

Avis Memorial Symposium.
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Nov. 18, 1994

Imagine you are born inside a prison. Imagine the prison wall--wide and deep and high, built of dark massive stones. And you walk back and forth beside it and beat upon it and cry out, and yearn for your freedom.

And your friends say--don't be silly, that isn't a wall, it's just the edge of the universe.

No, you exclaim, it's a wall and there are wonderful places on the other side.

Nonsense, everything there is here in the space we all live in.

I need more space--I am not meant to live inside a wall.

Hey man lighten up. It's cool.

But you are not fooled by the easy patter of your friends. You know that you are not free in this space, that you need other spaces and other ways. And so you stare in frustration, anger, and despair at the wall.

Imagine the wall.

Maybe it is a set of rules on a stone tablet that you are bound to follow.

Maybe it is a body which will not fly but within which you are forced to live.

Maybe it is a promise you have made that you can no longer keep.

Maybe it is a course you are committed to that you now find intolerable.

What can you do? How are you to find your freedom? The idea that I will develop here is that it is art which allows us to find our freedom. That the place to find your freedom is in your art.

I shall illustrate my remarks with a few paintings. Though let me make it clear that I use the word "artist" in a general sense. A painter is an artist who ranges his or her art upon a canvas. A writer uses words and stories, a stonemason uses stone, a mathematician, a tax collector, all can be artists. In fact, I don't know a lot about painting, and I would be more comfortable using literature to illustrate my remarks. But painting has a powerful visual component and works well in this setting. And perhaps in the discussion some of you can tell me things about the paintings I have chosen.

In James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus says "When the soul of a man is born in this country, there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. I shall try to fly by those nets."

You can all think of the nets that have been flung at you at all stages of your growing up. And there will be more, thicker and heavier with each passing year, with each step up on the socio-economic ladder. How are you to fly by those nets? How are you to preserve your freedom?

The most important and the most difficult feat is to see clearly. To see the wall clearly, and the space which it contains. To see the wall for what it is. To see clearly.

Painting 1. *Diana and her nymphs surprised by Actaeon*. Titian 1550



Females nudes have been a favorite subject of artists for centuries, and this 1550 painting by Titian is a typical example of the classic form. It's a very inviting picture--you'd love to be there. It has a familiarity too, it's exactly how you'd expect it to be, how you'd want it to be.

350 years later, in the spring of 1907, Pablo Picasso stood before an 8 foot square blank white canvas. At age 25, he was going to paint a group of five female nudes. It was to be the largest most audacious work he had ever attempted. He was anxious, for he already had a considerable reputation, and great things were expected of him. He had already made 30 preliminary sketches, but he was still not sure what would emerge when the canvas took shape, found its own life, and began to make its artistic demands upon him. His eyes widened, his nostrils flared, he frowned, and then he attacked the canvas like a picador sticking a bull.

Painting 2. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)*. Picasso 1907



Or indeed, the ladies of Avignon, was how the painting came to be known, not after the city in France, but after the red light district on Avignon street in Barcelona. These ladies are no longer soft and pliable--seven feet tall, they are intimidating and unworshipful. It's a frightening picture.

Never before had anything quite like this been seen. In this painting, Picasso had broken free from the two central characteristics of European Art: the classic ideal of human anatomy, and the illusion of space based on the conventional laws of perspective which assumes the viewer observes the scene from a fixed point. Here shapes are distorted, edges are blurred, and the perspective is all over the place, front and back and sideways. Radiography tells us that the two masks on the right were painted over more conventional faces. They are a crucial addition. They express our dismay, our acute discomfort at a world in which something is badly wrong. The lady above has the first square breast in the history of art, the one below is seen from three angles at once; she represents the dawn of cubism. Even the melon in the foreground warns us away.

Predictably enough, the first reaction to the painting was disapproving, angry, outraged. Matisse called it a hoax with which Picasso was trying to ridicule modern art. For years it lay rolled up on the floor of Picasso's studio.

But today it occupies a wall by itself in New York's Museum of Modern Art. It has been called the first truly 20th century painting. Jean Luis Ferrier said that this painting inaugurated modern art by modifying the nature of the relationship between the painted image and reality and by thus placing the person who looks at it in a position he has never before occupied. Now that's interesting, those of us who are fretting to get out of our prison: it places the observer in a position he or she has never before occupied.

"Art is a lie," said Picasso, "through which one finds the truth.... We all know that art is not the truth--Art is a deception made in order to approach the truth. The artist has to find a way to convince others of the truth through his deception."

When I was young, I had great difficulty relating to women of my own age, in a word, girls. They were mysterious and intimidating and infinitely desirable. Perhaps this experience is familiar to some of you. Perhaps it can work both ways and there are some women here who have had a similar experience. Anyway, there was some kind of wall, and I was not prepared to look at it, let alone see it clearly. Instead, I fled--fled into some inner space, where I was free, where I could be a real artist, where the rest of the world no longer mattered. In fact the world I found was the world of mathematics. But was I in fact free? I know that I was lacking in courage, but what was the root of that? Was my lack perhaps more one of imagination? There is an idea here that is very important for me. I had always supposed that my failure here was a lack of courage, but increasingly I am coming to view it as a lack of imagination.

When I found myself at university as an undergraduate, I again found a situation I could not handle--the lectures I was supposed to attend, the necessity of sitting for an hour in a small seat and listening to someone in great tedious detail give you an answer to a question you had never asked, or even wanted to ask. Perhaps this experience is also familiar to some of you. Again I fled, and I would spend these hours in the library ranging in some greater world where I never allowed myself the answer until I could stand no longer not to know, where the fruit was never picked until it was ripe. Excuse me if I romanticize those perplexing times but I had been assured that they were going to be the best days of my life. You will be free for the last time until you retire. What a joke, but that's what they told me. So half the courses I took, after my first year, I did not attend, and I even took a bitter pleasure in the first exam I failed, darkly declaring that it was their fault and not mine.

Often we find ourselves in circumstances where we need to adopt the mentality of the outcast. Society does not nurture the artistic life, for all the lip service it pays to art. Institutions, governments, businesses, even universities and colleges, even, or perhaps especially, the social/cultural milieu in which we find our identity, all seem to me to profoundly insensitive to the needs of that artist that lies at the core of each of us. And there is great pressure to conform to social and institutional dictates, to be a team player. So it is often necessary to be solitary, to be a misfit, to deliberately exile yourself from the life that everyone around you seems to live. But that carries with it dangers. How easily we can justify our splendid but unbearably lonely isolation. Ah but it is the price of the artistic life--it is the price of freedom. But are you sure you are free. Have you looked closely at the wall? Were you prepared to see it clearly? With what instruments did you examine it? Was your imagination foremost among these?

Clarity requires imagination. To see clearly is to see imaginatively. That's the essential artistic principle, and once you understand that, nothing is the same again. And I think that the failure of science education, about which we hear so much nowadays, is that it refuses to take this crucial insight seriously. It gives students the impression that to see the world clearly requires little more than an expansion or a sharpening of our technical tools. But if the imagination is left standing at the door of your laboratory, nothing of any importance to you will be seen clearly regardless of the power of your microscope.

Art is not the same as photography. Above all, Picasso's leap is one of imagination.

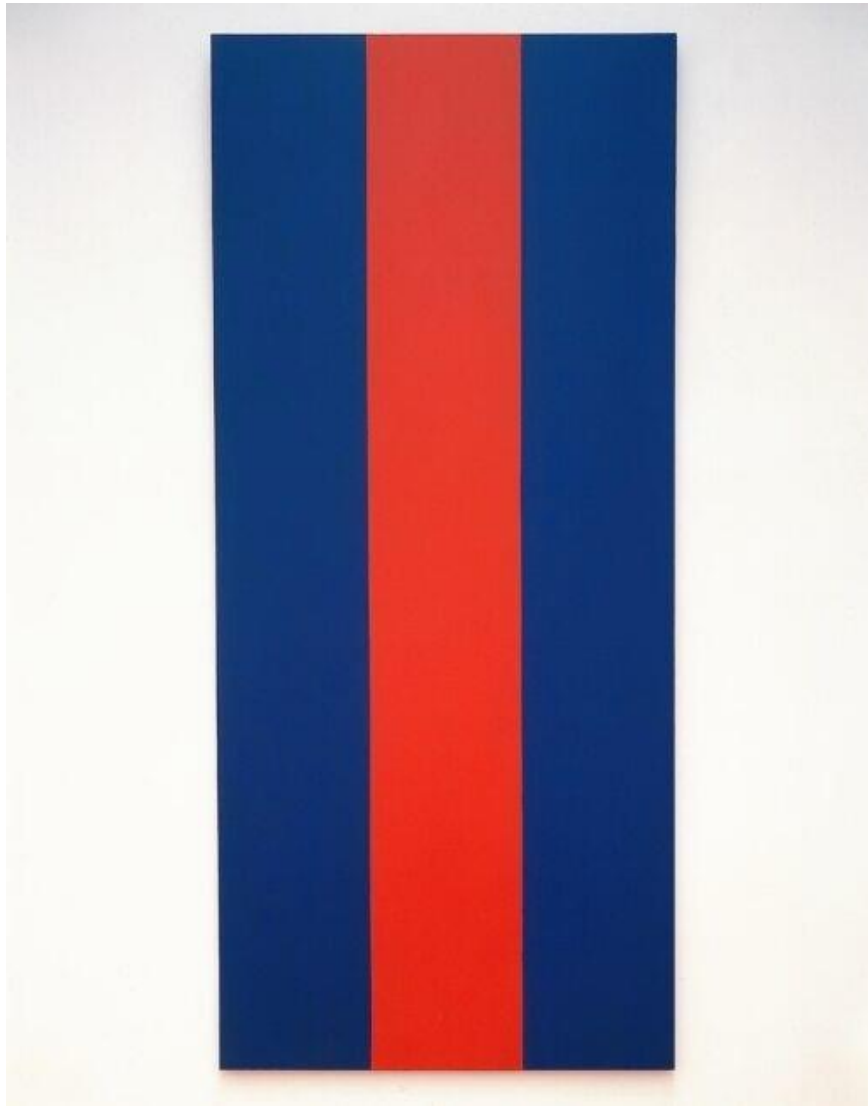
Painting 3. Portrait of Ambroise Vollard. Picasso 1910



Art must reshape experience and present a new kind of reality--that was the heedy concept that drove Picasso and the new cubism movement forward. In this 1910 portrait of the famed art dealer Ambroise Vollard, the image is broken into myriad facets which are then reassembled with a new sense of form, space and coherence. The intersecting slabs replace a normal 3-dimensional portrait with a flat mosaic, that, with its intersecting lines and corners, vibrates with life but is held firmly in place. In spite of the reorganization, the identity of the sitter is perfectly recognizable--in fact the form appears to emphasize the dynamic but shrewdly magisterial character of the man. One of the things I find interesting about this painting is that it looks like something that we could do with ease with computer graphics nowadays. Though I doubt that we could make a Vollard.

I think in my early years, my flight from contact with the girls in my class, and in fact from the whole social scene, was not a flight of freedom, but only succeeded in encasing me in a new set of walls, all the more isolating because I had built them myself. On the other hand, in my undergraduate years, I think now that my flight from many of my formal lectures was quite constructive and that it did allow me ultimately to see the walls more clearly--it gave me a measure of detachment. There an interesting idea here, that clarity requires the right balance between involvement and detachment--a balance that can be difficult to achieve. Now that I am on the other side of the fence, so to speak, I can profit from my undergraduate experience. Whitehead says that the task of the university professor is to wear his learning with imagination, and those lectures I fled from were anything but imaginative. But I do not judge these former professors of mine too harshly--I now find that Whitehead's dictum is a tall order even with artists like Picasso to lead the way.

Painting 4. Voices of Fire, Barnett Newman 1967. 18x8 feet



It was painted for the American pavilion at the 1967 world's fair in Montreal, and that's where it was first exhibited. In 1990 it was purchased by the National Gallery of Canada for 1.8 million dollars, and again, just like Picasso's ladies, it was given its own wall. The resulting furor was just as scathing though perhaps not as earthshaking as that surrounding Les Demoiselles d'Avignon 80 years earlier. Typical of the sentiment of the common man was the remark of the Chairman of the House of Commons Cultural Committee, an MP from Manitoba, that he could produce a similar painting in 10 minutes with a couple of cans of paint and two rollers. The gallery's director Dr. Shirley Thompson responded cheerfully that the history of art has always been full of tension and challenge, and the more discussion about art, the better for all.

But what kind of art is it? Remember Picasso: Art is a lie through which one finds the truth. In fact, Newman was also interested in the truth. In this case the problem he was trying to solve was how to take a 2-dimensional surface and keep it looking flat. It turns out that almost everything you might do, even simply drawing two intersecting lines, will give some impression of 3-dimensionality: one thing in front of another. Even colours are tricky, some hues advance, others recede. Maintaining flatness, what is called the integrity of the surface, requires using lines and colours in a new and revolutionary way. The shades of red-orange and ultramarine blue that are used here were very carefully chosen with this in mind.

In an interesting article about this painting in the 1991 Queen's Quarterly, Phyllis Yaffe says this: "When standing before Voice of Fire, one is engulfed by the work as it embraces the entire field of vision. The feeling of being subsumed by the painting is a vital component of its purpose. The vibrations, the movement, and the sheer imposing presence of the painting compels a meditative case of mind. If the viewer is receptive, a pulsation between one's inner world may commence. In the resulting silence, a real contact with one's core, the unconscious being within - what some call the soul - may be found. The courage to make this connection is itself monumental; the result is rewarding and refreshing."

Perhaps Newman's lie is that in trying to be true to the 2-dimensionality of the surface, he has created an object of unexpected depth, perhaps in a 4th if not a 3rd dimension.

Most often we cannot flee, we cannot run away from the impossibilities that seem to surround us--there seems to be no way out. Perhaps then we might notice the simplest moments of our lives--two colours chosen with great care to maintain the integrity of our purpose, and two vertical lines--what could be simpler--and then open that out and we are suddenly amazed at how high and wide we can make it grow, and work for us. Freedom is to be found in the tiniest crevice of our daily routine.

But there is still anger that surrounds and inhabits us, anger that things seem to have to be as they are or seem to be. So now I will talk about anger.

Painting 5. Guernica. Picasso 1937.



In the afternoon of April 26, 1937, German bombers, flying for Franco, annihilated the defenseless Spanish town of Guernica. The centre of the Basque cultural tradition, it was situated far behind the lines. For over three hours, a powerful fleet of bombers and fighters circled and wheeled over the town, dropping thousands of bombs, and setting everything on fire. The fighters then dropped low to spatter with machine gun fire those who had fled to the fields.

Over the next few days, the news of the massacre at Guernica spread to a shocked and outraged world. It was not the first of Franco's atrocities, but it was the one which galvanized Picasso into action. He had already accepted a commission for a mural at the Spanish pavilion at the Paris World fair, but he had so far produced nothing. In the six weeks following Guernica, he worked at a feverish pitch to produce a memorial to the innocent dead and a manifesto against the brutality of modern war.

The painting is 26 feet wide and 11 feet high. The figures rage across the canvas in a rush of terror. Heads everywhere are flung high, mouths forced open in a frozen outcry. A jagged light casts its sharp illumination the scene. A woman from the outside world leans through the window surveying the carnage with a feeble lamp, her face a mask of horror. Except for the harsh whites, everything is dark, claustrophobic, compressed in gloom. The images are stark and simple, almost childlike, a woman and a child, a peasant woman, farm animals, a single stricken household says it all.

Anger. Anger is a wall. Anger is a prison which cuts us off from our friends and colleagues, from our parents and our children, from our enjoyment of simple things, from ourselves. But do not bury it, do not flee from it--rather embrace it, live it, crash around in it, vent your spleen, your frustration, your dismay, and then when you're ready, or more often long before you're any where near ready, take your canvas, as wide as you need it,

as high as it has to be, and step back and survey it's whiteness, take a breath, and begin to sketch.

All the bedlam of Guernica is contained within a composition that is masterfully controlled and is as precise as a diagram. It is arranged in three panels, like a traditional medieval altar painting, the horse in the middle, the bull and mother and child at the left, and the building and falling woman at the right. But Picasso has superimposed a second design, which counterpoints and deliberately clashes with the first: the triangle which slopes up from the corners to peak at the little oil lamp. Anger does not cause your brush to fly erratically from one point to another, not if you are an artist. Rather, your anger functions as the source of form and energy for your art.

Here's an excerpt from the book by Alan Wheelis, *How People Change*: "Sviatoslav Richter strides out on the stage. His face is grim; there is anger in the set of his jaw, but not at the audience. This is a passion altogether his own, a force with which he protects what he is about to do. If it had words it would say, 'What I attempt is important and I go about it with utmost seriousness. I intend to create beauty and meaning, and everything everywhere threatens this endeavor: the coughs, the latecomers, the chatting woman in the third row, and always those dangers within, distraction, confusion, loss of memory, weakness of hand. All are enemies of my endeavor. I call up this passion to oppose them, to protect my purpose.' Now he begins to play, and the anger I see in his bearing I hear in the voice of Beethoven. It knows nothing of meanness or spite; it is the passion of the doer who will not let his work be swept aside. It hurts no one, it asserts life, it is the force that generates form."

Here is anger that we are not at the mercy of, buffeted this way and that. Here is anger that we ourselves can use to further our artistic purpose. Here is a force that gives form to our endeavours.

Free verse is the name given to poetry that is not confined by dictates of rhyme or metre or verse form, and it is therefore referred to as free, but it may be less free than it appears.

Here is Don Coles, the 1994 winner of the Governor General's award for poetry in the most recent *Quarry* magazine:

"The choice of the form though, the quatrain, the rhyme scheme, was one of the things that in retrospect I feel drove the poem onwards. I was being encouraged by the format to investigate things more fully than I might otherwise have done. I might have ceased the fifty or sixty investigations that the poem gets into earlier if the format had been laxer, less regular."

The form drives the poem onward. We start to understand the wall in a new and important way. It can be a valuable source of energy: it drives the artist onward.

In my teaching I am constantly frustrated by the unreasonable character of the scientific curriculum, too narrow, too technical, with far too much material, and all attempts to humanize it founder on the bottom line of a highly contrived three hour exam written in a converted skating rink under conditions which no true artist would tolerate. What am I to do? Throw in my pedagogical towel and sell life insurance? In fact I often think that it is my frustration that keeps my teaching engine running, that gives energy to my classes and makes them work in spite of themselves. In an unexpected but crucial paradox, my wall serves as a source of freedom.

There is an important principle here which must not be overlooked. The wall--the very object which you have come to regard as the symbol and even the source of your imprisonment, may in fact hold the key to your liberation.

Nevertheless the frustration is still there and it grows each year, frustration with my own life as much as with the lives of my students and my children. Frustration with how wrapped up I get with small unessential things, with how difficult it is to keep my focus on the vision of how I am meant to live, a vision which hangs there like a small ship on the distant horizon and fills me with hope that I will soon be rescued, but then comes an unexpectedly fearsome wave, and after a great struggle with that, I search for the ship again and find that it has slipped from sight.

Painting 6. The Raft of the Medusa Géricault 1819.



There is the ship, if you look hard and the picture is in focus, you can just spy it, a barely discernible speck on the horizon. It remained in view for half an hour and then slipped from sight. At this point they had been on the raft in the open sea for 13 days. The raft was 60 feet long and 25 feet wide and had started with 150 men, and with that load had floated a meter under water and valuable supplies had to be jettisoned. But by now the toll of death and two mutinies which left no man without serious flesh wounds, had reduced the number to 15. All of these had by now tried to eat human flesh, to drink blood and urine, to suck the juice out of raw fish, and there were many fights over the rationing of the single barrel of wine which remained on board. They sighted the ship at a time they had all become convinced that death was certain, and for a half an hour they all lay suspended between hope and fear. When it disappeared, they fell into despondency and grief. The painting was executed in 1819 by the French artist Gericault, three years after the raft was launched from the French ship Medusa which foundered south of Tenerife. I include the painting here partly because it is the subject of a masterful essay by the English novelist Julian Barnes, author of *Flaubert's Parrot*, who explores the question of why Gericault painted what he did, and not something else, and how the painting intersects with reality. My copy of this book, called *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, is spattered with blood as halfway through this essay I had a sudden massive nosebleed, something that rarely happens to me. But here is the passage I was reading at the time:

"The figures on the raft are like the waves: beneath them, yet also through them, surges the energy of the ocean. Were they painted in lifelike exhaustion they would be mere dribbles of spume rather than formal conduits. For the eye is washed -- not teased, not persuaded, but tide-tugged -- up to the peak of the hailing figure, down to the trough of the despairing elder, across to the recumbent corpse front right who links and leaks into the real tides. It is because the figures are sturdy enough to transmit such power that the canvas unlooses in us deeper, submarinous emotions, can shift us through currents of hope and despair, elation, panic and resignation.

"What has happened? The painting has slipped history's anchor. We don't just imagine the ferocious miseries on that fatal machine; we don't just become the sufferers. They become us. And the picture's secret lies in the pattern of its energy. Look at it one more time: at the violent waterspout building up through those muscular backs as they reach for the speck of the rescuing vessel. All that straining -- to what end? There is no formal response to the painting's main surge, just as there is no response to most human feelings. Not merely hope, but any burdensome yearning: ambition, hatred, love (especially love) -- how rarely do our emotions meet the object they seem to deserve? How hopelessly we signal; how dark the sky; how big the waves. We are all lost at sea, washed between hope and despair, hailing something that may never come to rescue us. Catastrophe has become art; but this is no reducing process. It is freeing, enlarging, explaining."

The wall as a source of energy, freeing, enlarging, explaining. Art allows us to understand finally how things are.

Painting 7. The Lighthouse. Tammy Love



I end with the Lighthouse--house of light--what better symbol for the imagination? It is a painting that sits upon the wall above the table at which I eat. It is located on False Duck Island, off Prince Edward County some 40 miles from here. It was painted by Tammy Love who is an artist living in Bloomfield, Ontario. It has saved many fishing vessels from destruction in the sudden fierce storms which can arise in mid-November on a cold and shallow lake. And now it watches over me. There is no vertical support under the right-hand end of the turret, but none is needed. The very strength of the bold horizontal stroke assures us that support is there aplenty even if only barely visible in the mist and the spray. To me the lighthouse has a face: two sombre saucer-like eyes look out to the right like deep pools of infinite caring. Everything I need to know about a lighthouse has been captured in a few charcoal strokes. It is a wonderful image and it is the one I will leave you with.

Ahead of you, there will be times when the walls suddenly loom too high, too close, too opaque, too stormy, and too terrible.

You will find yourself enslaved to a job that is slowly destroying your soul. Or taking a course whose nonsensical trivialities fill you with despair, but you seem to have no option to quit.

Your body will be ravaged by a disease, or that of your friend, or your parent or your child.

You will become preoccupied with yourself and not be there for someone else, someone you love and who counts on you, at the moment when you are needed most, and it is too late.

Your companion, your partner, your lover, the person on whom your sun rises and sets, will leave you in total confusion and absurdity but will leave you none-the-less, or you will leave him or her and be wracked by guilt and confusion and the fixed stars in your universe will be gone.

The ship that you have always counted on will appear on the horizon and stay for half an hour and then will disappear behind a wave. And there is no place to flee--the easy options of your youth are no longer there. You are on a raft with a handful of others, and there is nowhere else to go.

Then you must stand tall before the wall, and look squarely and clearly and imaginatively at its massive indifferent sides and say:

I am an artist. I am yet an artist.