

Wassily Kandinsky and the American Literary Avant-garde

For Wylie Sypher

As a result of the publication of his treatise *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* in mid-December 1911, and *Der Blaue Reiter* the almanac published in 1912 that he edited in Munich together with the German painter Franz Marc, the Russian Wassily Kandinsky began to be recognized as one of the most innovative modern artists working with abstraction.¹ Although much that he expressed in his essays was not new, he managed to articulate many concepts central to the development of abstract art both in Europe and America. His far-reaching influence is at least partially the result of his dual role as both painter and theorist. His writing was not the remote thinking of a critic but an artist's attempt to honestly confront and outline the new creative possibilities which appeared to be opening up in the twentieth century. His treatise elucidated ideas important for the justification of abstraction; it was at once both a rationale for the past developments of Matisse and Picasso and an open-ended challenge to pursue as yet unanswered questions. Kandinsky's own paintings, particularly the artist's Improvisations of 1909-14, suggested a new freedom of expression.

American artists as diverse as Alfred Stieglitz, Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove, Abraham Walkowitz, Albert Bloch, Konrad Cramer, Hans Hofmann, Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, and Willem de

* Gail Levin is a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. She is the author of *Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925*, *Edward Hopper as Illustrator* and *Edward Hopper: The Complete Prints*.

¹ Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst: Insbesondere in der Malerei* (Munich, 1912), translated by M. T. H. Sadler as *The Art of Spiritual Harmony* (London and Boston, 1914); republished in new revised edition as *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1947). Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, eds., *Der Blaue Reiter*, 2nd ed. (Munich: R. Piper & Co., 1914); translated documentary edition, Klaus Lankheit, ed., *The Blaue Reiter Almanac, Edited by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc* (New York: The Viking Press, 1974).

Kooning were attracted to Kandinsky's art and theory.² Certain American writers were also involved with Kandinsky's ideas, particularly Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. The significant interest in Kandinsky among the American literary avant-garde has not yet received the attention it deserves.

Of these writers, only Gertrude Stein actually met Kandinsky, and of this acquaintance, all that is known is that she once visited Kandinsky's studio during the period he lived in France, from May 1906 to June 1907, where she saw his tempera paintings.³ They probably met through a mutual friend, Hans Purrmann, a young German art student who had known Kandinsky in Munich where they had both been pupils of Fritz von Stuck. Purrmann, impressed by Matisse's Fauvist paintings at the Salon d'Automne of 1905, soon accompanied the American painter Maurice Sterne to the home of the collectors Gertrude and Leo Stein where he eventually met Matisse (whose school he helped to organize in the fall of 1907).⁴

Gertrude Stein's first opportunity to see Kandinsky's work was at the Salon d'Automne of 1904 where he was represented by eighteen examples. Leo later commented that at this Salon he had "looked again and again at every single picture, just as a botanist might at the flora of an unknown land."⁵ The following year Kandinsky exhibited twelve works at the Salon d'Automne. Of this Salon Gertrude recalled: "The show had a great deal of freshness and was not alarming"; she paid particular attention for she and Leo purchased Matisse's *Woman with the Hat*.⁶ That same year Kandinsky had attained

² For further information on the interest in Kandinsky among American artists, see Sandra Gail Levin, "Wassily Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde, 1912-1950," Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 1976; and Gail Levin "Miró, Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Expressionism," in Robert Carleton Hobbs and Gail Levin, *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1979).

³ Johannes Eicher, *Kandinsky und Gabriele Munter: Von Ursprungen moderner Kunst* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1957), p. 52, "Gertrud Stein besuchte ihn im Atelier, sah seine Temperagemalde und lachelte."

⁴ K. F. Ertel, "Hans Purrmann," *Kunstwerk*, 2, November-December 1958, 41. Will Grohmann, *Wassily Kandinsky: Life and Work* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1959), p. 36. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Matisse: His Art and His Public* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1951), pp. 58-59 and 116-117.

⁵ Leo Stein, *Appreciation: Painting, Poetry and Prose* (New York: Random House, 1947), p. 124.

⁶ Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 32.

prominence enough to be made a Sociétaire of the Salon d'Automne by vote of the fondateurs. She has ample opportunity to become familiar with his art which was exhibited regularly in Paris at the Salon d'Automne and other group exhibitions; it was also featured in reviews and articles in French publications such as *Les Tendances Nouvelles*, *L'Art et Les Artistes*, and *La Chronique des arts et de la curiosité*.⁷

If Gertrude Stein remained unenthusiastic about his work, she must have been initially puzzled at the attention her friends the American painter Marsden Hartley and the German sculptor Arnold Rönnebeck paid to Kandinsky's art, his book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, and to the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter*. Stein met Hartley in the spring of 1912 soon after his arrival from New York where he had been closely associated with Alfred Stieglitz and the coterie at his gallery known as "291" for its address on Fifth Avenue.⁸ That autumn, Hartley introduced Stein to Rönnebeck whom he had met in Paris over the summer. About this time Hartley became fascinated with Kandinsky's work, the primitive art in *Der Blaue Reiter*, and the artist's treatise *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*. He decided to make a brief trip (January 7-28, 1913) to Germany in order to "meet Kandinsky and size up the Blaue Reiter group and its activity there."⁹ He and Rönnebeck visited Kandinsky in his studio and were very impressed. Hartley was particularly enthusiastic and, in February 1913, wrote to Stieglitz: "I know that what I have to express coincides perfectly with his notion of Das Geistige in der Kunst."¹⁰

Stein would also have known of Kandinsky's inclusion of her friend the French painter Robert Delaunay in the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* and that Delaunay exhibited with artists of this group in Munich and Berlin.¹¹ She wrote of the poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire's

⁷ For an account of the attention paid to Kandinsky at this time in Paris, see Jonathan David Fineberg, "Kandinsky in Paris, 1906-7," Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1975.

⁸ For further information on this meeting, see Levin, "Wassily Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde, 1912-1950."

⁹ Quoted in Gail Levin, "Marsden Hartley, Kandinsky, and *Der Blaue Reiter*," *Arts Magazine*, 52, November 1977, p. 156. For further detail, see Levin, "Wassily Kandinsky and the American Avant-garde, 1912-1950."

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹¹ For Hartley's relationship to Delaunay, see Gail Levin. *Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925* (New York: George Braziller, 1978). Delaunay was included with *Der Blaue Reiter* in their first and second group

trip to Berlin on the occasion of Delaunay's exhibition at the gallery Der Strum in January 1913: "It was Guillaume's first opportunity to travel, he went to Germany with Delaunay and thoroughly enjoyed himself."¹²

Perhaps her distaste for Germans contributed to her continuing lack of enthusiasm for the work of artists living in Germany and associated with *Der Blaue Reiter*. She turned down Rönnebeck's invitation to visit him in Germany, saying "I like you alright but I don't like Germans."¹³ She evidently felt familiar enough with Kandinsky's recent painting to write to Stieglitz in the spring of 1913 that Hartley "has done what in Kandinsky is only a direction."¹⁴ Although she would appear to dismiss Kandinsky as unimportant, there is reason to believe that her expressed attitude may have been disingenuous. For as John Brinnin pointed out in his study of Gertrude Stein: "She was shy about admitting to the slightest literary influence from any quarter."¹⁵

Rönnebeck's letter to Stein of April 1, 1913, documents her knowledge of Kandinsky's prosepoems "*Klänge*," as the German sculptor enclosed a clipping from a Berlin newspaper reproducing several examples. Writing that he thought Kandinsky's poems might interest her, Rönnebeck pointed out:

They show rather well Kandinsky's intentions in using the *word* itself as a pure interior sound (*Klang*)—and how, thus applied, it loses its quality as a name of a certain object.¹⁶

It is also reasonable to assume that Gertrude Stein was, at the very least, familiar with the ideas set forth in Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, especially through discussions with Hartley and Rönnebeck who were so charmed by their meeting with the Russian artist. Stein would have read the excerpt translated by Stieglitz and published

exhibitions in Munich, December 1911-January 1912 and February 1912; he also showed with artists of this group in March-April 1912 in Berlin.

¹² Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, p. 93. On January 18, 1913, Apollinaire lectured in Berlin on modern painting.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹⁴ Quoted in Donald Gallup, "The Weaving of a Pattern: Marsden Hartley and Gertrude Stein," *Magazine of Art*, 41 (1948), 256.

¹⁵ John Malcolm Brinnin, *The Third Rose: Gertrude Stein and Her World* (Boston: Little Brown, 1959), p. 165.

¹⁶ Donald Gallup, ed., *The Flowers of Friendship: Letters Written to Gertrude Stein* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 77.

as *The Spiritual in Art* in the *Camera Work* issue of July 1912, which preceded her own portraits of Matisse and Picasso published in the following issue of *Camera Work*.¹⁷

In late June 1914, after Leo Stein had left his sister and Alice B. Toklas to go and live in Florence, John Lane, the English publisher, visited Gertrude Stein bringing to her the first copy of the Vorticist magazine *Blast* co-edited by Wyndam Lewis and Ezra Pound. According to the account in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, he "wanted to know what she thought of it and would she write for it. She said she did not know."¹⁸ That Gertrude Stein owned this first issue of *Blast*, published June 30, 1914, again documents her acquaintance with Kandinsky's writing, for this issue contains artist Edward Wadsworth's article "Inner Necessity," which both reviews Kandinsky's book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* and extensively quotes excerpts translated by Wadsworth.¹⁹ It is logical that the English artists and writers who formed the Vorticist movement, an independent synthesis of certain Cubist and Futurist ideas, should have found Kandinsky's work appealing, for they too favored innovation and saw in his work an original means of expression.

In the fall of 1914, Gertrude Stein's book *Tender Buttons* was published in New York by Claire Marie, a small firm just started by Donald Evans dedicated to "New Books for Exotic Tastes."²⁰ According to *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, two of the three manuscripts comprising *Tender Buttons* were written during their first trip to Spain in the late spring and summer of 1912, and the other (Food, Rooms, etcetera) immediately upon their return.²¹ It would be interesting to know what Stein's reaction was to the review of her book *Tender Buttons* in *The Little Review*. Written by Alexander S. Kaun (in his pen name Ibn Gabirol), this article draws a parallel between her writing in *Tender Buttons* and Kandinsky:

¹⁷ Wassily Kandinsky, "Extracts from *The Spiritual in Art*," *Camera Work*, 39 (1912), 34. Stein's portraits appeared in the *Camera Work* special number, August, 1912.

¹⁸ Stein, *Autobiography*, p. 132.

¹⁹ Edward Wadsworth, "Inner Necessity," *Blast*, No. 1 (June 20, 1914), pp. 119-25.

²⁰ Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*, 1914, reprinted in Patricia Meyerowitz, ed., *Gertrude Stein, Writings and Lectures 1909-1945* (London: Owen, 1967), pp. 161-206.

²¹ Stein, *Autobiography*, p. 147.

It is an exquisite little thing in cream covers, with a green moon in the center, implying the yolk of an egg with which "something is the matter," and it gave me rare pleasure to witness the first attempt to revolutionize the most obsolete and inflexible medium of Art—words. The author has endeavored to use language in the same way as Kandinsky uses his colors: to discard conventional structure, to eliminate understandable figures and forms, and to create a "spiritual harmony," leaving the layman the task of discovering the "*innerer Klang*." Both iconoclasts have admirably succeeded; both the "Improvisations" and the little "essays" on roast beef and seltzer-bottles have given me the great joy of cocreating, allowing me to interpret them in my own autonomous way.²²

Kaun pointed out that Kandinsky had discussed the use of word repetition in his treatise and that "Gertrude Stein has beautifully followed this recipe."²³ In the passage Kaun referred to, Kandinsky explained:

The apt use of a word (in its poetical sense), its repetition, twice three times, or even more frequently, according to the need of the poem, will not only tend to intensify the internal structure but also bring out unsuspected spiritual properties in the word itself. Further, frequent repetition of a word (a favorite game of children, forgotten in later life) deprives the word of its external reference. Similarly, the symbolic reference of a designated object tends to be forgotten and only the sound is retained.²⁴

According to Kaun, Stein's ordinary words have lost their "external reference" under her knowing manipulation and he claimed that her words:

...in their grotesque arrangements, frequent repetition, and intentional incoherence...have come to serve as quaint ephemeral sounds of a suggestive sympathy, or, if you please cacophony. *The Tender Buttons* arouse in the sympathetic reader a limitless amount of moods, from scherzo to maesto-

²² Ibn Gabirol [Alexander S. Kaun], "My Friend the Incurable," *The Little Review*, 1, No. 8 (1914), 43-44. Kaun chose as his pen name Ibn Gabirol (1021-1058) who was the first Spanish Jewish philosopher.

²³ Kaun, "Friend," p. 44.

²⁴ Kandinsky, *Concerning*, p. 34.

so...should be chanted to the music of another great conoclast, Schoenberg.²⁵

Kaun's suggestion that Stein is writing poetry in which she uses repetition as Kandinsky has directed in his treatise is supported by an examination of her work *Tender Buttons*. As an example, one may consider the following excerpt from *Tender Buttons* titled simply "A Dog":

A little monkey goes like a donkey that means to say that means to say that more sighs last goes. Leave with it. A little monkey goes like a donkey.²⁶

Stein addressed the question of repetition in "Poetry and Grammar," one of the lectures she gave on her tour of America in 1934. Recalling what is undoubtedly her most often quoted line, "A rose is a rose is a rose," she stated:

I have said that a noun is a name of anything by definition that is what it is and a name of anything is not interesting because once you know its name the enjoyment of naming is over and therefore in writing prose names that is nouns are completely uninteresting. But and that is a thing to be remembered you can love a name and if you love a name then saying that name any number of times only makes you love it more, more violently more persistently more tormentedly.²⁷

Her reference to loving a name corresponds to Kandinsky's notion of "spiritual properties in the word itself." Stein's unacknowledged appreciation of the relationship of her endeavors to Kandinsky's ideas is indicated by her direct use of Kandinsky's phrase "inner necessity":

Of course you might say why not invent new names new languages but that cannot be done. It takes a tremendous amount of inner necessity to invent even one word, one can invent imitating movements and emotions in sounds, and in the poetical language of some languages you have that, the Ger-

²⁵ Kaun, "Friend," p. 44. Kaun also parodied Gertrude Stein's style in *Tender Buttons* in a review of Arthur Jerome Eddy's *Cubists and Post-Impressionism* and only in this parody did he mention Kandinsky, whom he had omitted in his more serious discussion of the book, "The Savage Painters," *The Little Review*, No. 5 (1914), 63.

²⁶ Stein, *Tender Buttons*, p. 174.

²⁷ Meyerowitz, ed., *Stein*, "Poetry and Grammar," p. 139.

man language as a language suffers from this what the words mean sound too much like what they do, and children do these things by one sort or another of invention but this has really nothing to do with language.²⁸

Stein's familiarity with the German language is indicated in the above statement. Her father, Daniel Stein (at the age of eight), had emigrated to the United States from a small Bavarian village with his parents. Her mother Amelia Keyser was also from a family of German Jews. Before Gertrude was a year old, her parents took their five children and went to live in Vienna where they remained for around three years. After moving to Paris for more than a year, the Steins returned to the United States and settled in Oakland, California. The Stein children attended public schools in Oakland, but from time to time Daniel Stein "revised his democratic principles and he decided his children should be proficient in European languages and hired tutors to teach them at home."²⁹

It is very likely that Gertrude Stein read the first German edition of Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* in early 1912, shortly after it was published. She and Leo Stein had for years frequented the ex-clown Clovis Sagor's art gallery on the rue Lafitte (where they bought some of their first paintings by Picasso as early as 1905) where Marsden Hartley mentioned (in a letter to Alfred Stieglitz) that Kandinsky's book was for sale.³⁰

Critics such as Edmund Wilson have linked *Tender Buttons* to the Cubist still lifes of Picasso and Braque:

A pattern of assorted words, though they might make nonsense from the traditional point of view, would be analogous to a Cubist canvas composed of unidentifiable fragments.³¹

Certainly what has been called Gertrude Stein's "compulsion to sweep away the underpinnings of language and rhetoric"³² was supported by her acquaintance with ideas in Kandinsky's treatise. Her friend Carl Van Vechten may have alluded to this possibility in one of his articles on Gertrude Stein's work in 1914: "Miss Stein . . . has readily

²⁸ Meyerowitz, ed., *Stein*, "Poetry and Grammar," p. 142.

²⁹ James Mellow, *Stein*, p. 23.

³⁰ Hartley postcard to Steiglitz, n. d., 1912, Yale.

³¹ Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle* (New York: C. Scribner's, 1931), p. 242.

³² Brinnin, *Third Rose*, p. 161.

turned language into music, really made it sound more important than its sense."³³

Intriguingly, the first birthday of Société Anonyme (an organization founded by Marcel Duchamp and Katherine Dreier to promote modern art in America) was celebrated with a reading from Gertrude Stein's unpublished works on April 30, 1921. In 1923, Société Anonyme made Wassily Kandinsky its honorary vice-president which he remained until his death in 1944. Among those reading Gertrude Stein's work were two of the strongest American admirers Kandinsky ever had—Marsden Hartley and Katherine Dreier.

Ezra Pound, who first arrived in London in 1908, may have come into contact with Kandinsky's work at one of the exhibitions of the Allied Artists' Association, held at the Ropal Albert Hall in London, where Kandinsky's art was shown in 1909, 1910, 1911, and 1912. If Pound had not already discovered Kandinsky, he had another opportunity to see the Russian artist's work at the Grafton Group exhibition held from March 15-31, 1913 at the Alpine Club Gallery. Pound probably read M. T. H. Sadler's article discussing Kandinsky and *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* in the Spring 1912 issue of *Rhythm* as this little avant-garde magazine, known as an "Art Music Literature Quarterly," would surely have interested him.³⁴ By September 1, 1914, months after Sadler's English translation of Kandinsky's treatise appeared, Pound published his essay "Vorticism" wherein he discussed Imagist poetry in relationship to Kandinsky's theories on painting.

In his essay "Vorticism," Pound explained:

The image is the poet's pigment; with that in mind you can go ahead and apply Kandinsky, you can transpose his chapter on the language of form and colour and apply it to the writing of verse. As I cannot rely on your having read Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, I must go on with my autobiography.³⁵

Pound was, at this time, profoundly interested in the visual arts and in painters and sculptors whom he knew personally. He admired

³³ Mellow, *Stein*, p. 199, quoted from an article by Carl van Vechten in *Trend*, 1914.

³⁴ Sadler, "After Gauguin," see above.

³⁵ Ezra Pound, "Vorticism," *Fortnightly Review*, Sept. 1, 1914, p. 96; reprinted in *Ezra Pound: A Critical Anthology*, J. P. Sullivan, ed. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1970), p. 51.

and encouraged the young struggling French sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and later wrote a memoir of this young artist who perished in the first world war.³⁶ As early as 1908, Pound wrote to William Carlos Williams of his desire in poetry to "paint the thing as I see it."³⁷ In his article "Vorticism," Pound wrote of his perception, three years earlier, that one could express emotion with a "language of colour." Thus Pound asserted:

...when I came to Kandinsky's chapter on the language of form and colour, I found little that was new to me. I only felt that someone else understood what I understood, and had written it out very clearly. It seems natural to me that an artist should have just as much pleasure in an arrangement of planes or in a pattern of figures, as in painting portraits of fine ladies, or in the portraying the Mother of God as the symbolists bid us.³⁸

Ezra Pound's enthusiasm for Kandinsky's ideas and for the "new arts" in general proved important for his friend William Carlos Williams, as well as for countless other artists and writers who must have read his article "Vorticism" in 1914.

Williams met Pound in his dormitory in Philadelphia when he was a medical student and Pound was an undergraduate student at the University of Pennsylvania around 1902.³⁹ At this time, Williams later claimed, "I was still undecided whether or not I should become a painter."⁴⁰ Williams' other close friend in these years was the painter Charles Demuth whom he met "over a dish of prunes at Mrs. Chain's boarding house."⁴¹ Demuth, at this time, was in attendance at the Drexel Institute in Philadelphia where he studied art. These early friendships were important and lasting ones for Williams.

Williams was well acquainted with others in the Stieglitz circle besides Demuth, including Stieglitz himself. He was particularly friendly with Marsden Hartley. Stieglitz even sent Williams a copy of Hartley's book of essays *Adventure in the Arts* when it was published

³⁶ Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska, a Memoir* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

³⁷ Sullivan, ed., letter from Pound to Williams, Oct. 21, 1908, *Pound*, p. 34.

³⁸ Sullivan, ed., *Pound*, pp. 51-52.

³⁹ William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1948), p. 51.

⁴⁰ Williams, *Autobiography*, p. 52.

⁴¹ Williams, *Autobiography*, p. 52.

in 1922.⁴² Williams describes in his autobiography how he was inspired to write his poem "The Great Figure" while on his way to visit Hartley in his studio:

As I approached his number I heard a great clatter of bells and the roar of a fire engine passing the end of the street down Ninth Avenue. I turned just in time to see a golden figure 5 on a red background flash by. The impression was so sudden and forceful that I took a piece of paper out of my pocket and wrote a short poem about it.⁴³

Williams' poem "The Great Figure" was published in 1921 in a volume entitled *Sour Grapes*. This poem inspired his friend Charles Demuth to create a painting based on the poem. It is evident from a letter Williams wrote to Demuth that he gave the painter much specific advice on how to paint his poem which became one of Demuth's poster portraits and was called, *I saw the Figure 5 in Gold* after the third line of the poem. Demuth completed this painting in 1928. Among other things, Williams suggested to Demuth:

It needs some new sweep of imagination through the whole to make it one. It is no longer one but—not even 5. It is all shaken up...my own feeling, as I told you over the phone, is to take hint from the picture itself. That is to use the overlapping of planes, one contour passing partly into the next. If that were used more through the solid red center (as it is used among the figures which surround it) the whole would gain by a unity of treatment which would cast a unity of feeling over it all...⁴⁴

Williams' comments to Demuth are particularly interesting as they demonstrate the poet's great interest in painting and in visual expression in general. It has even been suggested that Williams may have "regarded his words as paint."⁴⁵

By the time Williams wrote "The Great Figure," he had already paid tribute to Wassily Kandinsky in his "Prologue" to *Kora in Hell*:

⁴² Bram Dijkstra, *Williams*, p. 86, letter of Jan. 12, 1922, Williams to Stieglitz, thanking him for the book and saying he would visit "291" soon. The letter also indicates that the two were well acquainted.

⁴³ Williams, *Autobiography*, p. 172.

⁴⁴ John C. Thirlwall, ed., *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams* (New York: McDowell, 1957), letter of May 12, 1928, to Charles Demuth.

⁴⁵ Dijkstra, *Williams*, p. 79.

Improvisations published in 1920. Williams' subtitle of this work, *Improvisations*, is a direct reference to Kandinsky's definition in his treatise of improvisation as "a largely unconscious, spontaneous expression of inner character, non-material in nature."⁴⁶ Around 1917, for about a year, Williams had begun to record quickly his imaginary images that he retained at the end of the day. From these experiments in automatic writing, some examples were later selected and published along with a prologue as *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*.⁴⁷ In his prologue Williams remarked: "If the inventive imagination must look, as I think, to the field of art for its richest discoveries today it will best make its way by compass and follow no path."⁴⁸ Williams later paraphrased Kandinsky's "axioms for the artist":

Every artist has to express himself.
Every artist has to express his epoch.
Every artist has to express the pure and eternal
qualities of the art of all men.⁴⁹

Williams then commented on the above: "So we have the fish and the bait, but the last rule holds three hooks at once—not for the fish, however."⁵⁰

Williams did not have to look very far to find Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* for he certainly read the first number of *Blast* dated June 20, 1914, where Wadsworth's review "Inner Necessity" included the above passages to which Williams referred.⁵¹ As Pound co-edited *Blast* with Wyndham Lewis, there can be no doubt that Williams (who carried on a correspondence with Pound) read both issues. Williams mentioned Pound several times in the Prologue to *Kora in Hell*; he even wrote of Pound's term "Vortex," which is not surprising for he certainly would have read Pound's essay "Vorticism" in 1914.⁵² Thus, Williams was certainly familiar with Pound's favorable opinion of Kandinsky's ideas.

⁴⁶ Kandinsky, *Concerning*, p. 77.

⁴⁷ Dijkstra, *Williams*, p. 69.

⁴⁸ William Carlos Williams, *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*, Prologue, reprinted in *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1970).

⁴⁹ Williams, p. 26.

⁵⁰ Williams, p. 26.

⁵¹ Wadsworth, "Inner Necessity," p. 119. Williams even spelled "Ueber" as Wadsworth did with an "e" in the place of the umlaut.

⁵² Williams, p. 16.

Williams' use of the term "Improvisations" indicates that his knowledge of Kandinsky went beyond Wadsworth's article in *Blast*, for this term is not mentioned in "Inner Necessity." Williams, of course, had seen the Armory Show in 1913 with Kandinsky's *Improvisation No. 27* and he had most likely seen this painting again at Stieglitz's gallery.⁵³ It was probably Marsden Hartley, however, who put Williams in touch with Kandinsky's treatise and most likely the Russian's volume of poems *Klänge* published in 1912, which Hartley, who also wrote poetry, may have owned.⁵⁴ Hartley's friendship with Williams at this time is documented by their correspondence, Williams' autobiography, and by their shared friendship with Charles Demuth. Hartley wrote to Williams on August 27, 1920, commenting on Williams' book *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*, which he said he liked, particularly the "spiritual" quality of the "Improvisations," although he found the prologue somewhat demonstrative and personal.⁵⁵ Hartley's mildly negative response to the namedropping and criticism of various contemporary writers in Williams' prologue is understandable. His appreciation of the Kandinsky-inspired improvisations is also predictable. It is likely that Hartley had discussed Kandinsky's ideas and improvisations with Williams previously and he probably approved of the use to which Williams put Kandinsky's concept. Williams later wrote that the improvisation was what he liked to do most of all.⁵⁶

A careful reading of Williams' poem "The Great Figure" raises the question of whether he was familiar with Kandinsky's poems published in *Klänge* [sounds]. Williams' poem briefly preserves the experience he described later in his autobiography:

Among the rain
and lights

⁵³ Williams, *Autobiography*, p. 134, mentions going to the Armory Show in 1913 but then confuses the Independents' show of 1917 which had Duchamp's urinal sculpture "fountain" signed by R. Mutt.

⁵⁴ Wassily Kandinsky, *Klänge* (Munich, 1912). Letter, Nov. 26, 1974, to author from Mrs. William Carlos Williams indicates that he probably did own Kandinsky's book. Hartley may have had copies of Kandinsky's poems from newspaper reviewers such as that Rönnebeck sent Gertrude Stein.

⁵⁵ Marsden Hartley to William Carlos Williams, unpublished, August 27, 1920, Lockwood Memorial Library, State University of New York at Buffalo, poetry collection, Buffalo, N. Y.

⁵⁶ Mike Weaver, *William Carlos Williams: The American Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971), p. 42, refers to unpublished undated letter from Williams to Jim Higgins.

I saw the figure 5
 in gold
 on a red firetruck
 moving
 with weight and urgency
 tense
 unheeded
 to gong clangs
 siren howls
 and wheels rumbling
 through the dark city.⁵⁷

Although Kandinsky's prose-poems were not then translated from the German, Williams, who had spent a year (1909-1910) studying pediatrics in Leipzig, could have read them with no difficulty.⁵⁸ Kandinsky, in his poem "Anders" or "Different," had written of a numerical figure describing its color and the color of its background:

There was a big figure 3—white on dark brown.
 Its upper loop was the same size as the lower loop.
 So many people thought. And this upper Loop
 was
 SOMEWHAT, SOMEWHAT, SOMEWHAT
 larger than the lower one.
 This figure 3 always looked to the left—never to the right.
 At the same time it looked slightly downward, for only in
 appearance did this figure stand perfectly straight. In reality,
 not easily
 discernible, the upper
 SOMEWHAT, SOMEWHAT, SOMEWHAT
 larger part inclined to the left
 And so this big white figure 3 always looked to
 the left and a little downward.
 Or perhaps it was different.⁵⁹

As Williams wrote "the figure 5 in gold on a red firetruck," Kandinsky had written "A big figure 3—white on dark brown." Of course, Williams' poem is much briefer and momentary while Kandinsky's poem has longer sentences and is more descriptive. In other prose-

⁵⁷ William Carlos Williams, *Sour Grapes* (New York, 1921).

⁵⁸ Williams, *Autobiography*, pp. 109-112.

⁵⁹ Kandinsky, *Klänge* (1912), reprinted in Kandinsky, *Concerning*, p. 83.

poems in *Klänge*, such as "Bassoon," Kandinsky described sounds such as "the beat of horseshoes" and "indifferent tones of a bassoon, moving a long long while in the depths of the void."⁶⁰ Williams wrote in "The Great Figure" of the "firetruck moving unheeded to gong clangs." Williams' choice of the word "clangs" for ringing sounds reinforces the relationship of his poem to Kandinsky's prose-poems in *Klänge*. Like Kandinsky, Williams is concerned with both sounds and visual images.

Perhaps, as is sometimes the case in his autobiography, Williams' memory fails him and he conceived of his poem "The Great Figure" after, rather than before, visiting his friend Hartley. Either way, the definite link of this poem to Marsden Hartley, who was so very interested in Kandinsky's work, makes the possibility of such an influence all the more likely. If Williams did learn from Kandinsky's prose-poems in *Klänge*, he still managed to make his poem "The Great Figure" very much his own and very much the "spontaneous expression" of which Kandinsky had written. Williams certainly benefited from Kandinsky's theories on the nature of artistic invention.

Thus Kandinsky was recognized by those in the vanguard of American modernism in literature as well as in the visual arts. It is not surprising to find that Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams were among those artists who appreciated Kandinsky's contributions to art and literature. If aspects of their art were inspired by Kandinsky's work, they were able to redefine what they found useful in the Russian artist's ideas in terms of their own talents and creativity.

⁶⁰ Kandinsky, *Concerning*, p. 81.

*Wassily Kandinsky and the American
Literary Avant-garde*

GAIL LEVIN

[Reprinted from *CRITICISM, a Quarterly for Literature and the Arts*, Vol. XXI,
No. 4, Fall, 1979.]