

Adolph Gottlieb's *Blast I*

*An Image of Renewal*¹

By Finley Eversole



High rests on low.

-- Lao-tze

Midnight decides whether the sun will be born again as the hero, to shed new light on a world renewed.

-- Erich Neumann

Adolph Gottlieb's *Blast I*, 1957, is, as I shall attempt to show, a painting which holds for modern, Western man a profound and, as yet, unrecognized significance. *Blast I's* meaning is that concerning which ignorance means death. The apprehension of the depths of consciousness is essential if we are to build an imaginative and truly human culture beyond the crises and nihilism of the present era.²

As with every true work of art, its meaning can only be perceived by an act of meditation by which we enter into relations with the 'world' set up by the artwork. So let us begin by viewing the painting.³

¹ Published in 1967 in *ARC Directions*, Society for the Arts, Religion & Contemporary Culture.

² This article was written forty years ago in 1967. Yet it seems even more apropos today in our post 9/11 world with its wars, terrorism, suicide bombers, threats of nuclear proliferation, genocide, growing use of addictive drugs, and ecological disasters. We *must* find answers!

³ Following Denis de Rougemont's suggestive idea of the artwork as a "trap for meditation", I reject the positivism of those "critics of pure visibility" who deny *meaning* and *relationships* to the art-object. My own theory of aesthetics is based upon a meditative approach which seeks to enter intuitively and progressively into (1) the objective imagery and composition of the work of art, (2) the subjective energies which give the artwork its power and affect on the viewer, (3) the intuitive vision of the artist which gave it birth, and (4) the meaning or significance of that vision. My approach is amply justified by the views of such philosophers as Heidegger in *Holzwege*, R. G. Collingwood in *The Principles of Art*, Sir Herbert Read in *Icon and Idea*, and Kandinsky in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.

Blast I consists in a marvelously composed double image – a chaotic ‘blast’ surmounted by a red ‘sun’. This red sphere recalls a poetic line from Stanley Rowland, Jr.: “the primal sun – its blooded crimson turning white in trackless time.” Beneath this ‘sun’ we encounter a violent ‘blast’, its washed texture and smoke-like surroundings bestowing that indistinctness which belongs to inner unformed experience -- hence rendering its violence as an inner violence. The composite image of *Blast I* is that of a sun rising over the smoking, twisted debris of some inwardly destroyed Hiroshima. Here is violence and chaos, yet over the ‘night’ a marvelous sun has risen.

In *Blast I*, the original ambiguity or ambivalence of existence has resolved itself into a conscious dialectic. Here is an opposing interaction *in consciousness* of that which was originally experienced as amorphous or ambiguous in our unconscious existence. The original uroboric unity of night and day, heaven and earth, male and female, creation and destruction, good and evil, life and death, sacred and profane, *yang* and *yin* has been split asunder through a heroic act of separation. Yet both poles of experience have been retained in the fullness of their original power. Neither reality has been allowed to obscure or destroy its opposite.

Much of the poetic power of *Blast I* comes from its simplicity as an abstract image, purified of all specific historical and cultural content. Its truth is existential, not cultural. It is an image of primordial conflict, of heroic struggle and conquest, and of the ultimate reality of the Night to which all Life returns. *Blast I* is born of creative conflict. Behind it stands the archetypal war of opposites – Freud’s *eros* and *thanatos* – and a thousand myths of battle between sun-god-heroes and the dragons of the deep. The heroes of this ‘war’ are the founders of culture, the bringers of

The pragmatism and positivism of art critics in the U.S. is typical of American thought in general. As such, it leaves unanswered the fundamental questions about art: its nature and meaning and its place in the cultural and intellectual history of the West. Current American criticism also fails to relate what Venturi describes as the two types of phenomena of art – its psychological expression and the artist’s vision. “It is the task of criticism,” says Venturi, “to overcome this dualism by understanding how psychological expression is turned into painting and how the vision of the artist expresses what he feels.”

Finally, I cannot forego quoting another statement from Venturi which summarizes my own point of view. Venturi, commenting on Wolfflin, says,

In each new visual style a new world is crystallized. Not only does one see differently, one also sees different things. The reason it is not possible simply to speak of a new expression is that we are here dealing with developments that, though they can occur only within the realm of the visual process, actually belong to the history of the mind; they remain inexplicable without the internal factor of the continuous influence of image on image, form on form....The origin of each work of art lies in life and not in a preceding work of art. (History of Criticism)

religions and the explorers of what Dostoevsky called “the chasms of the soul.” Their journey is the journey from birth to death to rebirth. As they fare, so do the cultures and religions which derive from their heroic acts.

Now *Blast I*'s meaning begins to emerge. The sundering of the world into opposites is the recondition for the world's birth. Light – or, rather, the coming of light – is central to all creation myths. “Again and again,” says Erich Neumann, “we come back to the basic symbol, light. This light, the symbol of consciousness and illumination, is the prime object of the cosmologies of all people.” In the Upanishads, for example, we read:

The sun is Brahma – this is the teaching.

Here is the explanation:

In the beginning, this world was nonbeing.

This nonbeing became being. It developed.

It turned into an egg. It lay there for a year.

It burst asunder...

What was born of it, is yonder sun.

Light – in *Blast I*, the ‘sun’ – sets up a dialectic of opposites, whereas, before its coming, all is undifferentiated darkness, without form, feature or measure. But without distinctions and demarcations there *is* no world. “The dawning world,” says Heidegger, “brings out what is as yet undecided and measureless and thus discloses the hidden necessity for measure and determination.”

The dialect of opposites also makes it possible for us to *experience* desire and satisfaction, love and hate, pleasure and pain, all contrary emotions. Or to put it another way, consciousness, in Collingwood's sense, takes our raw sensuous-emotional and psychic feelings and, through an act of attention, splits them off from ‘the unconscious’ and presents them to imagination and thoughts, which transforms them into ordered experience. The important point here is that feeling must be *split off* from ‘the unconscious’ in order to be *experienced*. There is no experience without consciousness.

The act of becoming conscious of sensuous-emotional or unconscious psychic experience is also the origin of the myth, the symbol, the dream, the work of art itself. Myth, says Neumann,

the work of art also, the dream in all its meaningfulness, rises up in the same way from the depths of the psyche and yields its meaning to the discerning interpreter, though often enough it is not grasped spontaneously by the artist or the dreamer himself.

Blast I, with its emerging 'sun', presents us with an image of the creative act itself. It is an image in art of the *dawning* of consciousness, the *birth* of the world, the *origin* of the symbol, the *creation* of the work of art.

The attainment of consciousness, that is, consciousness of all the antinomies which shape our being, is the work, in mythology, of the hero.

The hero, who corresponds with the sun, light and consciousness, exposes himself to the dragons of the unconscious. He descends into the underworld, undertakes the night journey under the sea, or returns again to the mother's womb. Having suffered these, he is then reborn as the hero. It is the cultural hero, those creative individuals who have suffered the agonies of night and death who, in Barlach's words, "awaken the sleeping images of the future which can and must come forth from the night, in order to give the world a new and better face."

The final mark of the hero is his courage and ability to hold together his 'double vision' of light and darkness, good and evil, consciousness and the unconscious, order and revolution.

Every cultural-hero has achieved a synthesis between consciousnesses and the creative unconscious. He has found within himself the fruitful center, the point of renewal and rebirth....From the union of the hero's ego consciousness with the creative side of the soul,...there is begotten the true birth, the synthesis of both. (Erich Neumann)

Blast I is unquestionably Western in its image and conception. Yet it introduces into the West a new element which is vital to the renewal of the individual and the age. Carl Jung, referring to the equally valid claims of the creative and destructive forces in man and our inability to make "concessions to both worlds," wrote:

Unfortunately, our Western mind, lacking all culture in this respect, has never yet devised a concept, nor even a name, for the union of opposites through the middle path, that most fundamental item of inward experience, which could respectably be set against the Chinese concept of Tao.

I propose that *Blast I* is such an image, Western in its dialectic, yet uniting the opposites in a single, total experience. Yet there is no indication that our culture is ready to embrace *Blast I*'s profound truth.

Blast I may now be said to hold particular meaning for our nihilistic age. For in its image of the sun roaring above the chaos, we have a dramatization of *the return from the abyss* – the only kind of return that modern man *can* make. As the young Camus wrote:

The malaise which concerns us is that of an entire epoch from which we do not wish to separate ourselves. We want to think and live in our own history. We believe that the truth of our century cannot be reached without going all the way to the end of our own drama. If the epoch has suffered from nihilism, then it is not in ignoring nihilism that we shall find the ethic that we need.

Gottlieb's image of the sun poised above the shifting darkness, above the abyss of nihilism, is one which recognizes the rightful place of the latter in all human, psychic and cultural experience. There lurks within each of us a secret nihilist, and our cultural 'tools' reveal our hidden yearning for death and destruction. Gottlieb's image of renewal, therefore, is not a renaissance "beyond the limits of nihilism" as Camus put it in his later years, but *a regeneration within sight of the dark eternal void*. *Blast I* shows us that the powers of destruction always lurk just below the surface of our victories and rebirths. It permits us a vision of renewal but will not let us forget the cost of this new birth. "High rests on low." Should we forget the dark and surging chaos below, the sun itself would be swallowed up again by night and destruction. *Blast I*, then, is that painterly 'word' spoken to an age and a humanity which has journeyed to the brink of the abyss, for whom the threat of nonbeing can never again be suppressed or dismissed from the realm of consciousness or culture.

Blast I is significant as an art-image of birth and renewal. Its emerging 'sun' images the creative act itself. And as a work of art which holds the creative and the chaotic together in a relationship of balance and tension, it opens up for us the nature of truth itself. "Truth," said Heidegger, "is the opposition of lighting and concealing....It is the opposition of the primal conflict...within which what *is* stands." He continues:

Through being there moves a hidden destiny that is ordained between the godly and the counter-godly. Man cannot master much of what is. Only little gets known. What is known remains inexact, what is mastered insecure....Every decision...bases itself on something not mastered, something concealed, confusing; otherwise it would never be a decision.

It now appears that the authentic work of art, such as *Blast I*, opens up for us the possibilities of both being and nonbeing. It is this possibility of choosing to *be* anew which the artwork establishes. When, in a moment of care, we cross over into the world of the artwork, we are caught up in the primal conflict out of which it is born – out of which, as Heidegger says, truth happens. In that moment we must *choose* either to accept or reject the truth revealed. We accept or reject the new life of the imagination which the artwork offers and thereby *renew our being* or pass with a cowardly and corrupt consciousness into death.

The *meaning* of the artwork lies in its power to awaken, to assure balance and wholeness, to inspire creative effort, and to promote a renewal of our

existence. Art has such power precisely because of our receptivity to vision, imagination and inspiration.

*Full of merit, and yet poetically, dwells
Man upon the earth.*

-- Hölderlin