actually named the piece at this time.[27] Since "talisman" is a synonym for "pharmakon," the *Talisman* can be seen to embody the Platonic subtext I have been discussing. The painting, along with Sérusier's and Denis's enthusiasm for it when they presented it to the students at the Académie Julian, then precipitated the Nabi group, for whom the *Talisman* worked as a constant reminder of the principles of Synthetism. As late as the 1920s, the *Talisman* still hung as an exemplar in the Académie Ranson.[28] It was an extreme painting, but perhaps not in the way often proclaimed by recent art historians, who see its radical simplification of natural forms as an anomaly never repeated by Sérusier and thus unlikely to influence the development of abstract act.[29] For both Gauguin and his pupil, it was certainly a demonstration piece never designed for exhibition or sale. For the converted, however, precisely because it was created under the spell of Gauguin, the *Talisman* had the mystical powers of a relic, powers that far outstripped its potential influence in an exhibition. The real anomaly is that the *Talisman* was not painted from memory. But since it represented Sérusier's initiation (we might say his "rite de *paysage*") and embodied the *purification* of nature's forms urged by Gauguin, the painting became a potent mnemonic device: a memory not only of Sérusier's seminal lesson, but also of this lesson's prescription to paint the essential. Its "abstract" qualities guided artists away from superficial nature and the material world in general and towards the Ideas. Sérusier's purification was Platonic: it sought to rise above the material to participate in the Ideas, to transcend mimesis by being a perfect imitation, that is, a non-imitation. Just as the artist as good physician is left behind, the individual work of art, however historically significant, is at best a sign of a higher reality. Albert Aurier codified this essential aspect of Synthetism in his 1891 article "Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin." Natural objects, he said, appear to the artist of genius "only as *signs*" of Platonic Ideas. Aurier makes the philosophical heritage of his semiotics clear: "Those who do not know about the Idea . . . merit our compassion, just as those poor stupid prisoners of the allegorical cavern of Plato did for free men." And he goes on to conclude that even paintings made through the inspiration of Ideas are themselves only signs of this ontologically superior realm. Artists like Gauguin and Sérusier are lauded because their works "move body and soul to the sublime spectacle of Being and pure Ideas." Aurier constantly employs the rhetoric of Platonic *purity* to convey the ultimate goal of art. "Ideistic" art, as he calls it, leaves nature behind by relying on memory and is therefore "more pure and more elevated through the complete purity and complete elevatedness that separates matter from idea." Finally, Aurier links this purity to a Platonic conception of the "abstract," which is then applied to art. The abstract is equated with the Idea: what Aurier calls the "transcendental emotivity" of a genius like Gauguin can, through painting, cause the viewer of a work to break free from the material fetters of the medium and have his "soul tremble before the pulsing drama of the abstractions."[30]

Sérusier articulated and practised a similar set of precepts. During his second apprenticeship to Gauguin, in the fall of 1889 at Pont-Aven, for example, Sérusier inscribed a credo, borrowed from Wagner's writings, on the wall of the inn where the artists lived:

I believe in a Last Judgment at which all those who in this world have dared to traffic with sublime and chaste art, all those who have sullied and degraded it by the baseness of their sentiments, by their vile lust for material enjoyment, will be condemned to terrible punishments. I believe on the other hand that the faithful disciples of great art will be glorified and that—enveloped in a celestial tissue of rays, of perfumes, of melodious sounds—they will return to lose themselves forever in the bosom of the divine source of all Harmony.[31]

The Platonic rhetoric of purity runs through this passage, though—as would be more and more characteristic of Sérusier—it is couched in Christian language. "Art should be hieratic," Sérusier wrote to Verkade in 1895. "It is not without regret that I say goodbye to the landscapes, the cows, the Bretons who charm and amuse the eye."[32] Leaving nature behind in this way—a process inaugurated by the *Talisman*—does not mean that Sérusier's paintings are without recognizable subject matter, but that natural objects are in themselves signs of the higher reality. The *Landscape at Pont-Aven* (Fig. 53) of 1890, for example, is based on observation but is composed through the filter of memory to guarantee an essential image. Here the blue outlines favoured by Gauguin—absent in the *Talisman* because it was painted quickly on the spot—were put in before the predominant orange of the quarry or the greens of the foliage, suggesting that Sérusier must have abstracted an image of this landscape at a very early point in the picture's evolution. This work is more finished than the *Talisman*, but it was executed in terms of the transcendence of material nature through memory, exactly as Gauguin's lesson in the Bois d'Amour implied. As I have argued, Sérusier's paintings also demonstrate his turn to the inner life of memory via the soul in their use of the "eyes closed" motif invoked so powerfully by Gauguin in his *Self-Portrait in Stoneware* of 1889 and *Self-Portrait, Les Misérables* from the previous year.[33] Sérusier's *Le Paravent* of 1891 shows six women harvesting fruit in what looks like an Eden on the coast of Brittany.[34] Although the women are in a social situation, and although activities like picking fruit would seem to involve the eyes, Sérusier has shown all the figures with their eyes completely hidden from us, averted, or closed. The result is a palpable tension between expected social interaction and self-contained inner vision. And like most of his paintings, the scene is static, and otherworldly, since Sérusier thought that movement—Becoming as opposed to Being—was literally too mundane for the timeless purity that he sought through his work.

The "poison" that Sérusier accepted from Gauguin was, ultimately, the drive to transcend the material world and search for purity in essences. The cure was painful because it went against the predominantly empirical practices of the day and because, in its indication that painting was only an instrument for gaining access to a higher realm, it ultimately negated the painter's vocation. As in Plato's texts, it was unpleasant (but therefore good) to take the pharmakon,[35] because old habits (like painting landscapes, cows, and Bretons as an Impressionist) had to be discarded. But in the Platonic tradition, the materiality of art is *lēthē*, forgetting (in a metaphysical sense), a necessary "reminder" that must nonetheless be abandoned in favour of *alētheia*, truth (or literally non-forgetting, remembering).[36] Art is positive only because its inevitably materiality holds the crucial ontological difference between the Idea and its sign constantly before us and points to the Ideas. But just as the good physician is transcended, so too abstract painting as it was initiated by Gauguin and Sérusier had as its final goal union with the pure presence of the Ideas through the transcendence of painting itself.

I want to conclude with a brief consideration of the paradoxical nature of what we might call Platonic painting in the late nineteenth century. An aesthetic based on Plato has to see art as derivative and removed from the Ideas. Even a revised Platonism that views art as a sign of and possible means to these Ideas still requires the transcendence of the very materiality on which the arts depend, since this materiality necessarily denies the "Platonic urge to escape from the finitude of one's time and place."[37] For Sérusier, however, abstraction in art was not an end in itself but a way to transcend temporal, historical limitations.[38] Echoing Aurier's notion of art as sign, he claimed that "art is a *universal* language expressed by symbols."[39]

Yet rather than abandon art because of its inherent shortcomings, Sérusier made the tension between the material and the Idea productive: painting remained his way to the Ideas to such an extent that his experiments with abstraction may, as I have suggested, be seen as a *response* to Plato's disparagement of the arts, an "apology" or "defence" in the Platonic sense, not just of abstraction, but of the category of art itself. Gauguin's "abstraction," as I have argued elsewhere, is an earlier step in this direction.[40] Sérusier sought a new mimesis more explicitly, one that so completely presented the Idea that art became literally non-mimetic. As we have seen, this project in fact stems from a notion central to Platonic epistemology and metaphysics: the ideal identity of the knower and known, the doctrine of participation.

If a painting like *Le Paravent* can so perfectly capture an essence (whether of harmony or of

God's presence in nature—the difficulty in specification is a problem for an essence's claim to universality) that it becomes transparent by becoming part of that essence, then art will have overcome the barriers Plato assigned to it. As I have emphasized, this possibility was broached by Plotinus: "Only from itself [the Idea] can we take an image . . . that is, there can be no representation of it, except in the sense that we represent gold by some portion of gold—purified, either actually or mentally" (*Enneads*, V,8,3). Purification through abstraction allows painting to perform this eidetic alchemy. Plato's goal in condemning writing and painting in the *Phaedrus* is to get beyond both, in semiotic terms, he wants to collapse the ontological difference between signifier and signified that typifies his metaphysics.[41] Ultimately, Platonic painting would like not to be painting.

In this spirit, both Gauguin and Sérusier overcame traditional symbolism by purifying objects of their expected identifiability and meaning: this process defines their "abstract" painting. If, as I am suggesting, this transcendental purification is foundational for what we normally call abstract art—the pioneering works of Mondrian, Kandinsky, Malevich, and Kupka in the early twentieth century—then we would expect to find the Platonic precepts I have discussed at work in these later developments. Two further implications would follow. First, the Platonic subtext of late nineteenth-century Symbolist theory, as represented here by Sérusier, was crucial to the birth of abstraction. Even more important, since the "purity" of Platonism differs crucially from the formal "purity" that (following Clement Greenberg) we commonly take to be central in the definition of Modernism, if we want to claim early abstract painting and its proponents as important parts of Modernism in the visual arts, then this definition of modern art's *self-reflexive* purity needs to be augmented in terms of the *transcendental* model I have described.

NOTES

1 Quoted from Sérusier's *ABC de la Peinture* (1942 ed.) in Wadysawa Jaworska, *Gauguin and the Pont-Aven School*, trans. Patrick Evans (Greenwich, Conn., 1972), 84, n. 46. I cite Jaworska because this quotation does not appear in the more readily available 1950 edition of the *ABC* to which I refer in the balance of this article.

2 Maurice Denis, "The Influence of Paul Gauguin" (1903), in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley, Calif., 1968), 101. The most detailed discussion of Sérusier's painting lesson is Carolyn Boyle-Turner, "Sérusier's *Talisman*," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 105 (May-June 1985), 191-96.

3 This famous work has been reproduced frequently: see Boyle-Turner, "Sérusier's *Talisman*."

4 Letter to Emile Schuffenecker, 8 October 1888, cited in Chipp, *Theories*, 67.

5 I have discussed this affiliation more fully in "Mystical Memories: Gauguin's Neo-Platonism and 'Abstraction' in Late 19th-Century French Painting," *Art Journal*, 46 (Spring 1987), 15-21.

6 For a discussion of the role of myth in Plato, see Julias A. Elias, *Plato's Defence of Poetry* (Albany, N.Y., 1984).

7 Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. R. Hackforth (1952; Cambridge, 1979), 274E-275A.

8 The implications of Plato's privileging of speech over writing are taken up by Jacques Derrida in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, 1981). See also Gregory L. Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology: Post(e)-Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys* (Baltimore, 1985). On "copies," "simulacra," and "models" in Plato, see Gilles Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum," trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October*, 27 (Fall 1984), 44-56.

9 Plato, *Republic*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (1941; Oxford, 1974), VII, 514-15 and X, 597.

10 Derrida, *Dissemination*, 135.

11 Published in 1921, this is a late text that came out of Sérusier's teaching; most of its ideas were nonetheless formulated in the 1890s. Subsequent references are to the Librarie Floury ed. (Paris, 1950); translations are my own. On Sérusier in general, see Carolyn Boyle-Turner, *Paul Sérusier* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1983).

12 Sérusier, *ABC*, 13, 8.

13 "Sérusier," in Maurice Denis, *Théories, 1890-1910*, 4th ed. (Paris, 1920), 147. My translation.

14 Marcel Guicheteau, *Paul Sérusier* (Paris, 1976), 9.

15 Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. Stephen Mackenna, 2nd ed. (London, 1956), V,9,2 and V,8,1.

16 He was not alone in this, since Albert Aurier, Emile Bernard, and Gauguin were all moving in the same direction. Sérusier, however, was acknowledged (by Denis especially) to have codified Synthetist ideas and practices philosophically. I am more concerned in any case to illuminate the existence and ramifications of Platonism in the advent of abstract painting than to ascribe chronological priority to any individual. Following Martin Heidegger's distinctions, I am using "Platonism" and "Neoplatonism" as historicized doctrines, that is, as philosophies as they were construed in a particular context. See Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Vol. 1, The Will to Power*, trans. David F. Krell (London, 1979), 151. It should also be noted that Sérusier and those around him responded to mystical and religious teachings that, while analogous to Platonism, were also separate. I am not claiming that Platonism was their sole inspiration.

17 In the late nineteenth century, alchemy was a common image for aesthetic purification. See Patricia Townley Mathews, *Aurier's Symbolist Art Criticism and Theory* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1986), 26.

18 Willibrord Verkade, *Yesterdays of an Artist-Monk*, trans. J. L. Stoddard (New York, 1930), 77.

19 For example, Gauguin's *Self-Portrait in Stoneware* and Sérusier's *Blind Force*. See my "Mystical Memories," 16, and Boyle-Turner, *Sérusier*, 86, for illustrations.

20 Verkade, *Yesterdays*, 79.

21 Sérusier's interest in mathematical absolutes was also inspired by Didier Lenz's ideas, as taught at the Beuron monastery in Germany, where Sérusier studied in the 1890s. See Boyle-Turner, *Sérusier*, chap. 8.

22 Plato, *Gorgias*, transl. W. D. Woodhead in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *The Complete Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton, 1973).

23 See Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley, Calif., 1972), and Derrida, *Dissemination*, 124-25. I use the masculine pronoun here quite self-consciously, since especially in its master/pupil or doctor/patient dialectic, the Platonic tradition is decidedly patriarchal. For this reason, we may question the gender of that abstract painting so closely allied to this tradition, especially as manifested in Mondrian's anti-

female pronouncements. See Chapter 2 of my book, *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting* (Cambridge, 1991).

24 Vincent to Theo van Gogh, autumn 1888, in *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, 3 vols. (London, 1959), #607.

25 Vincent to Theo, December 1888, in *Complete Letters*, #563.

26 As I have mentioned, Sérusier did have doubts until he saw the Volpini show, but his adoption of Gauguin's ideas was then fanatical. For a chronology of these events, see Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, *Vincent van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism* (exhibition catalogue, Toronto, 1981), 370-72.

27 See Welsh-Ovcharov, *Cloisonism*, 371.

28 See Boyle-Turner, *Sérusier*, 14.

29 Welsh-Ovcharov, for example, states the case thus: "Although this painting was painted from nature rather than memory and contains an identifiable landscape setting, those who wish to interpret it as the first small step leading to the abstract art of the twentieth century will continue to do so, little deterred by a knowledge of its actual circumstances of origin" (*Cloisonism*, 372). My claim, elaborated below, is that Sérusier did use memory in its Platonic sense to execute other works similar to the *Talisman* and (as I imply here but argue fully in *The Rhetoric of Purity*) that the Platonic premises necessary for and embodied in these paintings do filiate them, both historically and conceptually, with the abstract art of the early twentieth century. For a review of the debate surrounding the significance of Sérusier's *Talisman*, see *Post-Impressionism: Cross-Currents in European Painting* (exhibition catalogue, London, 1979-80), 128.

30 Quotations are from Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, 89, 90, 93. I have only summarized Aurier's ideas here. For a more complete discussion, see my "Mystical Memories," and Mathews, *Aurier*.

31 Sérusier, *ABC*, 42; translation from Rewald, *Post-Impressionism from Van Gogh to Gauguin*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1973), 255.

32 Sérusier, *ABC*, 72.

33 See V. Jirat-Wasiutynski, *Paul Gauguin in the Context of Symbolism* (New York, 1978), 316.

34 See Jaworska, *Gauguin*, 135, for an illustration.

35 See Derrida, *Dissemination*, 99.

36 See Derrida, *Dissemination*, 105, and Heidegger, *The Will to Power*, for these connections.

37 Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)* (Minneapolis, 1982), xix.

38 Like so many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists, Sérusier ultimately transcended art in religion. He ends the passage (cited above) about rejecting the Bretons and other motifs in his painting by pledging to restrict himself to an art "plus sévère et sacré."

39 Sérusier, *ABC*, 33. Emphasis added.

40 See my "Mystical Memories."

41 See Derrida, *Dissemination*, 112.

FIGURE 53. Paul Sérusier. *Landscape at Pont-Aven*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 65.3 × 80.8 cm, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).