

Robert Storr, "No Joy in Mudville: Greenberg's Modernism Then and Now"
in Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik (eds.), *Modern Art and Popular Culture: Readings in High and Low* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1990): 160-191.

Coming and going we cross his way. For fifty years Clement Greenberg has planted himself squarely in the midst of debate about the past and of modernism. Sequentially or simultaneously a cultural essayist, gallery reviewer, studio coach, and panel pundit, he has been and remains the single most controversial critic of his time—and by virtue of that controversy, the single most influential one as well. The Wizard of Oz of Formalism, commanding the allegiance of a host of curators, historians, dealers, and critics, he has issued edicts, sanctioned movements, and punished recalcitrants from behind the screen of his connoisseurship. For many the figure of ultimate and unimpeachable authority, for others—in particular former acolytes—Greenberg is the focus of Oedipal curiosity and envy. Previously enthralled by his aura of certainty and the heavily edited historicism of his thought, these disillusioned dependents currently revisit the scene of his self-invention, hoping to find relics of the personal and social past he has tried so assiduously to erase from memory.

There is much there to rediscover and sort out. For everyone concerned, including those immune to his mystique and well practiced at calling his doctrinal bluff the stakes are high. By usurping the American tradition of radical social criticism only to write it off as the preamble for a capricious and deterministic aestheticism willfully blind to its unsettled and impinging circumstance, Greenberg deprived subsequent generations of their true intellectual heritage. Although usually silent on contemporary affairs, even now the subject of this retrospective investigation can be heard commenting on and to a large extent setting the tone of its proceedings. Indeed, the tenor of his idiom and the grammar of his thinking can readily be detected in the work of many of his erstwhile disciples and present inquisitors, as well as in that of his constant admirers. Like the Great Oz, he thus continues to impose his will through a theatrical absence intermittently and unpredictably punctuated with new pronouncements and unexpected twists on old arguments. As always, even when they depart from or trivialize his former positions, they are spoken with an unflinching confidence that posterity will bear them out.

"After all, the best taste agrees in the long run," Greenberg announced to a symposium in 1953.¹ Such statements are his hallmark. Cueing the art historical applause track, they firmed the resolve of the fainthearted and bullied the doubtful that Greenberg sought to rally around his version of the modernist cause. Over the long haul, however, opinions conditioned on a promised consensus beg for back-checking. Consider some of his more recent pronouncements: Speaking to ARTnews in 1987, he said, "I think the best painter alive now is Jules Olitski ... Noland is still a great painter. . . I think Wyeth is way better than most of the avant-garde stars of this time. Better than Rauschenberg. Better now than Jasper Johns."² While it is always possible to assemble a quorum of the "happy few" to ratify one's prejudices, surely Greenberg does not believe that among members of the informed art audience "the best taste agrees" on this score. It is tempting then to write these remarks off as the products of a temperamental kink or signs of professional intransigence in the face of changing times. To a degree they are both. A kind of pontifical wisecracking, nevertheless, they also provide a useful analytic tool. For not only do Greenberg's views fly in the face of the conventional wisdom of the day—lending them, it must be admitted, a certain desperate piquancy—by example they call into question the very basis of his own critical practice. Unwilling to argue or modify his publicly declared preferences, yet

seemingly restless within the structure they blandly ornament, Greenberg has lately been toying with the criteria that originally determined those choices.

First articulated in two seminal articles, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" and "Towards a Newer Laocoon," Greenberg's initial premises are so familiar as to seem axiomatic. The destiny of modernism, he contended, lay in the purification and the self-referentiality of artistic means and ends. The modernist project hence consisted of the progressive elimination of the influence of one medium upon another and the gradual reduction of each to its "essential" properties and possibilities. Supported by a self-assured, liberal bourgeoisie "to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold," the agent of this process was the avant-garde.³ Its opposite and adversary was represented by "kitsch." Introducing into general parlance a German epithet for the gaudy and sentimental excess of bourgeois decoration, Greenberg named its American analogs: "popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc."⁴ Originally slang for "gutter scrappings," Greenberg's usage repolarizes the word's referents by suggesting more a fall from grace than a welling-up of cultural dreck. Inherent trashiness is not enough; devolution is involved. For Greenberg kitsch is specifically debased high art. Mass-produced simulacra of creations whose informing conventions it exploits as manufacturing templates, kitsch gratifies the demand for pleasure without making any demands of its own. Whether painting or sculpture, object or idea, it reproduces artistic effects but ignores their causes. Citing the facile realism of I. Y. Repin, Greenberg argued that even talent cannot redeem a work whose ambition does not include a close examination of its guiding formal principles.⁵ To the contrary, in the hands of a skilled craftsman, art may fail precisely by succeeding too well at disguising its artifice. Doing all the work on behalf of the public, kitsch thus betrays art's obligation to make that public think. The avant-garde, by distinction, takes nothing for granted. Rather, it uses art to question and elucidate art's "givens." By virtue of its ceaseless self-criticality, the avant-garde serves the society to which it is otherwise marginal by resisting the tendency toward cultural inertia inscribed in the canons of the academy and reiterated in the witless appropriations and crude reproductions of merchandisers.

Paradoxically, Greenberg's enduring fixation with Olitski, his abiding antipathy for Rauschenberg and Johns, and his recent enthusiasm for Wyeth affirm by inversion the antithesis first proposed in these two articles. Employing the term "avant-garde" as a pejorative, and singling out the Repin of Brandywine for praise, Greenberg in effect stands his own hierarchy on its head, offering his assessments as a negative proof of the lasting validity of his fundamental schema. Loyal to the Color Field academy, whose oracle he was, Greenberg displays an Alexandrian condescension toward—and ignorance of—the abstract art of the present. Sworn enemy of Surrealism and Dada, he has taken side against Rauschenberg and Johns and chosen that of our greatest living "kitsch-meister," Wyeth, whose arid illustrations make formulaic use of the picture-plane-puncturing techniques of chiaroscuro once anathema to Greenberg while "lending" themselves to endless reproduction. Most of all, Wyeth's dreary vignettes celebrate the cultural and social immobility against which the avant-garde has traditionally been locked in struggle. Pugnacious as ever—and as ever proud—Greenberg has in effect reasserted his categorical opposition of high and low culture while reversing his optic. To that extent his recent exercises in taste making instructively redirect our attention to the arbitrariness of that vision and telescope it into the past.

Despite Greenberg's conviction that true quality of judgment transcends the stresses and vagaries of time, it is impossible to make sense of or do justice to his ideas in any but historical terms. Those ideas had their moment, and that moment its mood. Delmore Schwartz's "New Year's Eve," a barely fictional account of a social gathering of Greenberg's crowd, describes it.

Yes it was 1938. How strange that it should be 1938, how strange seemed the word and the fact. No one knew that this was to be the year of the Munich Pact, but everyone knew there would be a new world war. . . . As Shenandoah, Nicholas and Wilhelmina parted in emptiness and depression, Shenandoah was already locked in what was soon to be a post-Munich sensibility complete hopelessness of perception and feeling.⁶

Testimony to the despair brought on by the spread of fascism and the failures and crimes of Soviet Communism is remarkably consistent. Left wing aesthetes of most tendencies professed much the same bleak view of their collective future. "All a writer can do," Stephen Spender wrote Christopher Isherwood in 1938, "the only completely revolutionary attitude for him today, is to try and create standards which are really civilized."⁷ The phrasing is strikingly similar to the final sentences of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch."

Here as in every other question today, it becomes necessary to quote Marx word for word. Today we no longer look toward socialism for a new culture-as inevitably one will appear, once we do have socialism. Today we look to socialism simply for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now.⁸

By the fall of 1939, when "Avant Garde and Kitsch" appeared in the *Partisan Review* events had gone from bad to catastrophic. August saw the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact followed by the outbreak of hostilities in Europe. A year later, the same month that "Towards a Newer Laocoon" was published, Leon Trotsky, the journal's unpredictable and often harsh guiding light, was assassinated.⁹ The apocalyptic tone of Greenberg's essay thus clearly echoed the anguished uncertainty that had suddenly beset the once confident radical intelligentsia. Declaring toward the middle of the essay that modernism's historical mission was to "keep culture moving," by the end. Greenberg's message was different in spirit; against the prevailing menace of global reaction, the best that could be accomplished, he felt, was a holding action.¹⁰ Of paramount significance, this shift in emphasis was more than circumstantial, as Walter Benjamin, a true martyr of that moment and a profoundly subtle Marxist, had foreseen. Anticipating this turn of mind, ten years before, Benjamin had said of the Surrealists, whom he considered the last flowering of the old avant-garde:

It is typical of these left-wing French intellectuals-exactly as it is of their Russian counterparts, too-that their positive function derives entirely from a feeling of obligation, not to Revolution, but to traditional culture. Their collective achievement, as far as it is positive, approximates conservation.¹¹

Even without Benjamin's caution, however, Greenberg's ostensible politics, in particular his appeal to Marx's authority, demand close scrutiny.

Greenberg was a latecomer to the Left of his generation. A 1955 autobiographical statement quoted in the introduction to his *Collected Essays and Criticism* makes no mention of any political affiliation whatsoever. It does recount his graduation from Syracuse University in 1930, time spent in his father's dry-goods business, his work as a translator, and finally his tenure as customs officer prior to his joining the editorial staff at *Partisan Review* in 1940. Only social and family ties and his freelance literary work seem to have brought him into contact with radical circles. In the mid-1930s he translated *The Brown Network, the Activities of the Nazis in Foreign Countries*, a report on the victims of fascism, as well as some works of Bertolt Brecht. Although a brother, Sol, belonged to Max Shachtman's Worker's Party, a Trotskyite splinter group, never, it seems, was Greenberg himself a member of a party. Neither did he take an active role in the affairs of the Artists' Congress (1935-42) or any other such cultural caucus. Indeed, since he had sat out most of the factional fights and organizational efforts that had animated the discourse and tempered the will of his New York colleagues, Greenberg's experience of Depression era politics was bookish and remote even by the standards of the intellectual Left in general.

Strong parallels nevertheless existed between his political and aesthetic positions. Naming militarism as reaction's social manifestation, and kitsch its artistic one, Greenberg's response to both was to signal for retreat and retrenchment on high ground. In a July-August 1941 tract entitled "10 Propositions on the War," written in conjunction with Dwight MacDonald, who had commissioned "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" from the previously unknown critic, Greenberg opposed participation in the war on the grounds that any collaboration with the ruling oligarchies of England and its allies would only reinforce their power over the working class and hasten the rise of domestic fascism.¹² Equating the fundamental interests of Hitler and Mussolini with those of the ruling castes in the liberal democracies under Churchill and Roosevelt, Greenberg and MacDonald urged radicals to abstain from the conflict and await an imminent revolution, one which, the authors speculated, "will be neither a protracted nor an especially violent struggle."¹³ Nor would the success of the rebellion depend upon expert or elite leadership. Such cadres were obviated by the "technical competence and relatively high cultural level of the individual worker, (which allowed) for a much wider distribution of initiative and authority, thus making possible, indeed necessary, a quite different kind of revolutionary party from the Bolshevik model."¹⁴ Implicitly—and ironically—trusting the masses to make spontaneously subtle political choices based on their "relatively high cultural level," while mistrusting their capacity to read books or look at pictures, Greenberg urged socialists to preserve their purity of purpose by refusing actively to support the war against the Axis just as, on the cultural front, he called upon writers and painters to protect the purity of their endeavors by effecting a staged withdrawal into "art for art's sake."

The problem, made obvious by the collapse of the Spanish Republic in 1939 and the betrayals of Stalin, was that no such upheaval was forthcoming. Around the world socialism had failed to sustain the momentum of change, and popular movements inspired by it had fragmented or turned to the Right. Although it struck a nerve in veteran radicals who recalled the Left's co-optation at the beginning of World War I, Greenberg and MacDonald's case against involvement was patently schematic and their political categories hazy if not altogether devoid of reality.¹⁵ A sophomoric gloss of Marxism, and a grossly simplified and distorted understanding of the forces at work in mass society thereby contributed to the formulation of a stance that pitted an unfounded revolutionary optimism against more justified but no less absolute pessimism. That combination would henceforth be typical of Greenberg's thinking and writing.¹⁶

For the record, moreover, Greenberg's policy on the war, like the mission he assigned the demoralized avant-garde, directly contradicted positions taken by Trotsky. On the one hand, believing that the defeat of fascism was of the first importance, Trotsky had repeatedly affirmed his "critical support" of the Soviet Union in the event of Nazi aggression. Defense of the existing worker's state, he maintained, was an unequivocal revolutionary duty as well as a precondition for the overthrow of the reactionary bureaucracy superimposed upon it by his arch enemy Stalin.¹⁷ On the other hand, Trotsky's socially committed but nonsectarian views on art were articulated with equal vehemence and clarity. Greenberg, indeed, could scarcely have missed them or their import. In an essay published in the August 1938 *Partisan Review*, for example, Trotsky wrote, "Art which is the most complex part of culture, the most sensitive and at the same time least protected, suffers most from the decline and decay of the bourgeois society ... To find a solution to this impasse through art itself is impossible . . . Art can neither escape the crisis nor partition itself off. Art cannot save itself."¹⁸ Moreover, in a manifesto printed in the pages of the *Partisan Review* that same year over the signatures of Diego Rivera and André Breton, and publicly endorsed, and secretly coauthored, by Trotsky, could be found further and still more explicit condemnation of the concept of art for art's sake. "It is far from our wish," the document flatly stated, "to revive a so-called pure art which generally serves the extremely impure ends of reaction."¹⁹

Against this background, Greenberg's revolutionary rhetoric rings hollow. At the time, however, it rang clear. As the grandiloquent looseness of his arguments proves rather than disproves, Greenberg's intuitions regarding the dramatic shift in cultural power then in progress were extremely shrewd, as was his pioneering translation of the ideas of the Right into the terminology of the Left. Blurring ideological distinctions and foreshortening historical processes, a plea for international solidarity and the militant defense of enlightened culture was thus enlisted to confer legitimacy on what in truth was a policy of Left-wing isolationism and the call for a return to Parnassus. "Someday," Greenberg wrote in a much cited comment added to his 1957 memoir, "The Late Thirties in New York," "it will have to be told how 'Anti-Stalinism,' which started out more or less as 'Trotskyism,' turned into art for art's sake and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come."²⁰ Accustomed to the historical voice, Greenberg betrays by the abbreviations of this chronology just how limited was his actual participation in the process that it apparently describes. For Meyer Schapiro, Harold Rosenberg, and other Marxist-oriented critics of the period covered by Greenberg's summary, the drift away from activism followed a long and wrenching commitment of which "Anti-Stalinism" was not the beginning but the middle and "Trotskyism" scarcely the code word for a nascent Formalism.²¹ But timing is all, and Greenberg's was perfect. Seizing upon the disarray in which the intellectual community found itself, he understood how the consolidation of a "saving remnant" would make it possible to salvage the idea of the avant-garde. Entering the ranks of the independent socialists just as they were breaking up, therefore, Greenberg sought to conjure "a third force" out of the mists of radical rhetoric, showing a beleaguered Left the path toward "honorable" disengagement through deft paraphrases of the language of engagement.²²

Contentious in tone and ostensibly rigorous in its analysis, from the outset Greenberg's position subsumed a staggeringly eclectic range of attitudes and ideas. From the neo-Platonist aesthete Walter Pater he took the notion that, "all art aspires constantly to the condition of music," and from Bernard Berenson the paradigm and posture of the connoisseur. From the anti-Romantic critic Irving Babbitt's 1910 book, *A New Laocoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts*, he adapted the title for his own essay.²³ Littering his reviews with references to

empiricism and positivism, by 1942 Greenberg began making frequent allusion to Kant's theories regarding the universality and disinterestedness of taste. A contagious "chutzpah" initially informed these piratical appropriations, in particular the last. *Partisan Review* Editor William Barrett recalled:

There was a special sense of triumph when Greenberg trotted out the reference to Kant: for one thing the reference was a little arcane, and there was special cachet in citing a philosopher who did not fall anywhere within the Marxist canon. But sometimes the reference did sound rather sententious coming from Greenberg's lips, and Delmore [Schwartz] would growl, Clem is always putting on the dog—intellectually speaking.... you know Clem doesn't know what he's talking about when he mentions Kant.²⁴

What "Clem" knew about Kant—or eventually learned—is less significant than the manner in which he introduced him and the role he assigned him. Reading one step ahead of his class, Greenberg avoided any serious attempt to reconcile the discrepancies between his latest critical *trouvaille* and his original premises. An increasingly brittle carapace overarching the theoretical hodgepodge of his aesthetic program, Greenberg's "Marxist" materialism covered for his undisciplined albeit dogmatic idealism.

Nor did "Marxism" simply drop from his discourse once more suitable models came to the fore. It was fundamental to his polemical strategy, and Greenberg persistently revived it throughout his career, most notably in his 1953 text, "The Plight of Culture," in which he returns to the theme of the mutual hostility between advanced art and the popular audience.²⁵ Responding to T. S. Eliot's "Notes Toward the Definition of Culture," Greenberg takes the poet to task for miscalculating the extent of technology's influence on the "organic" cycles of cultural growth and decay. Whereas the technological revolution is responsible for the death of "folk culture," and "abysses of vulgarity and falsehood unknown in the recoverable past," Greenberg once again holds out for a long-term utopian solution to the problems of civilization's decline, this time proposing the replacement of Western industrial society by one modeled on a primitive, preindustrial socialism.²⁶ Under such hypothetical circumstances, art, rather than being consigned to the realm of leisure—that is, passive enjoyment—would, on a mass basis, be given the status of work—that is, unalienated labor. "Beyond such speculation, which is admittedly schematic and abstract, I cannot go," Greenberg said, concluding that, "nothing in these ideas suggests anything that could be sensibly hoped for in the present or near future."²⁷

Typically hedged with last-minute disclaimers, the glimmer of distant yet profound social transformation is once again summoned to lend a radical aura to Greenberg's increasingly conservative preoccupation with cultural leveling.²⁸ Addressing many of the same issues and fears as "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," "The Plight of Culture" makes grudging allowance for previously unanticipated conditions. Contrary to Greenberg's initial scenario, the outcome of the late war was neither a final descent into barbarism nor a swift and relatively peaceful revolution. Far from sinking into a rigid Statism, in fact, America had emerged from the conflagration richer, more powerful, and socially more fluid than before. Hence, while the essential structure of Greenberg's dichotomy remained intact, his definition of its variables altered. Whereas in 1939 the enemy at the gates was fascist vulgarity—regimented low-browism—by 1953 it is liberal vulgarity-market-driven low- and middle-browism.²⁹

In particular, Greenberg recoiled from the supposed convergence of the latter constituencies and decried the deleterious effects on artists and intellectuals of the expanding audience these middle and lower sectors together created. Already in 1947, he could write,

Yet high culture, which in the civilized past has always functioned on the basis of sharp class distinctions, is endangered—at least for the time being—by this sweeping process which, by wiping out social distinctions between the more or less cultivated, renders standards of art and thought provisional . . . It becomes increasingly difficult to tell who is serious and who is not. At the same time as the average college graduate becomes more literate the average intellectual becomes more banal, both in personal and professional activity.³⁰

Ignoring for the moment its digressive insinuations—who, one may well ask, is the "average" intellectual and what bearing does the unseemliness of their unspecified "personal activity" have on the matter at hand—this text nicely explicates the hidden sociology of "The Plight of Culture" and, by extension, the class bias of all Greenberg's writing. In "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" Greenberg prematurely predicted and mourned the passing of the old patronage aristocracy. In "The Plight of Culture," he bemoaned its dilution, meanwhile subtly fudging the distinction between the concept of the avant-garde and that of a cultural elite with the euphemistic deployment of categories such as "uppermost," "middle," and "lower." Far from advocating fundamental change in the relations between the avant-garde and its "haut bourgeois" sponsors or its "petit bourgeois" milieu, Greenberg proceeded to adjust his description of the status quo ante, in an effort at semantically forestalling drastic slippage caused by the arrival of a newly prosperous and avid middle class. Ostensibly in favor of a far-off abolition of class distinctions and the division of labor, in the immediate context Greenberg used "Marxist" terminology to insist upon them. Thus cloaking his horror at the rise of a leisured public in "progressive" garb, Greenberg adroitly assumed Eliot's position without incurring the stigma attached to the latter's frankly reactionary statement of their common views.

Historian T J. Clark's labeling Greenberg an "Eliotic-Trotskyist," although it spawned a clever contraction, gives the critic the benefit of too much doubt, inferring a genuine ideological contest where, in fact, one finds a flurry of feints and parries followed by an artful striking of triumphant poses.³¹ Eliot, not Trotsky, was Greenberg's hero in combat, and a Marx impersonator, the poet's unlikely sparring partner. Indeed, the prolonged public face-off between these two contenders for his allegiance resembled an exhibition boxing match, refereed by a promoter who had a vested albeit unequal interest in both fighters and no desire to see either knocked out of the ring. Accordingly, each successive bout ended in a TKO and the guarantee of a rematch. Always, however, it was the Eliotic Greenberg that reigned in the interim.

Consistently dismissing artistic revolt or experimentation while still professing a desire for social revolution, Greenberg thus shared Eliot's conviction that continuity of tradition was an ultimate value and art itself was a product of purely aesthetic dynamics. "For my meaning is, that the poet has not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium . . . in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways," Eliot declared in 1919 in "Tradition and the Individual Talent."³² Greenberg was in complete agreement: "Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art," he wrote in "Towards a Newer Laocoon," adding, "the arts have been haunted back to their mediums, and there they have been isolated, concentrated and defined."³³ A quarter

century later in "Modernist Painting," he elaborated on that principle: "The essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence."³⁴ Primarily if not exclusively concerned with the identification of its "irreducible" characteristics, Greenberg defined art by its revealed essence rather than by the dynamic interaction of separate or contrary elements. Inasmuch as all the arts imitated music, all art of quality, therefore, tended toward harmony rather than dissonance, toward integration rather than fragmentation. The outstanding question remained the degree to which art might be exempted from the decadence toward which Greenberg believed industrial capitalism as a whole was destined. "We might sum up Greenberg's position, translating it into Spenglerian language, by saying that the coinciding of avant-garde and kitsch shows that we are dealing with a Civilization now unable to produce a Kultur," Renato Poggioli concluded.³⁵

Despite his condemnation in "The Plight of Culture" of Eliot's Spenglerian excesses, in fact, Greenberg has shown a long-standing affinity for Spengler's epochal fatalism and has recently owned up to it. "Cultures and civilizations do run their 'biological courses,'" he told a 1981 conference on modernism, "the evidence says that and the evidence forces me to accept Spengler's scheme in the largest part."³⁶ That scheme, however, precludes anything like a dialectical relation between society and culture—and more particularly between avant-garde and kitsch—insofar as an eventual and definitive failure of creative will presents itself as a forgone conclusion. Mindful of this problem from the start, and anxious to draw attention to and explain modernism's persistent vital signs, Greenberg countered with his own "natural" determinism, substituting an aquatic metaphor for Spengler's organic one. From these intellectual headwaters emanated the "mainstream," Greenberg's signature trope and greatest fallacy. Variants of this coinage appear in earlier texts, but a 1943 review of an exhibition by Marc Chagall uses it for the first time in its definitive form. "Chagall's art," Greenberg wrote, "turns from the mainstream of ambitious contemporary art to follow its own path. It is pungent, at times powerful, but opens up no vistas beyond itself"³⁷ "Abstract art today," he went on to assert in covering the 1944 Whitney Annual, "is the only stream that flows toward an ocean."³⁸ In "Towards a New Laocoon" Greenberg had stated that he "could find no other explanation for the present superiority of abstract art than its historical justification." The introduction of the concept of the mainstream subsumed that rationale within a larger teleology, putting in place the last of the rhetorical devices that make up Greenberg's "theory."³⁹ Channeled by history, abstraction was a current gathering momentum and coherence as it advanced toward an unbounded prospect. With the allowances habitually made for figurative artists dear to him, for example Arnold Friedman and Louis Eilshemius, and qualified by admiration for the old masters and tactical concessions to charges of dogmatism—"Art is under no categorical imperative to correspond point by point to the underlying tendencies of its age"⁴⁰—Greenberg proceeded without qualm to superimpose his grand design upon the contradictory facts of art as he found it in the 1940s.

Those facts were contradictory indeed, and insofar as the American public was concerned, still sketchy. To speak with comprehensive authority about the complex genesis of modernist painting and sculpture—or their hybrids—required a familiarity with a rapidly changing and far-flung international scene that very few critics, curators, scholars, or artists in the United States were privileged to claim. Given this and his repeated insistence on the primacy of direct experience in forming taste, it is remarkable how scant Greenberg's knowledge of the plastic arts actually was when "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" and "Towards a Newer Laocoon" were written.⁴¹ Prior to their publication, Greenberg had had little exposure to contemporary painting or

sculpture beyond his enrollment in a drawing class at the Art Students League and attendance at three out of a series of six lectures on modernist aesthetics delivered by Hans Hofmann.⁴²

Unpublished during his lifetime, Hofmann's talks provided Greenberg with a basic understanding of painterly values and mechanics from which the critic later extrapolated his fundamental theses, although often at the cost of reducing Hofmann's fertile insights into catch phrases. In these lectures—which in fairness it must be said Greenberg has consistently acknowledged as being of crucial value to his own thinking—Hofmann emphasized attention to the purity of color relationships, the importance of making the medium visible, and an appreciation of the dynamics of the picture plane. Hofmann's influence notwithstanding, however, almost all the notions presented in Greenberg's first essays were founded on literary not visual precedents, a fact made especially ironic when considering how quick he was to criticize the confusion of the literary and the plastic arts.

Moreover, as was true of those used to argue his political positions, the propositions and examples initially forwarded in his aesthetic writing were largely if not entirely hypothetical. The career of Greenberg the exhibition reviewer, who in 1941 sprung without warning or preparation from the forehead of Greenberg the literary essayist, is the story of the fast start obliged to be a fast study. To be sure, all good critics learn on the job. If they do not, they are unworthy of being read. In certain ways, Greenberg excelled at this challenge. As a stylist and scold he remains fresh. Inveighing against institutional compromise, he is still capable of inspiring contempt for the targets of his abuse; too little has changed in the art world for us not to find examples of comparable bureaucratic muddle-headedness in our day. Moreover, as a general advocate of American painting and sculpture at the hour of its majority, he deserves respect. Nevertheless, in his most important capacity as a witness to art seen in galleries and museums and a reporter on the ideas that informed it, he is woefully and consistently unreliable. By turns cavalier and hectoring in manner, and always ready to pigeonhole work he did not comprehend and movements into which he had not inquired in detail, Greenberg's lapses are even harder to excuse when measured against his ultimate cause. For example, although an advocate of purity in art and politics, Greenberg showed a general ignorance of the Russian Constructivists that is astonishing. Reviewing Malevich in 1942, he dismissed his work as "of documentary value but meager aesthetic results."⁴³ His praise of Mondrian is just as strange. In a 1943 column having just declared Mondrian a "great painter," Greenberg went on to disparage the artist's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* with a stunning arrogance. "There is a resolution, but of an easy struggle" Greenberg said of the painting's tension between pattern and ground, and then complained of its "floating, wavering, somehow awkward quality," concluding that "the color wanders off in directions I am sure belie the artist's intent."⁴⁴ Except that here, as in many other instances, Greenberg's grasp of the artist's intent and the pictorial facts was pure projection. Mistaking primaries for secondaries in spite of the Dutch artist's well-documented and rigorously applied color theory, Greenberg's description of the work's chromatic scheme was, in reality, grossly inaccurate.⁴⁵ Such errors are scarcely minor, especially for an "eye" or "mind" of such pretension.

Predicating his theoretical and historical case for abstraction on the development of Cubism, Greenberg thus managed to misconstrue the work and motivation of two of its principal followers—this despite the Museum of Modern Art's 1936 survey exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* in which the work of both were prominent. As late as 1951, Alfred Barr, the exhibition's curator, still thought it necessary to point out the "serious historical confusion" in Greenberg's habit of "includ[ing] all the abstract movements of the previous forty years," under the rubric of

Cubism.⁴⁶ In a famous diagram published on the dust jacket of the show's catalogue, Barr had, in fact, enumerated the tributaries of nonobjective art—Fauvism, Expressionism, Surrealism, Constructivism, Suprematism, etc.—and rendered their course as they fed into each other and then redivided into two omnibus channels: nongeometrical and geometrical abstraction. However, even Barr's own provisional attempt to track and focus art history's forward motion produced a puzzling picture as the central portion of his drawing—a welter of lines indicating overlapping and reciprocal influence—makes plain.⁴⁷ Three years later, when Greenberg began to write, the currents and whirlpools of modernism were if anything more difficult to chart. Meanwhile, Meyer Schapiro's critique of Barr's formalist account of abstraction also appears to have escaped Greenberg's notice. Writing for the Marxist Quarterly in 1937, Schapiro credited "Barr's recent book, [as] the best, I think, we have in English on the movements now grouped as abstract art." He observed, however, that

although Barr sets out to describe rather than defend or criticize abstract art, he seems to accept its theories at face value in his historical exposition and in certain random judgments. In places he speaks of this art as independent of historical conditions, as realizing the underlying order of nature as an art of pure form without content ... Hence if the book is largely an account of historical movements, Barr's conception of abstract art remains essentially unhistorical . . .

"48

Correcting Barr's methodological bias toward a cyclical explanation of stylistic action and reaction, Schapiro sketched an alternative interpretation of the origins of nonobjective art that emphasized both social and personal factors, quoting at some length from the writings of Malevich and Kandinsky in support of his case. Nothing in this exchange made an impression on Greenberg, who persistently finessed questions of social engagement on the part of abstract artists and regularly dismissed their often extensive theoretical texts as essentially irrelevant to their work.

Careless with regard to some who had carried forward the mission of the "purist" avant-garde, and unwilling to contend with the complex interplay among its various contributing tendencies, Greenberg was glib or accusing when it came to artists and schools that substantially deviated from his precepts. In his writing, Dada as a whole was reduced to a minor episode. In the entire first decade of Greenberg's criticism Marcel Duchamp receives one mention. Schwitters is dealt with only in terms of the formal syntax of his collages, which, like those of the Cubists, mattered to Greenberg only insofar as they undid the conventions of painterly illusionism. Berlin Dada is passed over without comment. Indifferent to if not simply oblivious of the political ideas and graphic innovations of John Heartfield and George Grosz, Greenberg refused or failed to contend with the implicit parallels between their work and that of Brecht, whose use of popular motifs he countenanced.⁴⁹ Surrealism, meanwhile, is caricatured as a retrograde pictorial movement. Where absolutely necessary, as Barr noted, Greenberg made exceptions by reassigning labels. Hence Miro, about whom Greenberg wrote his only monograph, was described as a "late Cubist," as was Pollock, whom Greenberg hoped thereby to rescue from the entanglements of Surrealist symbolism and the unconscious.⁵⁰ Stripsearching art for literary contraband, be it Schwitters's cheeky and ephemeral poetry or Miro's simultaneously droll and disturbing erotic vignettes, Greenberg, the aesthetic customs agent, stood vigilant guard at the frontier of American modernism.

Anywhere that strings of appropriation, invention, biography, or belief attached art to the world, Greenberg was ready to cut them clean, particularly when those strings lead to directly vernacular culture. Unlike Schapiro, who as a Marxist activist and art historian had long inquired into the social content and context of art in general and Impressionism in particular, Greenberg retreated to a tautological formalism that obviated such disquieting questions. Still, addressing the work of certain artists forced his hand, and frequently the results are more telling than his theoretical treatment of the issues involved. When writing of Georges Seurat (fig. 199), for example, Greenberg shrank from the very urban spectacles that beckoned this nonetheless supremely optical painter

Like Manet, Toulouse-Lautrec, Renoir and other contemporaries, he [Seurat] was fascinated by the mass produced recreations of the city which the nineteenth century had conventionalized into circuses, night clubs, dance halls, cafes and variety theaters. Seurat seems to have been sensitive to the outside-looking-in attitude that modern entertainment forces upon the spectator. More than the entertainment itself, the inhuman glamour of the entertainers keeps us at a distance. Both the entertainers and the spectators in "Le Chahut" and "Le Cirque" are cartooned ... It is a world most of us will never enter. Twenty years after Seurat, painting entered a world not unlike it and left a good many of us standing at the doors.⁵¹

This is as close to an open admission of critical incapacity as one encounters in Greenberg's writing. Accepting to stand outside the door opened by Manet, Lautrec, and their followers, Greenberg condemned himself to watch much of the avant-garde file past and out of sight. The question is, why? To what degree, one wonders, was his demurrer a product of philosophical design or a matter of default, a consequence of ascertainable principles or the result of a simple lack of affinity for rude pleasures? Did he, for example, recoil from the music hall on the grounds that it was debased Bach or Beethoven, or did he simply have a tin ear for Tin Pan Alley?⁵² Neither answer satisfies; yet how does one explain so crippling a critical weakness in so quick an intelligence? Projecting his own discomfort onto others, Greenberg often hints at the underlying ambivalence that appears to have prompted his sweeping disdain for popular culture. His complaint against the cartoonist William Steig is particularly revealing: "If, however, Steig were somewhat more susceptible to those dangers of middle-class existence he too triumphantly points out, he would score much more frequently"⁵³ Turned back on himself, the charge sticks more firmly still.

In his comments on literature, Greenberg was more forthcoming about his own predicament. Contributing to a 1944 conference, "American Literature and the Younger Generation of American Jews," he was indeed quite outspoken about the underlying anxieties and self-imposed strictures it entailed.

There is a Jewish bias toward the abstract, the tendency to conceptualize as much as possible, and then a certain "Schwarmerei," a state of perpetual and exalted surprise-and sometimes disgust-at the sensuous and sentimental data of existence that others take for granted.⁵⁴

Continuing in this vein, Greenberg's theoretical commentary borders on autobiographical testimony and is therefore worth quoting at length:

Again and again, they [Jewish writers] describe escapes or better flights, from the restrictions or squalor of the Brooklyns and Bronxes to the wide open world which rewards the successful fugitive with space, importance and wealth ... Sometimes it is a flight from loneliness to identification with a cause . . . Flight-as well as its converse, pursuit-is of course a great American theme, but the Jewish writer sets himself apart by the more concerned and immediately material way he treats it. It is for this reason that the Jewish writer is so reluctant to surrender himself to a truly personal relation with an objective theme. His personal relation is to the success of the writing, writing becomes almost altogether a way of coping with the world.⁵⁵

Ironically, it is precisely at this point that Eliot's Anglo-Catholicism and Greenberg's Jewishness coincide. "The progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality," Eliot wrote. "Poetry is not the turning loose of emotions but an escape from emotion, not the expression of personality but the escape from personality."⁵⁶ Greenberg's similar insistence on the aesthetic "extinction of personality," and his determination to purge from art all traces of mundane existence, for which kitsch became the shorthand term, reflect not so much a political or even an arthistorical perspective, as they do a fundamentally religious one. Located against the backdrop of Jewish emigration from the shtetl and the ghetto, the opposition of purity and impurity stands as a metaphor for the perilous choices imposed by cultural assimilation in the New World. If indeed a preoccupation with form is typical of the first- or second-generation Jewish-American writer, in Greenberg's reckoning that preoccupation is a sublimated expression of his deep alienation from the surrounding environment. "His need of course is a greater feeling of integration with society," Greenberg said, but he added, repeating his standard coda, "I do not believe this will be possible for him except under socialism."⁵⁷

Simultaneously a refugee from his community of origin and an outsider to his adopted one, Greenberg the cosmopolitan intellectual occupied a noman's-land. And though his constant appeals for revolution are hardly credible as politics, in this context they acquire a new and poignant meaning, haunted as they now seem by sacred eschatology consistent with his inertial pairing of apocalyptic pessimism and millennial optimism. As before, one must look to his literary criticism for clues, this time to his essay on Kafka:

For the Jew who lives in tradition-the Orthodox Jew-history stopped with the extinction of an independent Jewish state in Palestine two millennia ago and will not start up again until that state is restored by the Messiah. In the meantime Jewish historical existence remains in abeyance. While in exile, Jews live removed from history, behind the 'fence' or 'Chinese Wall' of Halacha. Such history as goes on outside that 'fence' is profane history, Gentile history, which belongs more to natural than to human history ... During the last century and more Gentile history has begun to intervene in Diaspora Jewish life in a new way by 'emancipating' Jews, which means 'enlightening them' as well as by recruiting them as citizens. But this turns out not to have rendered Gentile history any less hostile, whether to Orthodox or to assimilated Jews. Gentile history may, it is

true, have become more interesting to the later sort of Jew for and in itself, but this has not really made it gentler or less a part of nature. Therefore the emancipated Jew must still resort to some sort of Halachic safety or stability, or rather immobility.⁵⁸

Intellectually committed to an avant-garde whose task it was to precipitate radical social change and to keep culture "moving," spiritually it seems Greenberg imagined a frozen Halachic world remote from the contagion of the "natural" and safely insulated from a Gentile world that so often masked a brutal anti-Semitism in the "folkish" or "popular" forms.⁵⁹

As compelling as Greenberg's description of the crisis of the Jewish writer is, it cannot be indiscriminately applied. Nor was his retreat from coarse contingency into a realm of self-protective high-mindedness typical of all those artists who shared his heritage or his uneasiness. Also a careful reader of Kafka, Philip Guston suffered the divided consciousness of the Jewish artist and intellectual in a secular society as well. Although long torn between abstraction and image making, Guston never fled from his existential discomfort into pure aestheticism. During the 1970s, the last decade of his career, the mess of daily life and the stress of daily contradiction flooded the serene spaces of his Abstract Expressionist pictures. What Greenberg once belittled as Guston's "homeless figuration" had finally come home. A better student of Eliot's poetic than Greenberg, Guston understood the capacity of art to transfigure quotidian pettiness and the reciprocal power of the vernacular to rescue art from enfeebling rarification. As obsessed as Greenberg with art-historical continuity, moreover, Guston's faith in it was based on the perpetual tension between a striving for transcendent order and the imperfection of the artist's nature and means. While still an abstract painter, he thus stated:

There is something ridiculous and miserly in the myth we inherit from abstract art: That painting is autonomous, pure and for itself, therefore we habitually analyze its ingredients and define its limits. But painting is impure. It is the adjustment of impurities which forces its continuity.⁶⁰

Directed toward Ad Reinhardt during a panel discussion, Guston's retort might just as easily have been aimed at Greenberg. A member of the American Abstract Artists group around whose periphery Greenberg moved during the 1940s, Reinhardt in turn would seem to have been the critic's natural ally, being the only one among the New York School painters to defend artistic purity as an absolute value. In theory as well as practice, however, Reinhardt was a far more thorough and consistent defender of vanguard probity than Greenberg. An undaunted Leftist whose cartoons debunking kitsch concepts of modern art featured purposefully "dumb" images and bad puns, Reinhardt decried not only the confusion of aesthetic aims, but also the confusion of professional roles—critic, collector, adviser, dealer—a confusion in which Greenberg was deeply implicated.⁶¹ Snubbing Reinhardt, the "pure" purist whose work explicitly fulfilled his criteria but whose doggerel manifestos implicitly accused him of betraying his social vision, Greenberg jumped headfirst into the maelstrom of Abstract Expressionism.

Although Greenberg was the first among art writers of the late 1940s and early 1950s to seize upon and articulate the "look" and formal logic of "American-type painting"—in particular its scale and overall composition—it is easy to forget how out of sympathy he was with the basic motives and furiously improvisatory aesthetics that fueled postwar art in this country.⁶² Deaf to or disdainful of the eroticized bucolics of Gorky or the mystical "literature" of Rothko, Still, and

Newman, he was even less prepared to deal with the lyricism of Pollock, de Kooning, and Kline, or its rough metropolitan accents. Kline said it best:

Hell, half the world wants to be like Thoreau at Walden worrying about the noise of the traffic on the way to Boston: the other half use up their lives being part of that noise. I like the second half.⁶³

Nominally, of course, Greenberg partook of their experience and outlook. Cubism, he believed, was an urban art, and "all profoundly original art," he claimed, "looks ugly at first."⁶⁴ Yet, if "ugliness" marked a stage of artistic creation or its recognition a moment in the development of individual taste, it was "beauty" that Greenberg sought and the codification of its new laws that he set about to effect. Modernism's periodic aggressions and its attraction to the discordant realities of the city were necessary but not-to-be exaggerated dimensions of a process, justifiable in the end insofar as it yielded the rewards and comforts of private delectation. Although a revolutionary at his desk, as a connoisseur of pictures Greenberg seems to have taken all too literally Matisse's suggestion that a good painting was like an armchair awaiting the tired businessman at the end of the day.

Replacing the patron/critic's chair for that of the artist—and doubtless mindful of Greenberg's proscriptions—de Kooning spoke for much of his generation when he countered that "some painters, including myself, do not care what chair we are sitting on. It does not have to be a comfortable one. They are too nervous to find out where they ought to sit. They do not want to sit in style."⁶⁵ Pressing his advantage, de Kooning then asserted as a primary the very quality that Greenberg most abhorred: "Art never makes me peaceful or pure," he said in 1951. "I always seem to be wrapped in the melodrama of vulgarity."⁶⁶ De Kooning was seconded by David Smith, who was preeminent among sculptors in Greenberg's pantheon, but whose errors of aesthetic judgment the critic would eventually "correct" when, as the executor of his artistic estate, he had some of Smith's work repainted. Smith stated:

To the creative artist, in the making of art it is doubtful whether aesthetics have any value to him. The truly creative artist deals with vulgarity ... this term I use because to the professional aesthetician, it is vulgarity in his code of beauty, because he has not recognized it as yet or made up rules for its acceptance ... It will not conform to the past, it is beyond the pale.⁶⁷

In Greenberg's case, the difficulty resulted instead from the fact that the libidinous "Schwarmerei" in which Smith, Pollock, de Kooning were immersed did conform to the present. Everywhere that vulgarity seeped out: in Smith's notebook drawings and angrily sexual assemblages, in Pollock's psychoanalytic sketches and his turbulent late figuration, and most of all in de Kooning's "Women." Asked by Selden Rodman whether one of these paintings was inspired by Marilyn Monroe, de Kooning answered, "I don't know, I was painting a picture, and one day—there she was." "Subconscious desire?" Rodman inquired. "Subconscious hell!" the painter replied.⁶⁸ Prefiguring Andy Warhol's Marilyns and their Pop Art sorority, de Kooning's "Women" showed how deliberate irony could serve both as a universal cultural solvent, and a tonic capable of rejuvenating high-art conventions that had fallen victim to enervating piety. And, while Pollock's lifelong reliance on subconscious imagery drew upon the tradition of Surrealist automatism—contradicting Greenberg's emphasis on the purely formal aspects of his

work—de Kooning's flirtation with the tabloid Muse who emerged from the sea of his exquisite gestures demonstrated that in the modern era automatism is as likely to conjure up a fleshy screen idol as a spare Jungian archetype.

Greenberg hated the example of de Kooning's unbiased readiness to be "wherever my spirit allows me to be," yet never understood the lesson it taught.⁶⁹ Tolerant of "naive" art and of "Art Brut," though critical of its stylistic inertia—he granted Dubuffet a special dispensation for the "superior literature" of his work that he withheld from Abstract Expressionism's infidels—Greenberg continued to treat mass culture as irredeemably crude, institutional, and retrograde. Far from static, however, and despite the conservatism of its industrial captains and media bosses, the mass culture of the postwar years was enormously dynamic. The product of a chaotically prosperous entrepreneurial economy rather than of a closed one ruled by scarcity, the eddies of popular imagination found prompt access to "mainstream" venues just as the creations of Madison Avenue and Hollywood entered the minds of vanguard artists with increasing frequency and speed. Denying this constant two-way traffic and insisting upon absolute separation of high culture from low, Greenberg played his set piece game of avant-garde versus kitsch to repeated stalemates.

Treating kitsch as a raw material for art rather than its antithesis, however, Greenberg's more basic description of modernist process still applied and, if anything, applied more fully than ever before. "Modernism," he maintained, "criticizes from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized."⁷⁰ The generative and determining principle of modernism consists of the methods by which it transforms its substance; it is not a preordained standard of excellence against which the results of that transformation are judged. Hence, modernism's spirit resides in a developing process rather than in a canon of artifacts. Detailing instead of overturning the precedents set by de Kooning and his more worldly colleagues, artists of the late 1950s and early 1960s put Greenberg's idealist theory into radical practice. Junk assemblagists, Neo-Dadaists, and Pop artists, enthralled by popular images and the publicity machine that produced them, thus used the castoffs of mass culture to criticize that culture from within. Like their Cubist and Dadaist predecessors, they understood that the essence of the medium included rather than excluded the social and human provenance of the emblems and stuffs they incorporated into their work by collage or painted facsimile. "I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap and still comes out on top," avowed Claes Oldenburg, in whose work the elusive subjectivity of Abstract Expressionism first met the deadpan objectivity of Pop.⁷¹ To embroil art "in everyday crap" is to admit that the artist-citizen is already in deep. Soon, in fact, the vanguard found itself a prime target of the very media whose "false and cynical treatment of real emotion," Oldenburg once said, "fascinates me and yields more truth."⁷² Taking over and taking apart the techniques and iconography of the press that courted them, many artists of the 1960s rightly saw their future—to recast Robert Rauschenberg's remark—in the gap between life and art. The "negative" dimension of that project never precluded a sympathetic regard—Warhol simply and subversively called it "liking"—for the found objects of their affection equaling the disaffection they felt toward the society that had simultaneously produced and discarded them. As it turned out, then, the door through which Seurat had passed issued not only onto the spectral rivulets, spray mists, and polymer mud of Olitski and other Color Field painters, but offered a more compelling view beyond to the patchwork, photo-mechanical, screened, and socially encoded matrixes of Rauschenberg, Johns, and their peers and artistic progeny.

With few exceptions, art in our time has thus demanded a critic as "wrapped in the melodrama of vulgarity" as the artists upon whose work he presumed to sit in judgment. "A man watches a movie," said Robert War show, an editor at Commentary and Greenberg's office mate, "and the critic must acknowledge that he is that man."⁷³ Greenberg, however, could never concede being such a man among the semidarkened multitude. Although street-smart in intellectual skirmishes, his preferred critical stance has been studied and aloof and his critical voice mandarin. Presently that same voice echoes in the countless articles, catalogues, and lectures that emanate from our contemporary journals, museums, and symposia. Categorical, disembodied, and censorious, it is the voice of the academy, a voice we too readily confuse with that of modernism itself. Its habit is to speak in gross historical generalizations, ignoring obvious and major exceptions as well as intriguing if sometimes obscure anomalies. Among these academicians, theoretical name-dropping is the norm, coupled with an astonishing disinterest in and disregard for the stated intentions of the artists who fall victim to their attentions. They are humorless in their solicitude for art and artists, moreover, since humor acknowledges weakness and exposes the complex and irreconcilable facts of character. Meanwhile, the "terminal argument" is their favorite tactic.⁷⁴ In ostensible defense of the best, they predict the worst, routinely trumping their critical hand with doomsday utterances that curiously lack the urgency one would expect of those convinced that their case was definitive or the end nigh.

Though only a segment of this group are full members of the scholarly guilds, to varying degrees all trade in the same commodity: intellectual kitsch, a debased form of thinking, which differs from its artistic equivalent only in that fetishized opacity rather than fetishized transparency is its principal selling point. To be sure, divergent tendencies exist within this academy, yet in keeping with Greenberg's original emphasis in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," all see themselves as dedicated to the "preservation of culture" against Philistine encroachments and barbarian onslaughts. Mistaking tunas with good taste for tunas that taste good, the dwindling band of Greenberg's "neo-Kantian" disciples has accepted his example as so complete an affirmation of the cult of "quality" and the mystique of the "eye" as to forever absolve them of responsibility for examining the social issues in which his criticism was originally, albeit shallowly, rooted. To those of a still more reactionary bent, Greenberg's story permits another retelling of the fable of "the God that failed." Followed by long laments over the precipitous drop in "cultural literacy," the exercise satisfies a deeply self-congratulatory nostalgia for an art pure of spirit but most especially pure of radical politics. Of course, as Greenberg himself reminds us, "it is in the very nature of academism to be pessimistic, for it believes history to be repetitious and a monotonous decline from a former golden age."⁷⁵ That warning applies equally to the scholastic Left that exhausts its revolutionary zeal by rewriting the revolutions of the past while second-guessing the anarchic energies of the moment.

Just how confused criticism has become about which moment we are now living in is obvious from the shell game of prefixes currently in vogue. Resulting in a string of compounds—postindustrial, postmodernist, late capitalist and neo- almost any artistic style one can name—the practice does nothing to clarify the ill-defined root terms to which they are annexed. However, if postmodernism means anything that can be generally agreed upon, it means post-Formalism and—in America at any rate—post-Greenberg. Still, Greenberg's casuistic style of thought survives the repudiation of his dogmas and in all probability will remain his great legacy. Indeed, such hyphenates are a part of that legacy—a verbal strategy for eliding the present with a heavily expurgated past and a vaguely articulated future so as to hold all in permanent suspension. While going Greenberg the critic and gallery adviser at least two

better, the team of Collins and Milazzo have arrived at the most absurd of these periodic labels: "postrecent." Besides the amusement such jargon affords, we should be grateful for their having narrowed to near zero the span between then and now. For if the "post" in postmodernism signals any critical weakness, it is our current inability to tell time.

"What time is it?" is the question with which modernism began. Restless, ironic, always out of place, and everywhere alert, Charles Baudelaire's "Painter of Modern Life" exposed the anachronism of the academy by exposing his senses and nerves to the flux of the actual. To speak with accuracy and conviction about the moment, the critic of modern life must likewise be—and remain—a creature of immediate sensation and unorthodox mind. Far from complacent, of course, such a critic, Baudelaire said, would be "partial, passionate and political."⁷⁶ All of these qualities Greenberg has possessed in abundance. More was demanded, however. An absolute prerequisite was an honest estimate of one's own place in the social system and thus the full measure of a political candor for which no political cant will substitute.

Financially dependent upon a middle-class audience he despised for its ignorance and utilitarianism, Baudelaire still preferred that public to the taste-makers of the old regime: "the aristocrats of thought, the distributors of praise and blame, the monopolists of spiritual things [who] have denied you [the Bourgeois] the right to feel and enjoy."⁷⁷ (Fearful of the masses and scornful of his own class, Greenberg decried the lack in democratic society of just such aristocracy, and sought to invent one in his image and install it in power.) The scathing sarcasm of Baudelaire's appeal to the bourgeoisie to complement their wealth and power with poetry does not belie his grasp of aesthetic Realpolitik; it reflects it. Envy is beneath a self-made man of taste just as taste and intelligence are the currency of those who have no other. A man of the crowd, meanwhile, Baudelaire's model critic—like his archetypal modern painter—relished the parade of contemporary fashion and was participant observer of the often grotesque pageant of urban pleasure.⁷⁸ Although hating its presumption, he therefore took an intense interest in the manners of a bourgeoisie whose reign had just begun.

Despite the horrendous cruelties and dislocations of the century, their reign has not ended, nor has the profound ambivalence it stirs been lifted from the consciousness of the modern artists or intellectuals. Despite the sometimes despairing but usually wishful references to cultural "lateness" that have long been a feature of Greenberg's criticism and currently punctuate the writing of his epigones, we are in fact in a period of high capitalism. And, for all its structural debility and all the misery and fraud it propagates, capitalism has no rivals, only economic cycles and internal competition. In fact, rather than collapsing of its own weight—although partial collapses always threaten—capitalism is about to reabsorb the still weaker socialist systems that have so long been its political adversaries. For worse and for better, as Baudelaire was the first to acknowledge frankly, modernism is bourgeois art, a fever graph of the enthusiasms, discontents, bad conscience, and bad faith of its patrons' and practitioners' class. So long as that class survives and rules, modernism continues. Its contradictions are ours, from which no revolution has saved us in the past and none seems likely to do so in the future. Resistance of any meaningful kind to the constraints and crimes of bourgeois society must therefore begin with the admission and constantly updated appraisal of our compromised position within it. For if, in its crisis-ridden and frequently brutal unfolding, that reality seems intolerable, nevertheless we cannot stand apart from it and tell the truth.

The prospect before us is to reenter modernity in the fullness of its enduring ambiguity, magnificence, and corruption. To that end we must acknowledge and surrender to the complete if sometimes tragic fascination with contemporary life that Baudelaire first demonstrated. More

than "taste," in this regard, the basic credential of the critic is disciplined but childlike avidity. In the final analysis, such desire often dictates that either theories crumble or the sensibility and critical faculty atrophy. This Baudelaire knew by experience as well as instinct, and his words serve permanent notice to those who, like Greenberg, seek to buttress the testimony of their own experience, "a priori" truths, or borrowed authority.

Like all my friends I have tried more than once to lock myself inside a system, so to pontificate as I liked. But a system is a kind of damnation that condemns us to perpetual backsliding: we are always having to invent another and this is a cruel form of punishment. And every time my system was beautiful, big and spacious, convenient, tidy and polished above all; at least so it seemed to me. And every time some spontaneous unexpected vitality would come and give lie to my puerile and old-fashioned wisdom, much to be deplored daughter of Utopia... To escape from the horror of these philosophic apostasies I arrogantly resigned myself to modesty; I became content to feel, I came back and sought sanctuary in an impeccable naïveté.⁷⁹

Stripped of utopian illusions, we struggle to contemplate the confusing spectacle before us with "an impeccable naïveté" similarly distilled from skepticism and appetite. Lately that vista encompasses a new Alexandrianism, for which Formalism provides the crucial buzz words. Exploiting the notions of "quality" and aesthetic "purity," government now censors work that troubles the public mind and challenges the public order. Flag art—from Dread Scott Tyler to Johns—goes on trial while Wyeth pin-ups are enshrined as patriotic icons and cynically applauded by embittered cognoscenti. At the same time, the means and market for the production and dissemination of images of high or low rank have reached a technical sophistication and scope that vastly exceeds anything conceived of heretofore. Although flawed in its formulation, Greenberg's dialectic of avant-garde and kitsch thus remains at issue, its antitheses ever changing rather than fixed in their opposition and its specific manifestations ever more phantasmagorical as the years pass. At long last disabused of our own purity of intent and suspicious of any project predicated on the near or far term perfection of society, we are left, as modernity began, with only the intoxicating improbabilities of our imagination and the vivid, often disquieting, actuality of our perceptions.

¹ Clement Greenberg (hereafter referred to as Greenberg), in "Contribution to a Symposium," in *Art and Culture. Critical Essays* (Boston, 1961), p. 124 (hereafter referred to as *Art and Culture*).

² Greenberg quoted in *ARTnews* (September 1987), p. 16.

³ Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Criticism*, ed. John O'Brien, Vol. 1 *Perceptions and Judgments 1939-1944* (Chicago and London, 1986), p. 11 (hereafter referred to as *Perceptions and Judgments*)

⁴ Greenberg, *ibid.* About the original use of the term, Greenberg has said "Albert Gerard Jr. used 'kitsch' in English for the first time, as far as I know, in the mid-'30s, but the word seems to have caught on in English after my piece "Avant-Garde and Kitsch, Fifty Years Later, a Conversation with Saul Ostrow," *Arts Magazine*, December 1989, p. 57

⁵ Writing in answer to an essay by Dwight MacDonald on Soviet cinema, in which MacDonald speculated on the aesthetic instincts of the average Russian peasant, Greenberg, in "AvantGarde and Kitsch," summoned his

own Russian peasant to view a "battle scene" by Ilya Repin and a painting by Picasso and then imagined his stereotype's response to each. When the essay was republished in *Art and Culture*, Greenberg added the following note: "PS. To my dismay I learned years after I saw this in print that Repin never painted a battle scene; he wasn't that kind of a painter I attributed someone else's picture to him That showed my provincialism with regard to Russian art in the nineteenth century" Taking this apology into account, one wonders who painted the battle scene Greenberg was thinking of, if indeed any particular painting was ever at issue. Maybe the entire situation-peasant, Picasso, and unspecified battle scene-was equally hypothetical, Perhaps it was literary license, or the result of a regretted "provincialism with regard to Russian art in the nineteenth century-, nevertheless, one suspects that the lapse simply resulted from Greenberg's reckless compulsion to schematize aesthetic problems and his (at that time) little more than a layman's knowledge of art in general_ In the end, Repin's "battle scene," like much else in Greenberg's subsequent writing, seems the invention of a Union Square polemicist and Sunday painter Further, Greenberg's most recent explanation of the genesis of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" ("Avant-Garde and Kitsch, Fifty Years Later," p. 57) makes still plainer the essentially instrumental, if not wholly arbitrary, bass upon which he selected his examples. "I had to choose my examples from the visual arts because a Russian peasant obviously couldn't be expected to read any other language than Russian The names that figured m 'Bohemia' were those of painters and sculptors, only secondarily those of writers. I'm exaggerating a bit, but I elected after that to take my examples from poetry I talk about Eliot then Eddie Guest . I also take Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Robert Service for examples of kitsch verse. I didn't choose examples from fiction because I didn't know what to choose I guess any pulp novel would have done but I couldn't think of any on par with Eddie Guest."

⁶ Delmore Schwartz, "New Year's Eve," in *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities and Other Stories*, ed. and intro James Atlas (1937; New York, 1978), p. 113.

⁷ Stephen Spender, quoted in Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind* (New York, 1976), p 199. Others in this period withdrew from politics even more completely For instance, in 1939 Herbert Read announced, "In our decadent society...art must enter into a monastic phase...Art must now become individualistic, even hermetic. We must renounce, as the most puerile delusion, the hope that art can ever again perform a social function." Quoted in Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York, 1988), p. 158.

⁸ Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," p 22.

⁹ Responding to overtures from the *Partisan Review*, Trotsky damned its contributors with faint praise. In a letter of 1938 to Dwight MacDonald, he wrote: "It is my general impression that the editors of *Partisan Review* are capable, educated and intelligent people but they have nothing to say, . . . A world war is approaching. . . . Currents of the highest tension are active in all fields of culture and ideology. You evidently wish to create a small cultural monastery. guarding itself from the outside world by skepticism, agnosticism and respectability" *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art*, ed. and intro Paul N. Siegel (New York, 1981), pp. 101, 103.

¹⁰ Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," p. 8.

¹¹ "Surrealism: Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. and intro. Peter Demetz (New York and London, 1978), p 187.

¹² Struggling to establish their distance from the noninterventionist policy of socialist reformer Norman Thomas, as well as from the Right-wing isolationism of the America First movement, Greenberg and MacDonald performed a series of ideological contortions, finally claming to be in line with the "revolutionary defeatism" preached by Rosa Luxemburg during world War I. While these distinctions may seem arcane to the contemporary reader, they highlight the degree to which the authors had to strain to protect their basic premise that "the issue 1151 not war but revolution," and hence that any support for Roosevelt or Churchill was tantamount to collaboration with incipient fascism in America and Britain As to support for the Soviet Union against Hitler, here Greenberg and MacDonald disagreed, prompting Greenberg to add the following footnote "My position here, I admit, is a difficult one and open to serious misunderstanding but no matter. as Trotsky said, "if we admit war (involving the Soviet Union(without revolution, then the defeat of the Soviet Union is inevitable, If we admit this present war without revolution, the defeat of humanity is inevitable " Greenberg's exculpatory "admission" and jesuitical misappropriation of Trotsky's words is no less in character than his parting-shot prediction of the future should his views go unheeded "10 Propositions on the War," *Partisan Review*, July-August 1941, pp. 271-78 MacDonald's and Greenberg's text is excluded from the first volume of Greenberg's *Collected Essays and Criticism*, although "An American View," a 1940 essay for *Horizon* that

takes the same basic stand is printed there (pp. 38-41) This essay suggests that a revolution in Britain and United States might trigger one in Nazi Germany. Otherwise Greenberg saw no important distinction between the interests of British capitalism and those of Hitler -even going so far as to suggest that only the leadership of Churchill forced the German people into Hitler's ranks in fear of a new Versailles Treaty. "This fear had converted many a German from anti-Nazi to pro-Nazi, Without this fear the Nazis would have hardly any more moral reserves at their command than the erstwhile Allies. The bright future of plunder which Hitler promises his people only convinces the adolescents." To call this analysis Marxist is bizarre in the extreme. To ascribe Greenberg's eventual change of heart regarding the Nazi threat to de-Marxification is, correspondingly, no less bizarre. At any rate, by 1943 Greenberg had enlisted in the Army Air Force For a revealing, albeit refracted, image of Greenberg in uniform see, "War and the Intellectual Review of War Diary by Jean Malaquais," (*Perceptions and Judgments*, pp. 190-93), in which Greenberg writes of Malaquais, "His experience posed under what were almost laboratory conditions the problem of the right attitude towards his fellow men, in the flesh, of the Marxist who is supposed to love them in the abstract "

¹³ Greenberg and MacDonald, "10 Propositions on the War," p. 275.

¹⁴ Greenberg and MacDonald, *ibid.*, pp. 276-77

¹⁵ Reflecting a deep split among the *Partisan Review's* editors and contributors, Philip Rahv's rejoinder to Greenberg and MacDonald, "10 Propositions and 8 Errors," was published in the journal's November-December 1941 issue. This critique of the authors' stance with regard to the impending war and analysis of their intellectual and rhetorical habits bears quoting at length: "Their dicta outline a position which I cannot adopt as my own because I regard it as morally absolutist and as politically representative of a kind of academic revolutionism which we should have learned to discard long ago... Again we read that the social revolution is around the corner and that imperialism is tottering on the edge of the abyss and again we fail to recognize the world as we know it.

Speaking for no movement, no party, certainly not for the working class, nor even any influential grouping of intellectuals, the authors of the 10 Propositions nevertheless write as if they are backed up by masses of people and as if what has been happening is daily conforming their prognosis. They refuse to see anything which does not fit into their apocalyptic vision of a social system in Britain and America, administer the coup de grace to the Hitler regime, and forthwith usher in socialism " (p 449)

In passing, Rahv added another useful observation: "Here we have a series of bald assertions that wholly ignore the element of time, which is the one element one can least afford to overlook in political calculations." (p. 501)

"For me this article I am not arguing against a revolutionary policy in principle; I am arguing that in the absence of a revolutionary movement and also because certain other essential conditions are wanting, such a policy las that of waiting for a revolutionary party to form itself in reaction to the war is illusory . . . At bottom all that Greenberg and MacDonald are really saying is that if a revolutionary party existed it would not fad to act in a revolutionary manner But that is a tautology, not an insight " (p 505) For a detailed account of the debate over the war on the Left, see Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and Its Circle* (Madison, Wis., 1986)

¹⁶ Speaking to Saul Ostrow in a 1989 interview ("Avant-Garde and Kitsch, Fifty Years Later," p. 57), Greenberg used the same language as mine to describe his Marxism "When I read it ("Avant-Garde and Kitsch") now there are things about it that churn my stomach. Its Marxism was too simplistic and maybe too Bolshevistic. I was going along with the times, being trendy. Most of my friends were Trotskyites, or nearly. The piece was smug and badly written, sophomoric." Indeed, but Greenberg's attempts to escape the onus of that smugness comes too late. Reprinted in 1961 in *Art and Culture*, and as recently as 1985 in *Pollock and After The Critical Debate*, Francis Frascina, ed. (New York, 1985), "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" was permitted to stand for fifty years without comment from or substantive revision by its author. Only after careful examination of Greenberg's work began to unravel the expediciencies of his arguments and the abuses of power they occasioned has he seen fit to engage in any measure of self-criticism Greenberg's recent, offhand recantation amounts to little more than damage control; tellingly, his remarks were accompanied by a patently competitive attack on Walter Benjamin, whose authority has eclipsed his, and whose earlier "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" treats many of the themes m "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" with far more subtlety and with much more relevance to contemporary art.

¹⁷ See Leon Trotsky, "The USSR in War," in *The Basic Writings of Trotsky*, ed and intro, by Irving Howe (New York, 1963), pp. 305-14.

¹⁸ Leon Trotsky, "Art and Politics in Our Epoch," in *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art*, ed and intro. Paul N. Siegel (New York, 1981), pp. 105-6.

¹⁹ "Manifesto: Towards a Revolutionary Free Art" (1938), in *Theories of Modern Art A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed Herschel B Chipp (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1968), p 485 At the end of this manifesto, the signatories appealed for a new coalition of artists in opposition to fascism and Stalinism, to be called the Federation Internationale de l'Art Revolutionnaire Independant (FIARI). Although a journal was briefly published, nothing much came of efforts to organize this group before Trotsky's death and the outbreak of war See Lewes, *Politics of Surrealism*, p. 147.

²⁰ Greenberg, "The Late Thirties in New York," in *Art and Culture*, p- 230.

²¹ Meyer Schapiro addressed the problem of popular culture in an article entitled "Public Use of Art" that appeared in the November 1936 issue of *Art Front*, the journal of the Artists Union, which represented those working on the Federal Art Projects. In that essay he posed what Greenberg would later call "kitsch," not only as a threat but also, given the attraction it held for the average person, as an almost positive challenge to artists who sought to express their solidarity with the working class but remained stuck with a traditional bohemian idea of their role and subject matter. "The truth," Schapiro wrote, "is that public art already exists. The public enjoys the comics, the magazine pictures and the movies with a directness and wholeheartedness which can hardly be called forth by the artistic painting and sculpture of our time. It may be low-grade and infantile public art, one which fixes illusions, degrades taste, and reduces art to a commercial device for exploiting feelings and anxieties of the masses; but it is the art which people love, which formed their taste and will undoubtedly affect their first response to whatever else is offered them. If the artist does not consider this adequate public art he must face the question: would his present work, his pictures of still-life, his landscapes, portraits and abstractions constitute public art? Would it really reach the people as a whole?" (p 4).

²² Greenberg was not alone in his desire to create a "third force" between Stalinism and fascism. Ignacio Silone, whom he interviewed in 1939, was in fact a principal exponent of this idea. Given the deployment of political power at that moment, however, the reserves for such a face simply did not exist. Nor could they be marshaled by urgent desire or idle talk. That was the left's tragedy, in face of which the imaginary legions of revolutionary workers called for by Greenberg's debate-society Marxism represented no hope of relief. Philip Rahv thus concluded his "10 Propositions and 8 Errors": "No, what has been lost in the past two decades through an uninterrupted series of blunders, betrayals, and defeats cannot so easily be regained. Oracular appeals to history and a mere show of will on the part of a few literary intransigents will avail us nothing."

²³ Susan Noyes Platt points out Greenberg's debt to Babbitt in her essay "Clement Greenberg in the 1930s: A New Perspective on His Criticism" in *Art Criticism*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1989), p 50 This text is a valuable source for biographical information about Greenberg.

²⁴ William Barrett, *The Truants Adventures among the intellectuals* (Garden City, NY, 1982) p. 138.

²⁵ Greenberg, "The Plight of Culture," in *Art and Culture*, pp. 22-33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁸ It is worth noting that during this period Greenberg's "Anti-Stalinism" led him to join the increasingly conservative group of former "socialists" in the *Partisan Review* circle who gathered around the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an organization later discovered to have been subsidized by the CIA. On another but related front, in 1951 Greenberg was sued for libel by the *Nation*-a publication for which he had previously written - because he had asserted that a column by their foreign editor, Alvarez del Vayo, "invariably parallels that of Soviet propaganda." Greenberg's accusations were reprinted in the Congressional Record by none other than Michigan Congressman George Dondero, who was then campaigning against modern art, which he thought to be Communist-inspired. In the context of McCarthyism and Donderism, Greenberg's active campaign against supposed Soviet "fellow travellers" made for strange aesthetic bedfellows and made his revisionist use of Marxism in "The Plight of Culture" (1953) even stranger still. See *Art-as-Politics: The Abstract-Expressionist Avant-Garde and Society* by Annette Cox (Ann Arbor and London, 1977, 1982, p. 142) and Congressman Dondero, speaking on how the *Nation* magazine is serving Communism, in the Congressional Record, 82nd Cong., 1st sess., May 4, 1951, pp. 4920-25.

-
- ²⁹ Van Wyck Brooks had coined the terms "highbrow" and "lowbrow" in 1914, bequeathing to later generations of intellectuals an insidiously anthropological metaphor for explaining the relation of elite culture to that of the common man.
- ³⁰ Greenberg, "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed John O'Brian, Vol. 2 Arrogant Purpose 1945-49 (Chicago and London, 1986), p. 163 (hereafter referred to as Arrogant Purpose).
- ³¹ T.J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," in Pollock and *After The Critical Debate*, ed Francis Frascina (New York, 1985), p 50.
- ³² T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays* (1932; London and Boston, 1980), p 19.
- ³³ Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *Perceptions and Judgments*, p. 32
- ³⁴ Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Art and Literature. An International Review*, no 4, Spring 1965, p. 194.
- ³⁵ Renato Poggicci, *History of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass., and London), p. 80.
- ³⁶ Greenberg, "To Cope With Decadence," in *Modernism and Modernity. The Vancouver Conference Papers*, ed. Benjamin H. D Buchhloh, Serge Guilbaut, and David Solkin (Halifax, 1983), p. 163. In his conversation with Saul Ostrow (see note 4), Greenberg remarked, "But now normally I'm pessimistic and take Spengler much more seriously. I took him seriously from the beginning, although I detested his flavor."
- ³⁷ Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Marc Chagall, Lyonel Feininger, and Jackson Pollock," in *Perceptions and Judgments*, p. 164
- ³⁸ Greenberg. "Review of the Whitney Annual and the Exhibition Romantic America," in *Perceptions and Judgments*, p. 171.
- ³⁹ Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," p. 37.
- ⁴⁰ Greenberg, "Abstract Art," in *Perceptions and Judgments*, p 204.
- ⁴¹ Philip Rahv did not like Greenberg, and both William Barrett in Truants and William Phillips in A Partisan View report Rahv as saying that Greenberg took over the art beat because there were no openings for a literary critic at the *Partisan Review*.
- ⁴² Platt, "Clement Greenberg in the 1930s," p. 50.
- ⁴³ Greenberg, "Review of Four Exhibitions of Abstract Art," in *Perceptions and Judgments*, p. 104.
- ⁴⁴ Greenberg, "Review of Mondrian's *New York Boogie Woogie* and Other New Acquisitions at the Museum of Modern Art," in *Perceptions and Judgments*, p 153. (Mondrian's painting is presently titled *Broadway Boogie Woogie*.)
- ⁴⁵ In a piece in *Art Journal* (Winter 1987), I was more forgiving of these errors, but in retrospect I find it harder to understand how Greenberg could have made such a mistake, given the long-established practices of the artist he presumed to judge in such severe terms.
- ⁴⁶ Alfred H Barr, Jr., *Matisse. His Art and His Public* (New York, 1951), p. 265.
- ⁴⁷ Barr's diagram is hardly unique in pointing up the "simultaneity" of events in the early decades of the century. In this regard, it is interesting to consider a book entitled *The Isms 1914-1924*. Published in a trilingual edition in Germany in 1925, and coedited by El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, it lists sixteen isms in related development, implicating a clear recognition on the part of the authors—who were otherwise strongly committed to their own theories—of the general plurality, rather than mutual exclusivity, of modernist styles.
- ⁴⁸ Meyer Schapiro, "Nature of Abstract Art," reprinted in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York, 1978), pp 187-88
- ⁴⁹ Greenberg. "Bertolt Brecht's Poetry," in *Perceptions and Judgments*, pp- 49-62.
- ⁵⁰ Greenberg, "Surrealist Painting," in *Perceptions and Judgments*, p 225.
- ⁵¹ Greenberg, "Seurat, Science and Art: Review of Georges Seurat by John Rewald," in *Perceptions and Judgments*, p. 169.
- ⁵² Greenberg did, it seems, have an ear, or at least feet, responsive to pop music. William Barrett reports that he jitterbugged at The Club in the 1950s (Truants, p. 132). Speaking to Saul Ostrow ('Avant-Garde and Kitsch, Fifty Years Later,' p. 57), Greenberg confirmed this. adding, "Even though I loved and still do love popular music, and loved to dance, it (kitsch) bothered me... Today I'm not as bothered by kitsch as I used to be—I was bothered by it when I was growing up I remember a record player at college that went on forever. It was the repetition that bothered me."
- ⁵³ Greenberg, "Steig's Cartoons: Review of All Embarrassed' by William Steig," in *Arrogant Purpose*, p. 11.

⁵⁴ Greenberg, "Under Forty: A Symposium on American Literature and the Younger Generation of American Jews," in *Perceptions and Judgments*, p 177.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-78.

⁵⁶ Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," pp. 17, 21.

⁵⁷ Greenberg, "Under Forty," p. 178.

⁵⁸ Greenberg, "Kafka's Jewishness," in *Art and Culture*, pp 268-69.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* Both Allan Bloom in his book on the New York intellectuals and Susan Noyes Platt in her essay on Greenberg (*Art Criticism*, vol 5, no. 3119891 pp- 47, 49-50, 61) draw attention to the significance of the critic's interest in the Halachic order and its relation to the circumstances of the assimilated Jew in the 1930s. See Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals & Their World* (New York and Oxford, 1986), p. 154, I would also like to thank Rita Kaplan for providing me with reference materials on the Halacha.

⁶⁰ Philip Guston, in "The Philadelphia Panel," eds. Philip Pavia and Irving Sandier, *It Is*, vol 5 (Spring 1960), p. 37.

⁶¹ As noted by Lucy Lippard (*Ad Reinhardt* [New York, 1981]), p. 120.

⁶² The importance of Greenberg's advocacy of "American-type" painting should not be underestimated. Neither should it be overstated, however While in many respects the most articulate and-during the early-to-mid-1940s-the most aggressive partisan of Jackson Pollock and the other New York School painters he favored, Greenberg was not alone in recognizing their importance. Certainly his was not the only "eye" capable of discerning the pictorial originality of their work. Downtown attention was already focused on these artists, and critical support in the general art press was building By the late 1940s, Thomas B Hess, Abstract Expressionism's great editorial champion, was presiding at Art News, from which position he could guarantee frequent and extensive coverage by a range of writers who, for all their differences in perspective, consistently supported Abstract Expressionist work Greenberg's hold on the position of premier scout and shock-troop critic for the new American art, therefore, has its basis in a modicum of fact-his early reviews of Pollock, Robert Motherwell and David Smith, in particular-yet it is more generally the stuff of legend and proprietary professional claims. Frequently overlooked but also significant was Greenberg's early withdrawal of support from some of these artists Most notable was his cooling towards Pollock and his shift of loyalty to "field" painters such as Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, a shift that from the outset provoked him to make invidious comparisons between their work and Pollock's Having reviewed neither Pollock's 1952 nor his 1954 exhibition, Greenberg articulated his dissatisfaction with the artist's course in the 1955 article that gave 'American-Type painting,' its name "American-Type Painting," in *Art and Culture* Critical Essays (Boston, 1961) pp. 208-229. After praising Pollock's huge "'sprinkled' canvases of 1950," in which "value contrasts" were "literally pulverized in a vaporized dust of interfused lights and darks," resulting in an absence of depth, "complicatedness" of contour, and degree of abstractness only glimpsed by Kandinsky, Greenberg went on to chide Pollock for reversing directions: "But in 1951 Pollock had turned to the other extreme, as in a violent repentance, and had done a series of painting, in linear blacks alone, that took back almost everything he had said in the three previous years." Thus, at the very moment when Greenberg codified his ideas about the new art, he both granted Pollock credit for past achievement and foreclosed on his future Reiterating Bernard Berenson's hardly axiomatic notion that "in art, as in all matters of the spirit, ten years are the utmost, rarely reached limits of a generation," Greenberg told Jeffrey Potter, "Jackson...well he had his ten-year run." Considering Greenberg's unshakable opinion that Jules Olitski was the great painter of the past twenty-five years, the capriciousness of his remark resonates with brutality if not outright vindictiveness toward an artist who did not heed his counsel. His "correction" of Smith's polychrome sculptures follows the same pattern of possessive resentment. Berenson's observation is from "The Decline of Art," in *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (London, 1932); for Greenberg's remark to Potter, see Jeffrey Potter, *To a Violent Grave: An Oral History of Jackson Pollock* (New York, 1985).

⁶³ Quoted in "Franz Kline Talking," in *Frank O'Hara, Standing Still and Walking in New York* (San Francisco, 1983), p 94.

⁶⁴ Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Mondrian, Kandinsky and Pollock; of the Annual Exhibition of American Abstract Artists; and of the Exhibition European Artists in America" in *Arrogant Purpose*, p. 17.

⁶⁵ Willem de Kooning, in "What Abstract Art Means to Me," in Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning*, catalogue of an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, p. 145.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ David Smith, "Aesthetics, the Artist, and the Audience," in *David Smith*, ed. Garnett McCoy (New York and London, 1973), pp. 88, 105.

⁶⁸ Willem de Kooning, quoted in Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists* (New York, 1961), p. 104.

⁶⁹ De Kooning, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," p. 145.

⁷⁰ Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," p. 193.

⁷¹ Claes Oldenburg, in *Claes Oldenburg's Store Days*, selected by Claes Oldenburg and Emmet Williams (New York, 1967), p.39.

⁷² Claes Oldenburg, quoted in Barbara Rose, *Claes Oldenburg*, catalogue of an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970, p. 192.

⁷³ Robert Warshaw quoted in Norman Podhoretz, *Making it* (New York, 1967), p. 150.

⁷⁴ My thanks to Leon Golub for this useful phrase.

⁷⁵ Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Pollock, of the Annual Exhibition of American Abstract Artists, and of the Exhibition European Artists in America," p 15.

⁷⁶ Charles Baudelaire, "What Is the Good of Criticism?" in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. and intro. P E- Charvet (Cambridge, 1972), p.50.

⁷⁷ Charles Baudelaire, "To the Bourgeois," in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. and intro. P E. Charvet (Cambridge, 1972), p. 47.

⁷⁸ In his interest in contemporary fashion, incidentally, he was not alone. Stephane Mallarme, whom Greenberg cites in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" as a poet of radical purity, singlehandedly wrote and edited his own fashion magazine, "La derniere mode," and for all his fastidiousness seems to have vastly enjoyed and artistically profited from the task.

⁷⁹ Charles Baudelaire, "The Universal Salon of 1855: Fine Arts, I. Critical Method," in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Arts*, trans. and intro. P E. Charvet (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 117-18.