

**Mercedes AGUIRRE**

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

## **CLASSICAL MYTHS AND AMERICAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM: THE CASE OF WILLIAM BAZIOTES**

MITOS CLASICOS Y EXPRESIONISMO ABSTRACTO NORTEAMERICANO:  
EL CASO DE WILLIAM BAZIOTES

El expresionismo abstracto puede ser visto como una expresión válida de la crisis del ‘hombre moderno’ y, como resultado de ello, asumió un papel central en el debate cultural de la época. Dentro de la crisis del hombre de entonces se enmarca también la nueva forma en que se representan los antiguos mitos. William Baziotes, un artista perteneciente al grupo de la New York School, se convierte en un moderno ‘constructor de mitos’ que crea metáforas y símbolos recurriendo a las culturas antiguas o primitivas o a mundos primigenios. Algunos de los cuadros de Baziotes aluden específicamente a un personaje o mito clásico, por ejemplo ‘Cíclope’, otros, sin tener un título que se refiera expresamente a un mito, parecen tener afinidades con ellos, de manera que los mitos clásicos parecen estar unidos a los propios e íntimos mitos del artista, interpretados con su propio lenguaje y sus propios símbolos.

**Palabras clave:** Expresionismo abstracto, Baziotes, mitos, cíclope, ojo

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and particularly in the context of artistic avant-garde movements in Europe and America, there is a break in the language of visual representation which is gradually liberating itself from the realistic and the figurative. Mythological painting – which, although inspired by themes from a world of unreality and fantasy, was fed by real images and forms – was transformed through new perspectives, incorporating symbolic and distorted images, so that the relationship between art and myth became less obvious (on myth in 20<sup>th</sup> century art, for instance, Bernstock 1993: 153–183).

William Baziotes (1912–1963) belongs to the movement known as Abstract Expressionism; he was a member of the New York School – together with Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, among others. He turned to mythical themes but tried to express them transmuted into a more abstract form and pattern, as artists such as himself believed that styles of representation adopted in previous generations

were now completely inadequate (among others, Sandler 1965: 28–30). Attitudes conditioned by wars led artists to explore a wide range of intellectual thought which served as guide for new aesthetic explorations (Arnason-Mansfield 2009: 403). In academic studies of the relationship between Abstract Expressionism and mythology it is generally accepted that the most mature phase of this movement was a continuation of the previous phase which was influenced by Surrealism and that this was the reason for an interest in mythological subjects, at least in their essence<sup>1</sup>. Within the visual changes explored by Abstract Expressionism there was a process of reduction of the figurative image to its simplest essence in order to recapture what the artists regarded as the tragic and ageless nature of myth (Jachec 1993: 129, ff.). The theories of Freud and Jung were absorbed broadly and intuitively; to Abstract Expressionist artists, psychology represented – to borrow the words of the critic David Anfam (1999: 81) – a ‘cornucopia’ of visionary and poetic images with an existential edge, especially since Jung claimed that myth issues from the same depths as art<sup>2</sup>.

The aim of this article is to explore the way in which Baziotes – inspired by Surrealism and Symbolism (not only as an artistic but also as a literary movement<sup>3</sup>) which contributed to his own development as an artist – became a ‘Myth-maker’ who created metaphors and symbols by turning to primitive and ancient cultures. Some of his paintings – such as ‘Cyclops’ (1947) – allude to a specific Classical character or myth; others, without having a particular title which refers to a myth, seem to have some affinities with mythology, so that Classical myths seem to be combined with Baziotes’ own more personal myths, interpreted with his own language and his own symbols.

Baziotes’ themes – in Irving Sandler’s words (1965: 30) – are ‘enchanted creatures in underwater landscapes’. Baziotes was among the first in the Abstract Expressionist group to absorb Surrealism and its typical sources of inspiration and in producing what was called ‘Abstract Surrealism’ (Sandler 1965: 28). He used images drawn from the unconscious (as did the Surrealists and, before them, the Symbolists) and his strange figures, similar to distorted human bodies without arms or legs, seem to emerge from a dream world; but we know that he also found inspiration in the all-too-real bodies of mutilated soldiers and animals (Siegel 2011: 78; Polcari, 1991: 220).

---

<sup>1</sup> None of the members of the New York School were members of the Surrealist group (although Motherwell and Baziotes were shown in a major Surrealist exhibition) but the morphology of their work, its ‘Freudianized’ mythological symbolism and the flirtation with automatism, all seemed related to Surrealism (cf. Tuchman, 1971: 20). For further discussion about this subject see Polcari 1991: 213–214; Crain 2004: 1.

<sup>2</sup> On Abstract Expressionist artists and their preference for the symbolic see, among others, Gibson 1987: 66–69.

<sup>3</sup> A study on the influence of French Symbolist writers in Baziotes is Crain 2004. See also Hadler 1977: 102–110.

### Baziotes himself explained about his paintings:

I don't follow a particular system when I begin a painting. Each painting has its evolution. One can start with a few areas of colour on the canvas, another one with multiple lines, another one, perhaps, with a profusion of colour. Each beginning suggests something. Once I sense the suggestion I begin to paint intuitively. The suggestion then becomes a phantom that must be caught and made real. As I work or when the painting is finished the subject reveals itself.

And:

There is always a subject that is uppermost my mind. Sometimes I am aware of it. Sometimes not. I work on my canvas until I think it is finished. Often I recognise my subject at completion of the picture and again I may wait a long time before I know what it is about (Baziotes, 1947: 2).

To illustrate the evolution in the way art is transforming the mythological representation, I want to comment on four images by four different artists (in chronological order): Odilon Redon, Paul Klee, William Baziotes and Adolf Gottlieb, all of whom share some ideas about the artistic work. Odilon Redon was in some way a precursor of Surrealism<sup>4</sup>. Paul Klee was influenced by the fantastic visions of Redon and -like him- he admired the Symbolist poet Baudelaire, the painter Goya and the writer Edgar Allan Poe. On the other hand, Klee had an enormous impact precisely on the artists of the New York School<sup>5</sup>. Baziotes, in spite of being more abstract in his painting, reflects Symbolist aesthetics and shares with Redon and Klee the interest in dream worlds and in representing forms in a process of metamorphosis<sup>6</sup>. Gottlieb – who is normally included as a member of the New York School – goes further in his abstract art, but at the same time he shows – like other artists such as Rothko – an interest in archetypal motifs and a primitive imaginary, a product of the unconscious. He found inspiration in Classical myths, for instance in his ‘The eyes of Oedipus’ (1941) – even if the painting shows its myth by a screen of blind stares.

These images share a similar design: a round shape – in some of the cases it is more evident that it is a head, in others it is less evident – and an oval form (or round) which suggests with more or less precision an eye. What is different is the interpretation which the artist gives to his work through the title. Gottlieb's painting is ‘White disk, red ground’ (1968), Klee's is ‘The eye’ (1938), Redon's ‘The misshapen polyp floating on the shores, a sort of smiling and hideous cyclops’ (1883) and Baziotes's painting is – more concretely- ‘Cyclops’ (1947).

<sup>4</sup> Studies on Redon are, for instance, Hauptman 2005; Sandstrom 1955.

<sup>5</sup> For a general view on the influence of Klee in American art, particularly in Pollock and Tobey, see Kagan 1975: 54–59.

<sup>6</sup> As it has been pointed out in the exhibition curated by E. Kempner Freed-E. Sharp and published by them in 1957.

What allows us to recognise Baziotes' image as a mythological character is the title. Visual representations in these years in the history of art are more than ever ambiguous in their relationship with real life objects and persons, and the title is no longer a mere label describing the content but a sign in itself (Gombrich 1985: 225). When an artist puts a title he is taking a decision about how he wants the spectator to 'read' his work. For instance, Gottlieb himself affirms:

Whenever an artist puts a title on a painting, some interpretation about his attitude will be made.... It seems to me that the artist, in making up titles for his pictures, must decide what his attitude is (Tuchman 1971: 27; Shapiro-Shapiro 1990: 264; on titles for Baziotes cf. Chipp 1970: 565).

In calling his painting 'Cyclops' Baziotes provides it with an association which the other images do not have: it is a representation of a particular mythological character: the ogre with a single eye on his forehead, and in this case (as opposed to the one with the title 'The eye'), perhaps, the spectator would try to visualize what a Cyclops is and, if he knows the myth narrated by Homer, would imagine a complete story. This title would evoke a series of associations going from the general (a head with an eye) to the particular (a Cyclops).

Let's focus now on Baziotes' 'Cyclops' which won the first prize in the Chicago Art Institute Survey of Abstract and Surrealist Art in 1947 and made him the first of his generation of avant-garde artists to obtain official recognition and become the centre of an extended controversy<sup>7</sup>.

'Cyclops' presents – although with a high degree of abstraction – what seems a pink torso on a green background and a head in which there is a single blue eye with a black pupil in the middle. The head has no other traits to characterize it as a human head apart from the eye. This image has something of the primordial, even something of a 'baby cyclops' because of the pink body and blue eye. Baziotes' origins were Greek, and he was familiar with the myths of that country, so it is not difficult to assume that his inspiration for the Cyclops came from that knowledge; but in this case we also know (because he tells us) that he was influenced by a visit to the Zoo in the New York Bronx, where he observed a rhinoceros which he thought was a descendant of primordial creatures, and which he took as a metaphor for the one-eye giants of Greek myth. This painting combines aspects of innocence with threat (Polcari 1991: 218)<sup>8</sup>. In the upper corner of the painting Baziotes included a roughly triangular shape defined with a dark zigzag line. Sarah Crain (2004: 27–28) goes further in her interpretation affirming that this element would evoke the wooden stake which Odysseus and his men used to blind the Cyclops. However, there are at least two more paintings by Baziotes

<sup>7</sup> For further detail about critics' reception of 'Cyclops' see Polcari 1991: 213 and Crain 2004: 27.

<sup>8</sup> In Crain's words (2004: 27) 'it fuses the intimate with the universal as well as the prehistoric with the present'.

where a comparable design appears and where any identification of this design with a wooden stake would be meaningless.

Two more paintings of the same date (1947): 'Dwarf' and 'Night Form' represent an isolated figure, like a human torso, in the middle of the canvas. 'Dwarf' resembles 'Cyclops' as it presents what seems a torso and a head with a single eye containing concentric circles. The figure is painted in acid green on purple background and has a smaller round shape on one side of the head (not in the middle). 'Night Form' is one of his many works related to nocturnal motifs and presents a dark purple background and another torso in different shapes of purple, blue and green. The concentric circles in the middle of what seems to be the head are painted on a pale green background. Both paintings are characterised by agitated brushwork and a kind of 'macabre' quality (Preble 2004: 19), as the torso seems to include deformed limbs and the head has – just as in 'Cyclops' – a series of concentric circles which suggest a single eye. 'Dwarf' is a more complicated form which includes what seems a mouth with teeth<sup>9</sup>.

'Pierrot' (also 1947) presents what looks like a big eye dominating other traits suggesting a human form. All these figures, mysterious and distorted, share similar characteristics, mixing the human and the animal, the harmless and the menacing.

Two more paintings of the same date, 'Night Mirror' (1947) and 'Water Form' (1947), present the same head-like forms or torsos with other circular forms inside them. 'Night Mirror' insists on the motif of the night (we have already seen this motif in 'Night Form') and combines several elements: the dominant figure resembles the one in 'Night Form' and 'Cyclops', although it is surrounded by other forms – on the left, what seems a wrapped embryonic form (with a zigzag design), and, on the right, an undulating biomorphic shape with, again, what seems a single eye. These two forms seem a reflection of the principal form. For Baziotes a mirror had something mysterious about it and was evocative of strangeness. It was a motif to which he returned repeatedly in his career, producing at least five images with the word mirror in their titles (Crain 2004: 7)<sup>10</sup>. His images of water as a mirror remind us of another character of Greek myth who is related to water and reflection: Narcissus, who, perhaps, has been the mythic prototype for such images which approach reality indirectly through the idea of reflection (Sandler 1965: 30; Sandler 1970: 74). Classical myths appear as eternal symbols, 'disguised' as amorphous figures.

'Water Form' points to another favourite motif in Baziotes imaginary: water together with the delicate, semi-translucent, biomorphic shapes which dwell in it.

---

<sup>9</sup> On the similarities between 'Dwarf' and 'Cyclops' see Crain (2004: 29–30). 'Cyclops', 'Dwarf' and 'Night Form' have in common the fact that they stress the interpenetration of the realms of nature, emphasizing the beginnings of creation and metamorphosis (Cf. Kempner Freed-Sharp 1957: 2).

<sup>10</sup> In Baziotes' words (1949: 3–4): 'To me a mirror is something mysterious, it is evocative of strangeness and other worldiness'.

This underwater realm has been convincingly interpreted as an expression of the artist's vision of the ocean and the sea, not only as the primordial realm of all living creatures, but also as a domain of symbiotic relationships<sup>11</sup>. All these paintings inhabited by forms which seem to have originated in the underwater world reflect Baziotes' insistent interest in exploring what is most primitive, including the origin of the human race and the origin of species. In this sense we can see affinities with Odilon Redon, as they both share the same source of inspiration in Darwin's work<sup>12</sup>, and this inspiration leads them to represent the most primitive stages of humanity. In this context, Baziotes, like Redon, paints a Cyclops-polyp, an amorphous and primeval form with a single eye, only Baziotes has added deformed limbs. The mythical monster has become one of those forms in constant process of transformation belonging to an underwater and primordial world<sup>13</sup>.

One of the largest and most ambitious of Baziotes' paintings is 'The Flesh Eaters' (1952). On the left, positioned in front of different colours (green, blue, pink) and shapes which suggest seaweed, a form resembles either an armless seated figure or a huge single-eyed head with a gaping mouth. Above, at the right, another one-eyed creature in a pinkish hazy amorphousness. Below, a shape suggestive of a torso with either pointed headgear or wild hair. The painting seems to evoke an imaginary underwater landscape. Although the title might remind those familiar with the *Odyssey* of the episode of the Lotus-Eaters, it might equally well echo the theme of numerous zombie movies of the 1940's. In any case, if there were to be an allusion to the Lotus-Eaters it would be a very paradoxical one, since the Lotus is at the very opposite end of the alimentary spectrum from human flesh. More plausible is that Baziotes intended to represent the myth of the Homeric Cyclops as an anthropophagous monster and – in the view of one critic in the Metropolitan Museum – invites the viewer to consider the more universal notion that human beings survive by preying upon or consuming one another<sup>14</sup>.

We have seen that Baziotes is a modern 'Myth-maker' who creates metaphors and symbols which refer to primitive cultures and primeval worlds and who presents a fusion of the contemporary and the ancient, suggesting the continuous presence of ancient within modern life. If a few of his paintings allude in their title to a particular Classical myth, others, without a specific title referring to a myth, have strong affinities with mythology. Classical myths seem to be entwined with the artist's own personal myths, interpreted with his own language and his own symbols. Motifs such as night, the subaquatic, the primeval, the dream, and the mirror are some of those personal worlds which at the same time reflect, as I have

<sup>11</sup> Like another painting 'Aquatic' in New York, Guggenheim Museum (cf. Spector 2014: 42–43).

<sup>12</sup> On Redon and Darwin cf., for instance, Larson 2005; Noce 2011.

<sup>13</sup> For Tuchman (1971: 12) 'Baziotes' phosphorescent paintings in which dwarfs, birds, sea forms, mirages coalesce into perfect forms derive from a microscope-aided vision and Redon'.

<sup>14</sup> *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* [online] <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1995.234/> [accessed 17/10/2016]

already mentioned, a Symbolist aesthetic. Baziotes insistently repeats those motifs through forms which suggest other forms, and, in some cases, forms which allude to a particular mythical theme (such as the one-eyed Cyclops). The works' content is never explicit or obvious even when recognisable images emerge from it. When artists, such as Baziotes, invented myths or put names of Classical mythology as titles for their work- they intended to create new forms, in a way analogous to the ancient ones, although not necessarily inspired by them.

### Bibliography

- Anfam, D. (1999). *Abstract Expressionism*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Arnason, H.H. Mansfield, E.C. (2009). *History of Modern Art*. New York: Pearson.
- Baziotes, W. (1947). 'I cannot evolve any concrete theory'. *Possibilities* I, 1 (winter), 2.
- Baziotes, W. (1949). 'The Artist and his Mirror'. *Right Angle* 3 (June 1949), 3-4.
- Bernstock, J. E. (1993). 'Classical Mythology in Twentieth-century Art'. *Artibus et Historiae* vol. 14, 153-183.
- Chipp, H. B. (1970). *Theories of Modern Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Crain, S.D. (2004). *William Baziotes' Duality: Escaping the ordinary and finding the extraordinary*. Thesis Master of Arts, Athens, Georgia.
- Gibson, A. (1987). 'The Rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism' in M. Auping (ed.) *Abstract Expressionism the Critical Developments*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Gombrich, E. (1985). 'Image and Word in Twentieth Century Art'. *Word and Image* vol.1, issue 3, 213-241.
- Hadler, M. (1977). 'William Baziotes: A Contemporary Poet-Painter'. *Arts Magazine* 51 (June), 102-110.
- Hauptman, J. (2005). *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.
- Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* [online] <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1995.234/> [accessed 17/10/2016]
- Jachec, N. (1993). 'Myth and the Audience: The Individual, the Collective and the Problem of Mass Communication by the Early 1950s'. *American Abstract Expressionism. Critical Forum Series*, Vol. I, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press-Tate Gallery Liverpool, 129-140.
- Kagan, A. (1975). 'Paul Klee's Influence on American Painting New York School'. *Arts Magazine* 49 (June), 54-59.
- Kempner Freed, E.- Sharp, E. (1957). *The Magical Worlds of Redon, Klee, Baziotes*. Houston, Texas: Contemporary Arts Museums.
- Larson, B. (2005). *The Dark Side of Nature. Science, Society and the Fantastic in the Work of Odilon Redon*. Pennsylvania: Pennstate University Press.
- Noce, V. (2011). *Odilon Redon dans l'oeil de Darwin*. Paris: RMN.
- Polcari, S. (1991). *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Preble, M. (2004). *William Baziotes. Paintings and Drawings 1934-1962*. Milan: Skira.
- Sandler, I. (1965). 'Baziotes, Modern Mythologist'. *Art News* (February), 28-30, 65-66.
- Sandler, I. (1970). *Abstract Expressionism: The triumph of American painting*. London: Pall Mall Press.
- Sandler, I. (1978). *The New York School*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Sandstrom, S. (1955). *Le monde imaginaire d'Odilon Redon: étude iconologique*. New York: Witterborn.

- Shapiro, D.- Shapiro, C. (1990). *Abstract Expressionism. A Critical Record*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Siegel, K. (2011). *Abstract Expressionism*. London: Phaidon.
- Spector, N. (ed.) (2014). *Guggenheim Museum Collection A to Z*. New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications.
- Still, C. (1971). *William Bazotes: Late Work 1946–1962*. New York: Marlborough Gallery.
- Tuchman, M. (1971). *The New York School*. London: Thames & Hudson.