

As Criticism: From Cultural Criticism to Art Criticism

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Abstract

As a member of a loosely affiliated group that came to be known as the New York Intellectuals, Clement Greenberg started out writing cultural criticism for *Partisan Review* in the late 1930s. By the 1950s, when he began to contribute to the art press, he was known as an art critic. This shift resulted from a “change in the order of discourse” that occurred when the critical discourse that originated in the little magazines of the 1930s merged—or converged—with the art discourse of the interwar period in the mid-1950s, leading to the formation of a critical field and the emergence of a critical art discourse in the early 1960s.

This trajectory started with the establishment, in the first decades of the twentieth century, of an “independent social criticism” by the “young intellectuals” (a group that included Randolph Bourne and Van Wyck Brooks), who sought to develop a more generalized critical discourse outside the academy with its disciplinary divisions and discourses. Cultural criticism evolved out of this practice. What counted as criticism between the wars had more to do with a certain kind of critical engagement than a particular critical approach: social criticism and cultural criticism were broader in scope than the literary criticism (and art criticism although there was much less of it) that was published in the little magazines and journals of opinion, but all of these practices exhibited an intellectual engagement that was not found in the descriptive or impressionistic “journalism” that passed for criticism in the popular press and the art press. By the late 40s, with the rise of New Criticism, literary criticism had become professionalized, which meant that it was on its way to becoming a discipline. Cultural criticism took a divergent path as its

practitioners endeavored to establish the social role of the intellectual. By the 50s, cultural criticism had lost its political focus and was beginning to disperse. As cultural critics, including Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, began to write for a rapidly evolving art press, a new discourse emerged that combined the disciplinary specificity of art discourse and the analytical rigor of critical discourse.

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For Joe Havel

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Introduction

“Art does not develop independently of criticism.”¹

“The discourse on the work is not a simple side-effect, designed to encourage its apprehension and appreciation, but a moment which is part of the production of the work, of its meaning and its value.”²

It would be quite wrong to see discourse as a place where previously established objects are laid one after another like words on a page.”³

In his very short preface to *Art and Culture*, Clement Greenberg lists the original sources of publication of the essays included in his 1961 anthology. In addition to *ARTS* and *ARTnews*, he includes *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *Commentary*, and *The New Leader*.⁴ Often identified as a “New York Intellectual,” Greenberg started out writing cultural criticism for the little magazines and “journals of opinion” (e.g. *The Nation*) in the 30s and 40s. Although *ARTnews* had been around since 1902 and *ARTS* (formerly *Art Digest*) began publication in 1926, he would not write for the art press until the 50s. By that time, he was known as an art critic. In what follows I try to account for this shift and to consider some of its implications.

This study evolved out of an interest in artists’ writings and, more particularly, the criticism of Donald Judd. It was not clear to me how his criticism fit into the critical field when he began writing in the late 50s. Steeped in the history (and the myth) of the 60s, I

¹ Francis Francina and Charles Harrison, eds., *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 1.

² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 170.

³ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 42-43.

⁴ Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), vii.

took this field to be an indispensable feature of critical practice. What I argue here is that a “change in the order of discourse” was necessary for a critical field to emerge in the 50s and a critical art discourse to develop in the 60s—a process in which Judd’s criticism played a pivotal role. Prior to that time the “object” of art discourse was aesthetics rather than art, and what I refer to as “critical discourse” (which included the social criticism introduced by critics like Randolph Bourne during the World War I era, the cultural criticism practiced by the New York Intellectuals, and certain kinds of literary and art criticism) was not only separate from art discourse but occupied a different site. As late as the 40s, the art magazines to which Greenberg would later contribute published “news”—or “news and opinion,” as the cover of *Art Digest* proudly declared.

My account has a couple of theoretical touchstones. The term “critical field” or “field of critical production,” as I use it here, refers to a synchronic field of relational and differential critical positions. It operates within (and on the same principle as) the field of cultural production as Pierre Bourdieu theorized it. To paraphrase Bourdieu (applying his structural principle to the artistic field rather than the literary field): “The field of cultural production is the site of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the artist and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the artist.”⁵ For Bourdieu, “belief in the value of the

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 42. In a 1928 article that was later anthologized with the title “The Critic Who Does Not Exist,” Edmund Wilson gives an example of such a field, citing an address given by Paul Valéry to the Académie Française in which Valéry described the literary situation that prevailed in Paris during his youth. There were a number of “parties,” each with its own “set of policies,” creating a field in which the various positions—the naturalists (Zola), the Parnassians (Leconte de Lisle), the “ideologues” (Renan and Taine), and the symbolists (Mallarmé)—operated. These parties “stated their programs and defended them against each other,” playing roles in a “literary politics” that was “equally exciting and equally important with politics of the other sort.” Wilson argues that the most widely read French writers

work”—the work’s symbolic production—is as important as its material production, since works of art must be “received by spectators capable of knowing and recognizing them as such.” The “power” that Bourdieu is referring to is the power to “consecrate producers or products.”⁶ Critics play a part in both the social production of the work’s value, as Bourdieu argues, and the discursive production of art itself.

The “struggle” that defined the field of critical production in the 60s, when formalist critics (Greenberg, Michael Fried) faced off against minimal artist-critics (Judd, Robert Morris), is legendary. What was at stake in Fried’s famous essay “Art and Objecthood” was nothing less than the power to “impose the dominant definition of the artist.”⁷ In other words, the structural logic of the field erupted into the sphere of critical discourse itself at this moment.⁸ Which is not to say that “struggles” and “positionality” played no role within the field before the 60s, only that those struggles operated within a different “order of discourse.” I borrow this phrase from Michel Foucault, who argues that “changes in the order of discourse” don’t presuppose “new ideas,” but, rather, “transformations in a practice.”⁹ What I argue is that “positionality” itself functioned differently before a “transformation in (critical) practice” occurred in the late 50s.

“all came to intellectual maturity in this atmosphere of debate,” giving them “a kind of interest” that was “very rare in the literature of English-speaking countries.” The “interest” that Wilson was arguing for was “the interest of the intelligence fully awakened to what the artist is doing.” See Edmund Wilson, *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1952), 367–381.

⁶ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 37; 42.

⁷ As Robert Smithson pointed out in a letter to the editor, this essay created a “schism,” pitting formalism against “literalism,” as Fried called minimalism. See Robert Smithson, “Letter to the Editor,” *Artforum* 6, no. 2 (October 1967): 4.

⁸ These were not the only positions within the field, but the critical field was defined by this binary opposition at that moment.

⁹ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 209.

Edward Said, glossing Foucault's archaeological studies, states that discourse "is the particular occupied space, insofar as it is acted within and upon, that enables positive (although not necessarily conscious) knowledge for any coherent activity. How do an economist, a psychiatrist, or a literary critic make their way in their work? What traditions must they assume, what institutions, distinctions, codes, symbolism?"¹⁰ It is this "occupied space" that I focus on—or, more precisely, the way in which "it is acted within and upon"—since my account pays close attention not only to the material site but also to the discursive space within which critical discourse and art discourse were produced. Foucault's archaeology, Said argues, deals with the "epistemological resources" that make possible "*what* is said at any given period and *where*—in what particular discursive space—it is said."¹¹ To the extent that this chronicle focuses on what was said and where, it can be said to aspire, in the broadest possible sense, to an "archaeological" undertaking.

Until the 50s, critical discourse and art discourse represented different orders of discourse. If "changes in the order of discourse" involve "transformations in a practice," then different orders of discourse might be said to refer to different kinds of practice—or to practices that function differently. Critical discourse and art discourse not only functioned differently, they occupied different sites: art discourse was produced in the art and popular presses (art magazines and large-circulation newspapers) while critical discourse was produced in the critical press (little magazines and journals of opinion). Although the term "art discourse" includes more than the magazine criticism that I will discuss, I have limited my discussion to this writing because, as I argue, this was the site of the change in the order

¹⁰ Edward W. Said, "Michel Foucault As An Intellectual Imagination," *Boundary 2* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1972): 22, doi:10.2307/302044.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

of discourse. What I am arguing for is a kind of quickening of art discourse in the late 50s and early 60s when its “object” shifted from aesthetics to art as it converged with the critical discourse that had been the province of the little magazines of the 40s. When Harold Rosenberg began writing for *ARTnews* in the 50s, he was not only addressing a different public, he was also helping to construct a new public for both art and criticism.

The shift that occurred in the practice of criticism in the U.S. between the 30s and the 60s is analogous to the shift that Foucault, writing in 1969, insisted must be made in the way discourse was understood. If, as he argued, discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak,” it was necessary “to substitute for the enigmatic treasure of ‘things’ anterior to discourse, the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse.”¹² While the “object” of which critical discourse spoke during the interwar period was art or literature (or culture more generally), the object of which art discourse spoke was aesthetics. Frank Jewett Mather, Jr. argued in 1935 that the artwork found its “chief reason for being” in the “art lover’s experience of beauty.” The critic’s primary concern was “the appreciation of the work of art when made” not “the work of art in the making,” and the artist was served best by “furthering and extending appreciation of the artist’s work.”¹³ If the goal of art criticism at this time was to further appreciation of the “work of art when made” (a work whose reason for being was the “experience of beauty”), its concern was with “things anterior to discourse.” When art became the object of discourse in the 60s, discourse began to construct that object: modernism’s grounding in the specificity of its medium (despite Greenberg’s attempt to naturalize it) was a discursive

¹² Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 49; 47.

¹³ Frank Jewett Mather, *Concerning Beauty* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1935), 218; 229.

construction. Greenberg would not equate “art” with “modernist art,” but Fried would make this move: in order to call what one was judging “art,” one had to assume a definition of art that presupposed its proper judgment, which means that criticism was understood to be a “practice that systematically formed the object of which it spoke.”

Very schematically, the shift that I trace starts with the establishment, in the first decades of the twentieth century, of an “independent social criticism” by the “young intellectuals” (a group that included Randolph Bourne and Van Wyck Brooks), who sought to develop a more generalized critical discourse outside the academy with its disciplinary divisions and discourses. Cultural criticism evolved out of this practice. Between the wars, what “counted” as criticism didn’t have to do with a specific critical approach but, rather, a certain kind of critical engagement: social criticism and cultural criticism were broader in scope than the literary criticism (and art criticism although there was much less of it) that was published in the little magazines and journals of opinion, but all of these practices exhibited an intellectual engagement that was not found in the descriptive or impressionistic “journalism” that passed for criticism in the popular press and the art press. By the late 40s, with the rise of New Criticism, literary criticism had become “professionalized,” meaning that it was on its way to becoming a discipline. Cultural criticism took a divergent path as its practitioners sought to establish the social role of the intellectual. By the 50s, cultural criticism had lost its political focus and was beginning to disperse. As cultural critics, including Greenberg and Rosenberg, began to write for the art press, a new discourse emerged that combined the disciplinary specificity of art discourse and the analytical rigor of critical discourse.

To map the field of art critical practices that existed before the 50s, I have borrowed a template from Gertrude Buck, who offered a detailed description of the field that existed during the World War I era in her 1916 book *The Social Criticism of Literature*. Of the five types of literary criticism that Buck identified, the majority focused on subjective judgments (“impressionistic,” “appreciative”) or objective facts (“scientific”). By contrast, “aesthetic” criticism and what was referred to as “deductive” or “judicial” criticism (which “stood firmly upon some accredited canon of literature”) employed “standards of value,” focusing on the work rather than its production or consumption.¹⁴ Both aesthetic criticism and judicial criticism were “tradition-based,” meaning that practitioners of this criticism took it for granted that the literature of the past set the standards for the literature of the present and the future.

From the first decades of the twentieth century, the question of criticism’s “objectivity” or “subjectivity” would be raised by critics and observers. The critical practices that Buck discussed form a continuum from purely subjective (“impressionistic”) to purely objective (“scientific”). One observer would argue for “appreciative” as opposed to “impressionistic” criticism because appreciative criticism introduced some measure of objectivity into what was otherwise an entirely subjective enterprise.¹⁵ Aesthetic and judicial criticism were more objective than appreciative criticism, but didn’t devolve into the fact-based positivism of scientific criticism, which some have referred to as “historical” criticism (I use the term “scientific” in order not to confuse this criticism with a different kind of

¹⁴ Gertrude Buck, *The Social Criticism of Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1916), 11-12.

¹⁵ See Lewis E. Gates, “Impressionism and Appreciation,” *Atlantic Monthly* 86, no. 513 (July 1900): 73-84.

historical criticism that emerged in the 60s). I will argue that the critical positions closest to either end of the spectrum (impressionistic, appreciative, scientific) represent “critical positions” but not “critical position-takings”: impressionistic criticism occupies a position in relation to other *types* of criticism, but does not position or construct its object in a particular way (because individual practitioners of this criticism take different positions, impressionism *itself* can’t be said to be a positioned or positioning critical practice). By contrast, critical practices that endeavor to construct the meaning of the work according to some theory, program, or framework (e.g. formalism) represent “critical position-takings.”

The critical positions that most art critics occupied during the interwar period can be mapped using Buck’s diagram: many of those who published in the popular press were impressionistic (e.g. Henry McBride) or appreciative critics; traditionalists like Mather and Royal Cortissoz were judicial critics (or perhaps judicial-appreciative critics); and the “technical criticism” that was published in the art press was a form of aesthetic criticism. To the extent that the academy produced any criticism at all it was scientific. But it was debatable whether some of this writing was criticism. In the late 20s, critics like Edmund Wilson and Thomas Craven argued that most of what passed for literary or art criticism was actually journalism, a term that was often used as an epithet to describe the “reports of exhibitions,” as Craven put it, that appeared in the newspapers and magazines.¹⁶ (I will quote many commentators who distinguished between “reviewers” or “journalists” and “critics.”) The art magazines that survived into the 60s didn’t begin to include what has been referred to as “technical criticism” until the 30s (*ARTnews*) or 40s (*Art Digest*). I use

¹⁶ See Edmund Wilson, “Literary Politics,” *The New Republic* LII (February 1, 1928); Thomas Craven, “The Criticism of Painting in America,” *The American Mercury* XI, no. 44 (August 1927): 445-48.

the term “journalist-critic” to describe both technical critics, since their critical engagement with the work was limited to judgments of technique or craftsmanship, and the critics who wrote for large-circulation newspapers.

Cultural criticism and literary criticism followed divergent paths in the 40s: with the “de-Marxification” of the New York Intellectuals, cultural criticism began to dissipate, while literary criticism came to be identified with New Criticism. Toward the end of the decade, the large-circulation newspapers started to cut their art pages and the art press shrank when one of the three national magazines folded. In the 50s the new managing editors of *ARTnews* and *ARTS* presided over these magazines’ shift from “news magazine” to “art magazine” (in the sense that we now understand that term) as they began to publish writers (Greenberg, Rosenberg, Hilton Kramer, and Leo Steinberg, among others) who had been writing for the critical press.

That the 60s are believed to represent something like the “golden age of art criticism” means that we have come to take a couple of things for granted about criticism. First, there’s the understanding that criticism is contemporaneous with its object—that it deals with contemporary art. (And, more fundamentally, that its object *is* art.) As late as 1950, Alfred Frankfurter, the editor of *ARTnews*, would argue that the “proper critic’s” vocation involved the “painstaking chore” of “interpreting the already much-interpreted classics to an ever-renewing public.”¹⁷ (Mather had argued in the mid-30s that, “The best criticism is rarely if ever of the contemporary scene. It is of objects scrutinized at a certain remove and in historical perspective.”¹⁸) It’s unclear how Frankfurter categorized the writing

¹⁷ Alfred Frankfurter, “Vernissage,” *ARTnews* XLVIII, no. 9 (January 1950): 15.

¹⁸ Mather, *Concerning Beauty*, 226.

on contemporary art that was published in *ARTnews* at the time or how he distinguished between art criticism and art history, but within a little over a decade these questions would be moot, since “criticism of the classics” was by then an anachronism—if not an oxymoron. The change that occurred in art criticism during this period involved a shift from a tradition-based aesthetic criticism that had been developed primarily to address “the classics” to an art historical criticism of contemporary art. What I mean by this is that the critics who would be most integral to the convergence I’m tracing—Judd and Greenberg—would ground their critical approaches in a historical understanding of art.

These critics assumed several things: that the work about which they were writing was related to or built upon the art of the recent past; that this work should be compared with contemporaneous artworks; that criticism involved a critical judgment about an artwork’s “validity” (based on a theory, a program, a framework, etc.) rather than simply “judging good from bad” in terms of the “standards of the past” or “a strictly aesthetic standard”; that critical judgment was involved in the construction of an artwork’s meaning. These, then, are the characteristics of the “critical art discourse” that emerged in the 60s. In the art criticism of the interwar period, none of these assumptions applied. The principal difference I am arguing for is between criticism that critically constructed its object and criticism that did not.

Writing in a 1963 essay titled “What is Criticism?,” Roland Barthes defined criticism as “a construction of the intelligibility of our own time.”¹⁹ As vague as this short string of prepositional phrases might seem to be, it is typically precise in its own way.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 260.

Barthes was writing about French criticism (and, more specifically, about the difference between “interpretive” criticism and “academic” criticism), but his construction resonates with the way in which I will describe the “critical art discourse” that was emerging in the U.S. around the time Barthes published his essay. Adapting Barthes’s phrases for my purposes here, I propose to use the following definition for the art criticism of the 60s: “a construction of the intelligibility of the art of its time.” A form of criticism that critically constructs its object is one that advances “a construction of the intelligibility of the artwork” in terms of a critical framework, theory, or program: it is a critical construction of the work’s meaning and its value.

It’s important not to confuse criticism’s object with the object of discourse, which, as Foucault argues, does not preexist discourse but is produced by discourse. While artworks are understood to be the object of art criticism, art itself (the discipline of art, or disciplinarity as such for formalist critics) would be the object of the critical art discourse that emerged in the 60s.

To recap: the criticism practiced by the “journalist-critics” of the interwar period did not critically construct its object and therefore did not operate within a “critical field” (I will call the field in which these critics operated a “field of critical practices”). By the 50s, a transformation in the practice of art criticism—a change in the order of discourse—began to occur as the art press shifted its focus from “news” to criticism. Over the course of that decade, cultural critics would start to publish in the art press, a recontextualization that affected both their criticism and the site. As a result of the position-takings of the cultural critics (as well as the editors of the two leading art magazines and the critics who would

begin to publish in the late 50s), a critical field began to emerge. In 1950, Alfred Frankfurter described criticism as a “funnel to the public” (by which he meant the “great and ever growing group of Americans interested in art,” as the magazine’s publisher had put it in 1936), but by the mid-50s criticism would have a new public: the rapidly professionalizing ranks of artists and critics who were beginning to coalesce into what has come to be known as the “artworld.”²⁰



Lionello Venturi’s *History of Art Criticism* (the English translation was published in 1936) is still the only history of its kind. As one reviewer pointed out, “While the history of literary criticism from antiquity to the present day has received considerable attention, there has been a distinct *lacuna* in the literature of art where any parallel survey was concerned.”²¹ Venturi traced the history of aesthetic criticism from the Greeks and the Romans to the 30s, ending with a chapter titled “The Critical History of Art.” His central argument was that, “Judgment of the artist or of the work of art must be the centre of our treatment.”²² To that end, he was convinced that it was necessary to “reflect upon the relations between art history, art criticism and aesthetics.” Art history was understood to “present works of art without judging them”; art criticism to “judge works of art in conformity with the aesthetic feelings of the critic”; and aesthetics to “formulate the definition of art in its universal meaning.”²³

²⁰ Frankfurter, “Vernissage,” January 1950, 15; E. K. Frankel, “Progress and Policy: A Statement,” *The Art News* XXXIV, no. 17 (January 25, 1936): 5.

²¹ G. Price-Jones, “Review of *History of Art Criticism* by Lionello Venturi,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 71, no. 413 (August 1937): 102.

²² Lionello Venturi and Charles Marriott, *History of Art Criticism* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1936), 33.

²³ *Ibid.*, 23.

The book doesn't purport to be—and isn't—a critical history of art criticism; it is more of a chronicle. But it was not intended to be entirely “objective,” since the last chapter promotes the development of a “critical” history of art—one that would overcome its “every-day phase of erudition, aestheticism or the ‘science of art.’”²⁴ John Crowe Ransom, who was convinced that criticism’s “proper seat was in the universities,” would argue for the professionalization of criticism the year after Venturi’s book was published.²⁵ This was not Venturi’s goal, but, like Ransom, he was convinced that judgment was integral to criticism—and art history. And, also like Ransom, Venturi was interested in steering a course between “journalistic” criticism and the “historical or purely erudite form” of criticism (Buck’s scientific criticism). For Venturi, the history of art was the history of taste and must bring together the “value which transcends history and the reality which is subject to it,” or art and taste, since only one who possessed “the most perfected taste which his civilization allows” could “understand the taste of past civilizations or remote regions.” Art history seems to have been his primary concern, since he started and ended the book with it (the introduction starts with an overview of the “progress” made in the field in the last fifty years) and he was particularly interested in the moment when the history of art was “identified with critical judgment.”²⁶

I share Venturi’s interest in critical judgment, but my understanding of that term differs from his, and “art criticism,” or the kind of writing that we now recognize as art criticism, enters the history that I trace very late. Venturi was able to call the writing of Xenocrates, who lived in the third century B.C., criticism because, as he asks, “What is

²⁴ Ibid., 320.

²⁵ John Crowe Ransom, *The World’s Body* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 228.

²⁶ Venturi and Marriott, *History of Art Criticism*, 320-21.

criticism if not a relationship between a principle of judgment and the intuition of art or of an artistic personality?”²⁷ He recognized that different “standards of appraisal” existed, but dismissed the viability of all but the “one true judgment,” the others being “partially true, and therefore false.”²⁸ Published three years before the publication of Greenberg’s “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” and around the time that *ARTnews* began to publish technical criticism, Venturi’s book offers some insight into its own critical context.

A follower of the Italian aesthetician Benedetto Croce, Venturi’s approach to aesthetic criticism was not prevalent in the U.S., but his understanding that this kind of criticism produced the “one true judgment” would not have been challenged by many critics writing for the American art press at the time. His understanding that criticism involved “standards of judgment” also accords with the general view of criticism in the U.S. before World War II (although, for him, it was the standards of the present—taste—that mattered not the “standards of the past”).²⁹ Venturi’s book is useful insofar as it confirms the centrality of aesthetics and taste to art critical practice in the 30s, but its scope is much broader than is either practical or useful. Although I address the art discourse of the interwar period (Venturi mentions none of the critics I discuss except Roger Fry, whom I touch on only tangentially), I focus primarily on shifts that took place in critical practice after World War II, which, of course, Venturi doesn’t address. His belief that there was

²⁷ Ibid., 41.

²⁸ Ibid., vii.

²⁹ This might be similar to the “situatedness” that Hans-Georg Gadamer insisted on: “Historical consciousness fails to understand its own nature if, in order to understand, it seeks to exclude what alone makes understanding possible. To think historically means, in fact, to perform the transposition that the concepts of the past undergo when we try to think them. To think historically always involves mediating between those ideas and one’s own thinking. To try to escape from one’s own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible but manifestly absurd.” See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 397.

only one true criticism provided the framework for his study and his failure to historicize critical practice is precisely the issue that my study addresses.

In *The Critics of Abstract Expressionism*, the only attempt that has been made to write a history of this criticism, Stephen Foster posits that, “most criticism of the fifties and sixties issued from, or in reaction to, earlier criticism” and argues, more specifically, that, “as modern painting stands as a logical link in the progress of painting, so also does Greenberg’s criticism represent a logical and progressive link in the course of the history of criticism.”³⁰ For Foster, Greenberg’s criticism has its own formalist logic, an interpretation that runs counter to my approach to the historicization of this writing.

If histories of art criticism aren’t plentiful, there’s no shortage of historical interpretation when it comes to the New York Intellectuals, most of which focuses on their political orientation or their role as members of the intelligentsia. Of the two earliest studies, Daniel Aaron’s *Writers on the Left* (1961), which the author describes as a “social chronicle of the Left Wing writer from 1912 to the early 40s,” and James Gilbert’s *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (1968), the latter offers a more expanded discussion of the *Partisan* circle and was, therefore, more relevant to my project. As his subtitle makes clear, Gilbert was interested in the intersection of a “cultural renaissance” and a “political revolution,” as he puts it, but he places more emphasis on political radicalism than literary radicalism.³¹

³⁰ Stephen C. Foster, *The Critics of Abstract Expressionism* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980), 20.

³¹ James Burkhart Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 24.

Of the many books on this topic that have appeared since the 60s, one of the most political—and polemical—is Alan Wald’s *The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (1987). Wald contends that the history of this period has been “vastly misunderstood” and argues that the New York Intellectuals must be understood as “an outgrowth of the tradition of the anti-Stalinist left,” proposing, “from a contemporary Marxist point of view,” to “help cure a certain amnesia.”³² In Wald’s view, we have not taken the political ideals of these intellectuals seriously enough. Because he sees this history through a Trotskyist lens, he doesn’t pay much attention to literary concerns—much less literary criticism.

At the other end of the spectrum is Neil Jumonville’s *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (1991), which deals with its subject thematically rather than chronologically and is keyed to specific events in the group’s history (the book starts with a discussion of the Waldorf Conference of 1949). Jumonville certainly doesn’t neglect politics—he divides the group into “affirmers” and “dissenters” and recounts their “critical crossing” from an “earlier ideological faith and prophetic partisanship” to a “more modest and precise outlook based on reason, analysis and pragmatism”—but his focus is on the group’s intellectual vocation.³³ (Jumonville starts his introduction to *The New York Intellectuals Reader* with a definition of the public intellectual: “The term *public intellectual* describes one who is a generalist knowledgeable about cultural and political

³² Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left From the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 7–8.

³³ Neil Jumonville, *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), xii.

matters and whose ideas reach a substantial public.”³⁴) While Wald’s book is skewed toward the political, Jumonville’s study limits the discussion to the role of the alienated (or “elitist”) intellectual.

There are numerous studies that deal with a variety of topics somewhere between these poles. Alexander Bloom’s *Prodigal Sons: New York Intellectuals and Their World* (1986) traces the decline of the group’s Trotskyite inclinations and addresses its impact on future generations (“there is no question that these individuals embodied many of the most important political and intellectual forces in recent years, that they helped shape what America thought—in its universities, its leading journals, and its political debates.”)³⁵ In *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and its Circle* (1986), Terry Cooney is most interested in the New York Intellectuals as a group and his framework for understanding that group is through its commitment to “cosmopolitanism” or “cosmopolitan values,” citing its efforts to foster “a rich and inclusive American culture—especially an American literature—that could measure up to the traditions of Europe.”³⁶ The tradition that they saw themselves continuing, as I argue as well, was that of the young intellectuals of the World War I era.

Harvey Teres’s purpose in retelling the story of the New York Intellectuals in *Renewing the Left: Politics, Imagination and the New York Intellectuals* (1996) is to explore how their “imperfect legacy might affect our views of contemporary criticism and

³⁴ Neil Jumonville, ed., *The New York Intellectuals Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1.

³⁵ Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals & Their World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 7.

³⁶ Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and Its Circle, 1934-1945* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 6.

politics.”³⁷ The first part of the book deals with the early *Partisan* years and Teres acknowledges T. S. Eliot’s influence on Rahv and Phillips (as does his very useful article “Remaking Marxist Criticism: Partisan Review’s Eliotic Leftism, 1934-1936”). Finally, Hugh Wilford in *The New York Intellectuals: From Vanguard to Institution* (1995) has a different take on the vanguardism of the New York Intellectuals, arguing that they could not withstand “powerful recuperative, hegemonic processes.”³⁸

All of these books contribute to the scholarship on the New York Intellectuals and the *Partisan* circle more specifically, but, with the exception of Teres, the authors don’t deal with this group as critics. I use the term “intellectual-critic” in order to emphasize these writers’ dual identity as intellectuals and critics and have attempted to place the writing of the *Partisan* circle not only in its social and political context, but in its critical context—to understand it, that is, *as criticism*. Because cultural criticism (as it was practiced by the *Partisan* critics) owed as much to T. S. Eliot’s early criticism as it did to Bourne and Brooks’s social criticism, the *Partisan* critics shared some common ground with Ransom and the New Critics—in spite of the difference in their politics. Even if this had not been the case, these writers participated in the same critical discourse.

The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography, edited by Frederick J. Hoffman et al., and *The Little Magazine in America: A Modern Documentary History*, edited by Elliott Anderson and Mary Kinzie, were indispensable resources. In the preface of the 1964 edition of *Magazines in the Twentieth Century*, Theodore Peterson complains

³⁷ Harvey M. Teres, *Renewing the Left: Politics, Imagination, and the New York Intellectuals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 13.

³⁸ Hugh Wilford, *The New York Intellectuals: From Vanguard to Institution* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), viii.

that, “Almost as soon as the first edition of this book appeared in December, 1956, magazine publishers inconsiderately set about making it out of date. Indeed, changes probably came more rapidly in the half-dozen or so years after 1956 than in any similar span since the modern magazine was born in the late nineteenth century.”³⁹ This was the context within which the change in the order of discourse that I describe occurred and, although he doesn’t elaborate, the changes Peterson refers to were due, at least in part, to the professionalizing audience that I discuss in the last chapter.

G. A. M. Janssens’s *The American Literary Review: A Critical History 1920-1950* offers a detailed discussion of the little magazines of the 20s and 30s that focused on literary criticism rather than literature itself (*The Dial*, *The Hound & Horn*, *The Symposium*, and *The Southern Review*). Invaluable as a source of information about these publications, it doesn’t offer “a history of modern American criticism,” as the author notes in the introduction, but, rather, assesses the reviews’ “achievements.” When he discusses the importance of these reviews to later publications, Janssens’s characterization of the difference between *Partisan* and *Kenyon*—that the first was “journalistic” and the second “academic”—would seem to drive too wide a wedge between them. *Partisan* was less “journalistic” and *Kenyon* less strictly “academic” than Janssens would have it. He also makes a distinction between the “little review” and the “little magazine” that doesn’t have a fully convincing rationale.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, Janssens’s chronicle of the run of each of these magazines is useful. Marian Janssen’s *The Kenyon Review 1939-1970: A Critical History*

³⁹ Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), vii.

⁴⁰ G. A. M. Janssens, *The American Literary Review: A Critical History 1920-1950* (The Hague; Paris: Mouton & Co., 1968), 30; 14.

deserves the subtitle it shares with G. A. M. Janssens's book. In the history of *Kenyon* and its influence that Janssen recounts, she pays careful attention to the range of writers who contributed to it, including some of the New York Intellectuals. As I argue, there was not as much distance between *Kenyon* and *Partisan* as G. A. M. Janssens claims, and Janssen's study provides ample support for this view.



I begin the dissertation by addressing a specific moment in the historiography of Greenberg's early writings. In the 80s, a number of art historians—Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, T. J. Clark, Serge Guilbaut—discussed the “Marxist roots” of Greenberg's early criticism. These historians read this criticism through Greenberg's later writings, collapsing the distinction between his early use of the term “avant-garde” and what Orton and Pollock refer to as the “ideology of avant-gardism” (i.e. Greenbergian modernism). This chapter considers the implications of constructing Greenberg's critical practice in this way. I agree with these scholars about the importance of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Greenberg's first published essay on art, but I differ with them on the nature of its significance. My study begins with this seminal text because, in my view, it represents a shift in the focus of the critical discourse that it participated in.

I argue that to historicize Greenberg's early writings it's necessary to examine their critical context, and my objective in the following two chapters was to explore the way in which “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” functioned discursively by considering what might be called its “critical roots.” The origins of what I call “critical discourse” can be traced back to the “independent social criticism” developed by the “young intellectuals” during the World

War I era. Randolph Bourne and Van Wyck Brooks wrote for magazines like *The New Republic*, which was founded in 1914, and *The Seven Arts*, a little magazine that Brooks co-edited. They sought to develop an “independent social criticism,” which would synthesize “the insights which had previously been the property of different specialisms.”⁴¹ In other words, the young intellectuals wanted to establish a non-specialized (non-academic) critical discourse for the “intelligent reading public” that addressed contemporary political, social and cultural issues. Social criticism, as the term suggests, tended to deal with social and political issues. But, toward the end of the war, Bourne began to advocate for a “new criticism” (what would come to be called cultural criticism) that would examine art and literature “in relation to the larger movement of ideas and social movements.”⁴² Although *The Seven Arts* lasted only a year, magazines like *The Hound & Horn* and *Symposium* would publish literary and cultural criticism in the 20s and early 30s. All of these precursors had ceased publication by the time *Partisan Review* was launched in 1934.

The intellectual historian Neil Jumonville describes the New York Intellectuals, who were descendants of the young intellectuals, as “reviewers and essayists” who “took all of culture and society as their province, rather than restricting themselves to the specialized fields that they also knew.”⁴³ As I’ve noted, I use the hyphenated term “intellectual-critic” to refer both to the young intellectuals and to the *Partisan* writers, not to further complicate things, but to emphasize their dual identification. This term also serves as a foil for the term

⁴¹ Paul F. Bourke, “The Social Critics and the End of American Innocence: 1907-1921,” *Journal of American Studies* 3, no. 1 (July 1969): 70.

⁴² Randolph Bourne and Van Wyck Brooks, “The Retort Courteous,” *Poetry* 12, no. 6 (1918): 342.

⁴³ Jumonville, *Critical Crossings*, 3.

used to describe art critics during the interwar period, “journalist-critic.” Unlike the impressionistic reportage or technical criticism of the journalist-critics, the intellectual-critics’ writing was analytical, socially engaged, and intellectually rigorous.

By the late 30s, critical discourse was undergoing a significant shift, due largely to calls for the “systematization” of criticism by the editors of both *Partisan* and the soon-to-be-launched *Kenyon Review*. In an essay that was published the same year that Philip Rahv and William Phillips broke with the Communist Party and re-launched *Partisan* as an independent magazine, Ransom argued that criticism was being practiced by amateurs who had simply “undertaken a job for which no specific qualifications were required” and should be “taken in hand by professionals.”⁴⁴ While the university professor was the “trained performer” that Ransom had in mind, the revolutionary (Marxian) critic was the “professional” that the *Partisan* editors envisioned for the job (they opposed both the amateur and the “leftist” critics who wrote for *New Masses*).

Interested in “founding” criticism, by which he meant that it should “receive its own charter of rights and function independently,” Ransom launched *The Kenyon Review* in 1939. The foundation—and professionalization—of literary criticism involved its establishment as a discipline within the academy (what Ransom meant when he said that it should become more “scientific” was that it should be “developed by the collective and sustained effort of learned persons—which means that its proper seat is in the universities”).⁴⁵ The goal was to displace both the “literary history” of the academy (which ostensibly paved the way for literary criticism) and the reigning models of criticism

⁴⁴ Ransom, *The World's Body*, 228.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 237; 229.

(Marxism and New Humanism). The *Partisan* editors were initially intent on defining the terms of Marxian criticism in order to establish it as a “social force.” Rejecting the “leftism” of the critics who supported social realist literature, which, they argued, was the “literary equivalent of mechanical materialism,” their emphasis was on “creative experimentation and critical precision.”⁴⁶ The job of criticism, in their view, was to support some “currents of revolutionary writing” rather than others, since some of those currents were “moving away from the aims of Marxism.”⁴⁷

Having explored the critical context of the late 30s, I turn to “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” When Greenberg began to contribute to *Partisan* in 1939, I argue in the third chapter, the editors were worried about the capitulation of the producers of culture to “bourgeois democracy” or what Rahv called, borrowing Julien Benda’s phrase, the “treason of the intellectuals.” F. R. Leavis, the editor of *Scrutiny* magazine and the author of *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (with which “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” shared several themes), was more concerned about the consumers of culture. Greenberg was interested in culture itself—and in criticism’s role in its production.⁴⁸ In several editorials published in the late 30s, Rahv lamented the lack of an active avant-garde, which he attributed to a “rapid

⁴⁶ Wallace Phelps (William Phillips) and Philip Rahv, “Problems and Perspectives in Revolutionary Literature,” *Partisan Review* 1, no. 3 (July 1934): 9.

⁴⁷ Wallace Phelps (William Phillips) and Philip Rahv, “Criticism,” *Partisan Review* II, no. 7 (May 1935): 25.

⁴⁸ The notion that criticism was integral to “creative activity” dates back at least to Matthew Arnold, who argued in 1864 that, “[T]he creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it.” See Matthew Arnold, *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (ReadHowYouWant.com, 2006), 1; 3, <http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=scAq35BbTskC&oi=fnd&pg=PT3&dq=%22on+the+critic%27s+business,+which+seems+to+justify+every+possible+disparagement+of+it.+Wordsworth+says+in%22+%22lower+than+the+inventive+and+he+said%22+%22prose+or+verse,+is+quite%22+&ots=zkuwBtwJZz&sig=xg01FiZG6MYuwD7rF8Vvk3AUhUSQ>.

decline of standards in all spheres of the intellect and of the imagination.”⁴⁹ Greenberg acknowledged the “timidity” of the avant-garde, but attributed it instead to the abandonment of culture by the ruling class. If the “rich and the cultivated” could no longer be counted on for their support, that left the “cultivated” (intellectuals) to find a way to keep culture moving. What was at stake for Greenberg in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” was “the survival of culture in general,” and critics had a part to play in safeguarding it.⁵⁰

In the fourth chapter, I consider the field of art critical practices in the 30s. If “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” was cultural criticism and Greenberg’s reviews for *The Nation* magazine (for which he started writing in 1941) were a kind of cultural-technical criticism, as I argue, this raises the question of what counted as “art criticism” in the 30s and 40s. Using Buck’s diagram of the field of literary critical practices as it existed during the World War I era, I map the field occupied by the journalist-critics who wrote for the art magazines and the popular press in the 20s and 30s. These critics practiced various forms of impressionistic (Henry McBride), appreciative (Forbes Watson), or aesthetic criticism (technical critics writing for the art press); the traditionalist critics, who wrote primarily for the popular press, practiced a kind of judicial-appreciative criticism. Technical critics, who focused on aesthetics, limited their discussion of the work to its conformity with a “strictly aesthetic standard.” In this chapter, I begin to trace the distinction between those whose critical framework was tradition-based and those, like Greenberg, who practiced a historical criticism. This would be a crucial factor in the discursive shift that occurred in the late 50s.

⁴⁹ Philip Rahv, “Twilight of the Thirties,” *Partisan Review* VI, no. 5 (Summer 1939): 4-5.

⁵⁰ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* VI, no. 5 (Fall 1939): 38.

This chapter also considers the critical practice of Thomas Craven, who began writing for the little magazines and journals of opinion in the mid-20s. Having developed a critical position (unlike Watson and McBride), he was, as one observer put it, “more than a journalist,” he was “actually a critic.”⁵¹ Although he started out as a champion of Cézanne, he quickly came to believe that modern European art was only a “question of technique” and no longer functioned as a “medium for communicating with intelligence and power the experiences of mankind.”⁵² By the mid-30s, he condoned the work of only five American artists, since they were the only ones who were on the right track—the only track, that is, that could “produce art.”⁵³ As his biases began to get in the way of his critical judgment, his peers came to doubt not only the validity of his views but the viability of his criticism. His prejudices, one critic wrote, “color his criticism and diminish its value.”⁵⁴ Nonetheless, his position dominated the field of critical practices in the 30s because no one took up a critical position in relation to it.

The fifth chapter starts with a discussion of *Partisan's* shift in focus in the early 40s and the trajectory it followed over the course of that decade. As literary criticism became identified with New Criticism, the *Partisan* critics began to shift their attention away from the proletariat and toward the social role of the intellectual. In 1940 Archibald MacLeish, a poet who was then serving as the first Librarian of Congress, published a long rant in *The Nation* in which he berated American scholars and writers for their “irresponsibility” in the

⁵¹ Ralph M. Pearson, “The Failure of the Art Critics III,” *The Forum* XCV, no. 1 (January 1936): 57.

⁵² Thomas Craven, “Men of Art: American Style,” *The American Mercury* VI, no. 14 (December 1925): 429.

⁵³ Thomas Craven, “Our Art Becomes American,” *Harper's Monthly*, September 1935, 430.

⁵⁴ L. M., “Review of Men of Art by Thomas Craven,” *The American Magazine of Art* 22, no. 6 (June 1931): 515.

face of the “destruction of writing and of scholarship in great areas of Europe.”⁵⁵ *Partisan* was quick to refute this charge (in spite of the fact that MacLeish didn’t mention intellectuals or critics), but by the middle of the decade Arthur Koestler would argue (and the *Partisan* editors would concur) that the intelligentsia had always been “concerned about its own plight” and that, with the collapse of the revolutionary movement, it needed to cling to the “ragged banner of ‘independent thinking.’”⁵⁶ Harold Rosenberg had been a contributor to *Partisan* since it was founded in the mid-30s, but he began to pull away in the 40s as he became increasingly frustrated with the magazine’s preoccupation with the intellectual’s plight. A few years later he would publish his first article in *ARTnews*.

This chapter also explores the technical criticism that was developing in the art press and the criticism that was published in *The Nation* (Greenberg) and *Partisan* (George L. K. Morris). By the late 30s, the artists associated with the American Abstract Artists group were calling for critics who did more than express “personal opinion and prejudice,” which is what they believed the critics who wrote for both the art press and the popular press offered: the “total lack of any conception of the form problem” signaled the “failure of these self-appointed administrators of American art.”⁵⁷ Morris, an artist affiliated with this group, became an editor of *Partisan* in 1938 and wrote the Art Chronicle until the mid-40s. Like Greenberg, who was writing regularly for *The Nation* by this time, Morris was engaged in the discourse of the little magazines. For Morris, the A.A.A. was “the sole organization in America” that was “dedicated to the hewing out of an authentic and appropriate cultural

⁵⁵ Archibald MacLeish, “The Irresponsibles,” *The Nation*, May 18, 1940, 618.

⁵⁶ Arthur Koestler, “The Intelligentsia,” *Partisan Review* 11, no. 3 (Summer 1944): 271; 277.

⁵⁷ American Abstract Artists, *The Art Critics--!* (New York: American Abstract Artists, 1940), 3.

organization” because of its rejection of representation.⁵⁸ A proponent of what he called the “abstract tradition,” Morris might be said to have possessed a formalist aesthetic rather than a formalist theory.

The art magazines began to be reorganized during the 40s and by the end of the decade *ARTnews* had changed its publishing schedule, becoming a monthly magazine in 1946. Thomas Hess was named managing editor in 1948 and began hiring poets and artists as reviewers. *Art Digest* remained a semi-monthly until the mid-50s, but began to publish reviews written by the staff of the magazine rather than offering a digest of the newspaper columns in 1946. The final two chapters deal with the change in the order of discourse that began in the mid-50s and the emergence of a critical art discourse in the early 60s. Chapter six tracks a series of critical exchanges that occurred in the art press (or between the art press and the critical press) as critics began to position themselves in relation to the “new painting” (Abstract Expressionism). This began with the publication of Rosenberg’s “The American Action Painters,” which was published in *ARTnews* in December 1952; Hilton Kramer’s response appeared in *Partisan* six months later and Greenberg’s “‘American-Type’ Painting was published in the spring of 1955. Art criticism in the U.S. emerged in tandem with the rise of Abstract Expressionism (or, more precisely, it began to count in a way that it hadn’t before) both because critics believed there was something at stake in this work and because there was something at stake in explicating it to the new art public as the rapidly professionalizing ranks of the middle class began to pay attention to these art practices.

⁵⁸ George L. K. Morris, “Art Chronicle: Some Personal Letters to American Artists Recently Exhibiting in New York,” *Partisan Review* IV, no. 4 (March 1938): 37–38.

In the 50s art discourse and critical discourse began to converge in the pages of *ARTnews* and *ARTS* (as *Art Digest* was now called), as cultural critics, including Rosenberg and Greenberg, began to write for the art press. By this time, cultural criticism had begun to dissolve as magazines like *Partisan* became less socially engaged and critical practice became more focused on individual disciplines. Hess invited both Rosenberg and Greenberg to contribute to *ARTnews*, becoming an advocate for Rosenberg's action painting, which he would read through a "humanist" lens. Around this time, Kramer began to write for *Partisan* and *Commentary*, where Greenberg served as associate editor. Following his forceful response to "The American Action Painters," Kramer began to write for *Art Digest* and was hired as associate editor in 1954. Although he was more conservative than the intellectual-critics of the 30s and 40s, Kramer was committed to critical discourse and developed what might be called a "hybrid" practice: he engaged in the critical discourse of the little magazines without abandoning aesthetic judgment, which remained the criterion and the object of traditional art discourse.

Quickly promoted to managing editor and then editor, Kramer believed technical criticism could rise to the level of critical discourse, and his attempt to increase the critical rigor of *ARTS* would have a significant impact on art discourse. Hess and Kramer didn't agree on the definition—much less the function—of criticism. For Hess, who championed the *belles-lettres* of the New York School poets, three of whom he hired as reviewers, criticism was a literary form. Valuing critical acumen rather than poetic imagery, Kramer believed that criticism required "analysis" not "rhetoric." He also opposed action painting, which set up the binary that shaped the critical field of the 50s. For all their differences,

Kramer and Hess were both adherents of “tradition” and rejected the concept of the avant-garde. Not surprisingly, they differed in their understanding of tradition: Hess believed American artists were creating “traditions of the present” and Kramer called for a “living, reciprocal relation to the past.” Kramer didn’t consider his own traditionalism to be a “critical position,” since he was convinced that this was the only “position” the critic could take. These editors not only disregarded but actively resisted the historical contextualization of contemporary artworks.

Kramer rejected the idea that the work of art required explication (that it was even possible for the artwork’s meaning to be in dispute), arguing instead for the elucidation of the “work itself.” Although I think Kramer’s division fails (since any elucidation of the work implies its explication), I will borrow this pair of terms—and add a third—to describe some of the positions occupied within the critical field that began to emerge in the late 50s. If “elucidation” can be taken to describe the position occupied by critics writing for *ARTS*, “illumination” might be used to describe the *belles-lettrism* of the poet-critics who wrote for *ARTnews*. “Explication” was involved in any form of “position-taking.” Kramer was more interested in publishing a certain kind of critical writing than he was in finding critics who shared his critical viewpoint, however, and he admired the “logic” and “coherence” of Greenberg’s writing in spite of its “governing myth.” When he became editor of *ARTS* in 1958, Kramer hired a handful of reviewers including the painter Sidney Tillim and Judd.

Greenberg’s focus on modernism’s relationship to the “past of art” in “Modernist Painting” was probably what prompted Kramer’s invitation to publish this essay in the 1961 *ARTS Yearbook* (it was written as a lecture for a radio broadcast the previous year).

Kramer left the magazine shortly after the yearbook was published—but not before he fired Judd. It’s my contention that Judd was fired because of his art historical “explication” of the work he was reviewing. Greenberg’s understanding of “history” had shifted since the late 40s (when he wrote that Cubism had “originated not only from the art that preceded it, but also from a complex of attitudes that embodied the optimism, boldness, and self-confidence of the highest stage of industrial capitalism”), but it remained a determining factor in his criticism.³⁹ I argue that Greenberg and Judd, who shared a historical consciousness (although they didn’t share the same one), initiated the shift to a critical art discourse.

When I argue that Judd’s “specific object” could have emerged as art “only in discourse,” I don’t mean to suggest (as Michael Fried did) that the objects that Judd included in this category weren’t art to begin with. What I mean is that this work’s artistic “validity” was established discursively. That is, when the object of art discourse shifted from aesthetics to art in the early 60s, discourse began to construct that object. In “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” Greenberg sought to ground the aesthetic validity of abstract art in its self-reflexivity. The artistic validity of modernist art, as Greenberg theorized it in 1961, was grounded in its self-criticality, which meant that “historical change” now meant “art historical change” (by “art history” Greenberg meant “modernism”).

For Randolph Bourne, arguing for a “discussion of a larger scope” in 1918, poetry was “neither a refined dessert” nor a “private hobby” but a “sound and important activity of

³⁹ Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 213.

contemporary American life.”⁶⁰ Fearing for the “survival of culture in general” in 1939, Greenberg was convinced that critics were integral to the production of culture and were therefore implicated in the fight to sustain it. With the intensification of the public’s interest in art and art’s increasing professionalization, what was at stake for critics in the early 60s was art itself. The critical frameworks that Greenberg and Judd employed might have been diametrically opposed, but they shared a crucial premise: historical contextualization was integral to the “construction of the intelligibility of the art of their time.” And it was the struggle over that historical construction that governed the critical field of the 60s.

⁶⁰ Randolph Bourne, “Traps for the Unwary,” *The Dial* LXIV (March 28, 1918): 278.

Chapter 1

Historicizing Greenberg

If we centre our attention on a tradition
of thinking rather than on an isolated
man, we shall not be disposed to
underrate what he did and what he
represented, nor to neglect what he
urged us, following him, to do.
—Raymond Williams

Clement Greenberg's criticism is so closely identified with modernism that it's easy to forget they're not synonymous.⁶¹ For some good and some not-so-good reasons, we understand his critical practice to comprehend a single, unified theory variously referred to as Greenbergian modernism or, simply, modernism. The good reasons include the constancy of Greenberg's thought and the consistency of his position over the course of his writing career. Although he published criticism for nearly half a century, his most influential writings span the three decades from 1939 to 1969. Certainly, most of his longer essays could be considered theoretical tracts, and the rudiments of the theory that he would develop over the next two decades can be glimpsed in his earliest essay on art, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." But Greenberg didn't theorize modernism until the early 60s (or Modernism, as he would call it, when he did). The question, and what needs consideration, is the critical field into which his writing was first introduced on one hand and an inquiry into the commitments that motivated it on the other.

That "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (and "Towards a Newer Laocoön") helped lay the foundation upon which Greenberg would construct his theory of modernism is indisputable. But historicization of this essay requires an examination of the critical

⁶¹ Caroline Jones, for example, argues that modernism "does not exist outside persons (such as Greenberg), but produces them as persons." See Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xv.

discourse that both produced and was produced by it—to quote Greenberg himself, we “must take into account the inextricable and ambiguous connections that exist between ideas and the milieux in which and the material circumstances under whose pressure they arose.”⁶² Or, as Foucault put it, “The oeuvre can be regarded neither as an immediate unity, nor as a certain unity, nor as a homogeneous unity.”⁶³ Efforts to historicize Greenberg’s early writings have tended to focus on *Partisan Review*’s political orientation in an attempt to account for their appearance in this leftist publication, but little attention has been paid to the fact that *Partisan* was, first and foremost, a literary magazine.⁶⁴ Moreover, while most historians acknowledge that, as a contributor to the magazine, Greenberg was part of a loosely affiliated group that came to be known as the “New York Intellectuals” and many refer to his early writings as “cultural criticism,” no attempt has been made to historicize this term or to differentiate it from the term used to describe his later writing—namely, “art criticism.”⁶⁵

If we understand these distinctions to have cultural as well as lexical significance, these elisions raise several questions. When did Greenberg stop producing “cultural criticism” and start producing “art criticism”? When did he cease to be a “New York Intellectual” (or “intellectual-critic”) and become an “art critic,” and what distinguishes these terms? Why did

⁶² Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1986), 82.

⁶³ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 24.

⁶⁴ When it was launched by the John Reed Club in 1934, the magazine billed itself as a “Bi-Monthly of Revolutionary Literature”; it was re-launched as an independent magazine in 1937 as a “Literary Monthly.”

⁶⁵ The term “New York Intellectuals” was coined by Irving Howe in his 1968 essay “The New York Intellectuals: A Chronicle and A Critique.” See Joseph Dorfman, *Arguing the World: The New York Intellectuals in Their Own Words* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 7. Neil Jumonville notes that, until Howe’s piece was published, the group was known as the *Partisan Review* crowd. Neil Jumonville, ed., *The New York Intellectuals Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 2.

he stop contributing to publications like *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, and *Commentary* (where he served as associate editor from 1945 until 1957) and begin to publish in *ARTnews* and *Art Digest*? It might not be possible to answer some of these questions in any definitive way, but that's not my goal. Rather, raising this issue allows me to consider the nature of criticism in the decade or so before American art practices began to dominate art discourse and to pose the question of how making these distinctions might shift our understanding of postwar criticism.

Postmodernism's Greenberg

In the early 80s, when what began as the critique of modernism in the late 60s had begun to coalesce into what was called the discourse of postmodernism, three essays aimed at contextualizing Greenberg's early criticism were published in a newly re-imagined critical press: Serge Guilbaut's "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the 'Vital Center'" was published in the Winter 1980 issue of *October*; Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock's "Avant Gardes and Partisans Reviewed" appeared in the September 1981 issue of *Art History*; and T. J. Clark published "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art" in the September 1982 issue of *Critical Inquiry*.⁶⁶ The two American journals, *Critical Inquiry* and *October*, were launched in 1974 and 1976 respectively; *Art History* commenced publication in the U.K. in 1978. These journals, which were important sites for the emerging discourse, might be described as

⁶⁶ Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, "Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed," *Art History* 4, no. 3 (September 1981): 305–27; T. J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (September 1982): 139–56; Serge Guilbaut and Thomas Repensek, "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the 'Vital Center,'" *October* 15 (Winter 1980): 61–78, doi:10.2307/778453.

“professionalized” little magazines, since they were not only run by and for a professional academic audience but were themselves instrumental in the professionalization of critical practice.⁶⁷

Although the authors of these essays addressed different concerns, all three focused, to varying degrees, on the “Marxist roots” of Greenberg’s criticism, sharing a decisive moment in its historiography. Like much of Greenberg’s early writing, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” and “Towards a Newer Laocoön” were published in *Partisan Review*, which was founded in 1934 by the John Reed Club of New York.⁶⁸ One of about two dozen clubs that operated between 1929 and 1935 under the auspices—or “within the orbit of influence and control,” as one *Partisan* editor put it—of the Communist Party, the New York club joined several others in starting its own journal.⁶⁹ However, with the institution of the Popular Front, the Communist Party’s attempt to form a broad coalition of left-leaning parties and organizations to oppose fascism, the clubs were dissolved and replaced by the League of American Writers. *Partisan* discontinued publication in 1936, but was revived the following year, breaking publicly with the Communist Party in an editorial published in the first new issue. Two of the original editors, Philip Rahv and William Phillips, assembled a new group of editors (chosen as much for their strategic value as for their

⁶⁷ Pollock and Orton discuss “the internationalization of the professionalisation of art history that occurred in the 1970s” in the introduction of *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, an anthology of co-authored and individually authored texts published primarily in *Art History*. British art historians modeled the Association of Art Historians, which was founded in 1975, on the College Art Association and *Art History* was intended to be the British counterpart to *Art Bulletin*. See Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), xii.

⁶⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* VI, no. 5 (Fall 1939): 34–39; Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoön,” *Partisan Review* VII, no. 4 (August 1940): 296–310.

⁶⁹ Robie McCauley, *The Little Magazine in America: A Modern Documentary History*, ed. Elliott Anderson and Mary Kinzie (Yonkers, N.Y.: Pushcart, 1978), 132.

editorial skill) to restructure the magazine, which would privilege literary values over ideological orthodoxy.

Guilbaut's "New Adventures of the Avant-Garde" previews the argument laid out in his now famous *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, which considers the implications of the "de-Marxification" of the New York Intellectuals for postwar American art and discourse. In the article Guilbaut dates the inception of this process to the year 1937, when, "confronted with the mediocrity of the political and aesthetic options offered by the Popular Front," a "large number" of those intellectuals became Trotskyites.⁷⁰ Turning to the proximate cause of this shift, he argues that Meyer Schapiro's "Nature of Abstract Art" was not only a "displacement of the ideology of [Schapiro's] earlier writing" but would "subsequently enable the Left to accept artistic experimentation, which the Communist Popular Front vigorously opposed" (emphasis added).⁷¹ In other words, when Schapiro "crossed over to the Trotskyite opposition," he gave others, including Greenberg, permission to do so.⁷² According to Guilbaut, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" was inspired by three texts: Schapiro's essay, Trotsky's "Art and Politics" (published in the August-September 1938 issue of *Partisan*), and Andre Breton and Diego Rivera's "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art" (published in the following issue of *Partisan*).⁷³

Before raising the obvious question regarding Guilbaut's support for this argument, there's the equally problematic assumption underlying it. Presumably, the reason Guilbaut never mentions the Moscow Trials, for example, is because he assumes that the only possible

⁷⁰ Guilbaut and Repensek, "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America," 62.

⁷¹ "Nature of Abstract Art" was published in *Marxist Quarterly* 1, 1937.

⁷² Guilbaut and Repensek, "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America," 63.

⁷³ Trotsky is widely believed to have written this essay.

grounds for the anti-Stalinism of artists and critics was the cultural policy of the Communist Party. Similarly, it seems that Greenberg's essay could only have been inspired by Schapiro's and Trotsky's writings on art. Guilbaut's disciplinary specificity, which is nothing if not Greenbergian, leads to the conclusion that Schapiro's essay "relaxed the rigid opposition between idealist formalism and social realism," paving the way for "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"—a conclusion that, as Andrew Hemingway notes with no lack of understatement, "does not take into account the complex debates on art within the American left in the mid thirties."⁷⁴ As one of the chief participants in this debate, *Partisan* had opposed the "leftism" of *New Masses* (the official Party publication) from its inception, serving initially as respectful counterpoint to this position and later as its staunchest critic.⁷⁵ In a 1934 editorial, Rahv and Phillips wrote, "'Leftism,' by tacking on political perspectives to awkward literary forms, drains literature of its more specific qualities... Our emphasis has been on creative experimentation and critical precision, leaving more immediate political questions to other periodicals in the field, especially the *New Masses*."⁷⁶ Not only did the institution of the Popular Front not put an end to this debate but, as the *Partisan* editors never wearied of pointing out, they had never embraced the notion that political parties (including Trotskyism) should dictate cultural programs. Because of their belief that

⁷⁴ Guilbaut and Repensek, "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America," 64; Andrew Hemingway, "Meyer Schapiro and Marxism in the 1930s," *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no. 1 (1994): 20.

⁷⁵ "Leftism," according to James Gilbert, was a "term taken over from Lenin who had used it to belittle the extreme and unrealistic proposals of other radicals." See James Burkhardt Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans; a History of Literary Radicalism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 127. For the *Partisan* editors, it referred to the social realist literature (which they described as the "literary counterpart of mechanical materialism") that was promoted by the *New Masses*.

⁷⁶ Wallace Phelps (William Phillips) and Rahv, "Problems and Perspectives in Revolutionary Literature," 9.

revolutionary art *couldn't* be produced in this way, their affinity with Trotsky was practically a foregone conclusion.

While it might be a case study in determinism, Guilbaut's argument is only a highly distilled version of the larger consensus. But a discussion of Greenberg's early writings that assumes a connection with Schapiro (and Alfred Barr, whom Guilbaut brings into the discussion because of the attention Schapiro pays in his essay to Barr's 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*) without taking into account the way these writings functioned discursively betrays an anachronistic view of the disciplinary divisions that existed in criticism at the time. Greenberg might have been destined to become one of the twentieth century's leading proponents of disciplinarity, but "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" is an essay on art in the broadest sense, an essay on culture. And criticism. In a letter to his best friend from college, Harold Lazarus, with whom he had been corresponding for over a decade when "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" was published, Greenberg made a list of those who had responded favorably to the essay: James Burnham, Van Wyck Brooks, Louise Bogan, Delmore Schwartz and Harold Rosenberg ("with reservations").⁷⁷ With the exception of Rosenberg, this roster does not constitute the (art) public that art historians are likely to conjure up for this text.⁷⁸ Greenberg himself was silent on the subject of Schapiro's essay, noting only that, "The only dissent came from Meyer Schapiro, who says in addition that I borrowed some of his ideas."⁷⁹ Whatever we read into this statement or Greenberg's lack of comment on it,

⁷⁷ Clement Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928-1943: The Making of an American Intellectual*, ed. Janice Van Horne (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), 211.

⁷⁸ With the exception of Van Wyck Brooks, these critics—three of whom were poets—were regular contributors to *Partisan*.

⁷⁹ Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928-1943*, 212.

the issue is not whether it's possible to establish the truth about Schapiro's influence; rather, it's the disciplinarity of Guilbaut's lineage.

Greenberg's first essay on art has become a canonical modernist text not only as a result of its theoretical importance but also because of its *historical* significance—that is, because of the role it played in changing the terms of critical discourse (one of my aims here is to pry the two earliest essays apart, since, while it might be the case that “Towards a Newer Laocoön” was intended to function as a kind of pendant to “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” the latter was not written with a sequel in mind). Historians sometimes give the impression that Greenberg “invented” or “founded” modernism out of whole cloth and that he did so with the intention of determining the future course of both discourse and practice. Here's Guilbaut: “Between 1939 and 1948 Clement Greenberg developed a formalist theory of modern art which he would juxtapose with the notion of the avant-garde, in order to create a structure which, like that of Baudelaire or Apollinaire, would play an aggressive, dominant role on the international scene.”⁸⁰ The premeditation that Guilbaut detects in this writing is symptomatic: this conclusion could only have been reached retrospectively and, arguably, only by reading the early writings through the later ones. While it's true that Greenberg wrote with confidence, even authority, from the start, the ideological ambition that Guilbaut ascribes to his earliest efforts is belied as much by their substance as their tenor—not to mention Greenberg's own misgivings. In a rare moment of diffidence, Greenberg admitted to Lazarus as he was drafting

⁸⁰ Guilbaut and Repensek, “The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America,” 61. Or there's Caroline Jones: “Greenberg constructed the dialectics needed to make Pollock inevitable, just as Apollinaire provoked his readers' commitment to Cubism as the best way to visualize an emerging modern world.” Jones, *Eyesight Alone*, 6.

“Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” “I’m afraid of my own flights of spun theory.”⁸¹ And later, upon hearing that no article had “stirred up so much comment as mine and received such universal praise,” Greenberg admitted to being flattered but was still not convinced. “I’m afraid I lack a critical audience,” he wrote, “the piece is full of loopholes which no one seems to have noticed.”⁸² We could dismiss this as false modesty except that Greenberg was equally candid about his “genius” in other instances.

Extrapolating from the situation that obtained in the late 70s, when art discourse was not only confined to the art press but had seemingly been limited to a single publication for over a decade, Guilbaut might have concluded that Greenberg and his interlocutors were engaged in a similarly bounded discourse in the 30s.⁸³ It’s not clear that it was even the *same* discourse, though, given the different function of critical discourse during these two periods. If, as Wittgenstein argued, “the meaning of a word is its use in the language,” does the same principle apply to the use of (critical) language in discourse?⁸⁴ More pointedly, given the historical context of Guilbaut’s essay, what happens to this discourse when criticism comes to be understood as a discipline? It’s hardly a coincidence that Greenberg’s chief disciple turned out to be central to this very shift: “The idea of creating a discipline of art criticism, of raising it to a certain level,” Phil Leider remarked retrospectively about his tenure as editor of *Artforum*, “starts the moment I met Michael [Fried], or the moment we started publishing Michael... he knew that he was creating a

⁸¹ Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928-1943*, 198.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 212.

⁸³ The defection of several of the editors of *Artforum* and their subsequent founding of *October*, along with the brief eclipse of *Artforum* in the early 80s by *Art in America* (by critics who would later join the ranks of *October*), broke the near-monopoly on criticism that *Artforum* had had since the late 60s.

⁸⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 18.

serious discipline of art criticism in America that did not exist prior to him.”⁸⁵ In other words, the critic who published “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” was not yet the critic—or even the *kind of critic*—that would later emerge thanks to the role he himself would play as catalyst of this change. As Bourdieu wrote of his analysis of Flaubert, “taking the viewpoint of a Flaubert who was not yet Flaubert, we try to discover what the young Flaubert was obliged to do and wanted to do in an artistic world not yet transformed by what he did.”⁸⁶ To put it another way, the term “art critic” had a different valence in 1939. And when this difference is taken into account it becomes evident that “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” might have been as crucial for the emergence of a critical art discourse as it was for the theoretical origins of modernism.

The scope of Clark’s essay is narrower and his conclusions more speculative than Guilbaut’s, but his essay makes its own historiographic contribution. Focusing exclusively on “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” and “Towards a Newer Laocoön,” he offers Marxist hermeneutics in lieu of Cold War politics. Clark is convinced that, in an effort not to “spoil the flow of the prose” by deploying “the ponderous armory of Marx’s concepts,” Greenberg ended up with texts in which the Marxism remained “largely implicit.” At the risk of “making their Marxism declare itself more stridently” than Greenberg would have wished, Clark proposes to read between the lines of these essays, admitting that, “there are several points... where I am genuinely uncertain as to whether I am diverging from Greenberg’s argument and explaining more fully.”⁸⁷ In his view, the lack of specificity is evidence of Greenberg’s desire for lucidity, although he doesn’t comment on the fact that the single direct reference to

⁸⁵ Quoted in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974* (New York: Soho Press, 2000), 150.

⁸⁶ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 98.

⁸⁷ Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” 141.

Marx in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” substitutes a prefatory remark about the need to “quote Marx word for word” for an actual citation.⁸⁸ Perhaps Greenberg failed to set off the quote because he assumed that his audience knew their Marx—implicitly as it were—but his failure to punctuate could also be seen as a way of offering attribution with one hand and taking it away with the other.⁸⁹

Clark doesn't limit himself to exegesis, announcing in the opening paragraphs that he will end by arguing with “these essays' Marxism and their history.”⁹⁰ When it comes time to argue, though, it's not simply a matter of reading between *these* lines: Clark is arguing not only with the author of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” and “Towards a Newer Laocoön” (whose arguments, Clark writes, “are taken up directly, sometimes almost verbatim” in “Modernist Painting”), but with the “author-function,” to return to Foucault, that Greenberg had come to represent by the late 70s. Clark hews closely to a discussion of the early texts until, toward the end of his essay, he quotes a line from Greenberg's 1960s position paper, “Modernist Painting.” I don't begrudge Clark this reference, but it began to seem inevitable because his text, no less than Guilbaut's, is as much a reflection of and participant in the critical debates of its time as Greenberg's were. “Modernist Painting” was implicated in an ideological debate over a discourse that, by the late 70s, had not only been

⁸⁸ Greenberg wrote: “Here, as in every other question today, it becomes necessary to quote Marx word for word. Today we no longer look towards socialism for a new culture—as inevitably as 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.” Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 49.

⁸⁹ Paul Hart, writing in the *Oxford Art Journal*, claims that the cited passage comes from Marx's *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1859: “[M]ankind sets itself only such tasks as it can solve... the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist.” See Paul Hart, “The Essential Legacy of Clement Greenberg from the Era of Stalin and Hitler,” *Oxford Art Journal* 11, no. 1 (1988): 78.

⁹⁰ Clark, “Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art,” 140.

named and theorized but had become entrenched.⁹¹ Clark's use of the term "modernism" is theoretical rather than historical (he's not referring to the term's signification circa 1940 but to Greenberg's later theorization—that is, to Greenbergian modernism). The later critics' consideration of the social and political context of Greenberg's early writings went hand in hand with their rejection of the formalism reflected in "Modernist Painting" (but not, I would argue, in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"). And while the preoccupation with Greenberg's Marxism is by no means a pretext, the intense focus on his early writings didn't just coincide with the critique of modernism and the emergence of a new discourse, it also coincided with a renewed engagement with Marx that began in the early 70s.⁹²

To return for a moment to Clark's text, the essay begins with a brief demonstration of the "Marxist culture" in which *Partisan Review* participated, listing, for the record, contributions like Edmund Wilson's "The Marxist Dialectic," Meyer Schapiro's review of Wilson's *To the Finland Station*, and Breton and Rivera's "Manifesto." Greenberg's first appearance in the magazine, a review of Bertolt Brecht's *Penny for the Poor*, is added to this list along with a rundown of some of the questions—about the role of revolutionary writers and a 1938 Trotsky pamphlet titled "Their Morals and Ours"—that Greenberg posed to the Italian writer Ignazio Silone in an interview that appeared in the same issue as "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," setting the stage for Clark's discussion of the two essays.⁹³

⁹¹ It was only in 1998 that Stephen Melville could write, "We may be coming at last to the end of the artworld demonization of Clement Greenberg and so may be able to reconsider the terms and limits of his achievement relatively free of the thick miasma of nonreadings that have so long obscured his views." See Stephen Melville, "Kant after Greenberg," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 67, doi:10.2307/431953.

⁹² See Orton and Pollock, *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, 1996, xii ff.

⁹³ Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," 142–43.

In a brief summary of the essays' arguments Clark refers to Greenberg's "Eliotic Trotskyism," a phrase that has now gained wide currency in discussions of *Partisan Review* but that was relatively obscure when Clark published his essay.⁹⁴ He rightly adds Brecht, whose importance Greenberg insisted on in numerous letters to Lazarus (claiming, at one point, to have "found him first"), to the list of Greenberg's early influences and then turns to a discussion of the avant-garde.⁹⁵ "No doubt bourgeois culture is in crisis," Clark writes, glossing Greenberg's argument, "but it has spawned, half in opposition to itself, half at its service, a peculiar and durable artistic tradition—the one we call modernist and what Greenberg then called, using its own label, avant-garde." He follows this with a quotation from "Towards a Newer Laocoön" before pivoting back to his discussion of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch": "It was to be the task of the avant-garde to perform in opposition to bourgeois society the function of finding new and adequate cultural forms for the expression of that same society, without at the same time succumbing to its ideological divisions and its refusal to permit the arts to be their own justification."⁹⁶ Focusing more closely on Greenberg's elaboration of the avant-garde's function in "Towards a Newer Laocoön," Clark zeroes in on the "modernist" tenets that he will attempt to discredit at the end of his essay. It's that last point—the idea that the arts could be their own justification—that he finds most objectionable. But Clark's conflation of modernism and the avant-garde is as telling as it is misleading: it confuses modernist discourse (not the avant-garde, but the "ideology of avant-

⁹⁴ Ibid., 143. Michael Leja notes that Clark's description of Greenberg's "Eliotic Trotskyism" was anticipated by Nicolas Calas. See Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1997), 223, 360 n. 52 and Nicolas Calas, "View Listens," *View* 1:2 (October 1940): 1, 5.

⁹⁵ Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928-1943*, 213.

⁹⁶ Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," 144.

gardism,” to borrow Orton and Pollock’s formulation) with a historically specific understanding of the avant-garde, which doesn’t allow Greenberg’s discussion to stand on its own.⁹⁷

In “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” the closest Greenberg comes to the idea that the arts could be their own justification—or, in the stronger reading Clark offers later in his essay, that art could “substitute itself for the values capitalism has made valueless”—is a statement concerning the artwork’s dissolution of content into form so that it could not be “reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself,” which falls far short of “Laocoön’s” position on autonomy.⁹⁸ Greenberg understands that the critique that avant-garde culture represented would be moot in anything other than a capitalist society, which is why a new culture was inevitable under socialism. “Advances in culture,” he writes, “corrode the very society under whose aegis they are made possible.”⁹⁹ Although he frames the binary opposition between kitsch and the avant-garde as a parasitic one, the problem that kitsch represents cuts both ways: there’s no vanguard without a rearguard. It’s meaningless to talk about avant-garde culture *as such*; it can exist only in opposition.

In keeping with his stated objective, Clark focuses on Greenberg’s Marxism but not on how it fits into the argument of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” Greenberg’s essay starts with a discussion of Alexandrianism, the cultural stagnation that resulted in a situation “in which

⁹⁷ Tom Crow makes a similar point in “Modernism and Mass Culture” when he argues that he has “been using the words avant-garde and modernism in a roughly equivalent way... But there is a tension or lack of fit between the two terms.” See Thomas Crow, “Modernism and Mass Culture,” in Clement Greenberg et al., *Modernism and Modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers*, ed. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh (Halifax, N.S: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2005), 216.

⁹⁸ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 36.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 48–49.

creative activity dwindles to virtuosity in the small details of form.”¹⁰⁰ Clark objects to this comparison because, he writes, “to compare the conditions in which, in late capitalism, the meanings of the ruling class are actively disputed with those in which, in Hellenistic Egypt, say, established meanings stultified and became subject to skepticism—this is to compare the utterly unlike.” Clark can’t countenance what he takes to be an equation between “a time of economic and cultural dissolution—an epoch of weariness and unconcern” with “one of articulated and fierce class struggle,” but, while kitsch might be the modern equivalent of Alexandrianism insofar as they are both forms of academicism, the equation of pre-industrial Egypt and late capitalism doesn’t necessarily follow from this.¹⁰¹ Greenberg writes:

It is among the hopeful signs in the midst of the decay of our present society that we—some of us—have been unwilling to accept this last phase for our own culture. In seeking to go beyond Alexandrianism, a part of Western bourgeois society has produced something unheard of heretofore: —avant-garde culture. A superior consciousness of history—more precisely, the appearance of a new kind of criticism in society, an historical criticism—made this possible... New perspectives of this kind [that the “bourgeois social order” was “not an eternal, ‘natural’ condition of life”], becoming a part of the advanced intellectual conscience of the fifth and sixth decades of the nineteenth century, soon were absorbed by artists and poets, even if unconsciously for the most part. It was no accident, therefore, that the birth of the avant-garde coincided chronologically—and geographically, too—with the first bold development of scientific revolutionary thought in Europe.¹⁰²

I’ve quoted from this paragraph at length to underscore the fact that Greenberg connects avant-garde culture not simply to Marxism but to Marxist criticism. Called forth by the same historical conditions, Marxism and the avant-garde emerged at the same moment, but it wasn’t just “a superior consciousness of history” that made the avant-garde possible, it

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰¹ Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” 145.

¹⁰² Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 35.

was, “more precisely,” a “new kind of criticism.” This might seem like a razor-thin distinction (particularly since it’s clear that he was referring to the “criticism” of society that Marxist theory comprehended), but it was one that clearly mattered to Greenberg—as did the “unconscious” assimilation of this “advanced intellectual conscience” by artists and poets. Critics—or, better, criticism—led the way.

Greenberg raises the issue of Alexandrianism because, he argues, “the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture” become the raw materials for kitsch. He comes back to it when he notes that avant-garde culture contains “some of the very Alexandrianism it seeks to overcome” (the imitation of imitating), but with one crucial difference: the avant-garde moves while Alexandrianism stands still.¹⁰³ The driver of that movement is not the self-criticality of the modernist narrative that he would later theorize (Greenberg states the point without arguing it here, offering no explanation, other than the link to Marxism, for what “movement” means in this context), but the bigger issue for Clark is the question of where the avant-garde is headed. Summarizing (and collapsing) the two essays’ arguments, Clark maintains that the “main strands” in the avant-garde’s history “have all conspired to narrow and raise art ‘to the expression of an absolute.’ The pursuit has been purity, whatever the detours and self-deceptions.”¹⁰⁴ His use of the passive voice makes it unclear whether he’s referring to the avant-garde’s “pursuit” or Greenberg’s, though it would not be a stretch to read Greenberg’s later disclaimer about his use of the

¹⁰³ Ibid., 37–38; 40.

¹⁰⁴ Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” 145. When Clark asserts that some of the arguments in “Towards a Newer Laocoön” are taken up “sometimes almost verbatim” in “Modernist Painting,” he doesn’t offer this sentence from the opening paragraph of “Laocoön” as an example: “It is quite easy to show that abstract art like every other cultural phenomenon reflects the social and other circumstances of the age in which its creators live, and that there is nothing inside art itself, disconnected from history, which compels it to go in one direction or another.” Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoön,” 296.

term “purity” (in a postscript added to a 1978 reprint of “Modernist Painting”) as a “detour or self-deception.”¹⁰⁵ If we put the line Clark quotes about the “absolute” back into its original context, however, “purity” is less the goal than the outcome of a different pursuit: “Retiring from public altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point. ‘Art for art’s sake’ and ‘pure poetry’ appear, and subject-matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague.”¹⁰⁶ The goal of the avant-garde artist, according to Greenberg, was “to maintain the high level of his art”—not “purity,” which was a consequence of that pursuit.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Greenberg writes, “Many readers, though by no means all, seem to have taken the ‘rationale’ of Modernist art outlined here as representing a position adopted by the writer himself: that is, that what he describes he also advocates... a close reading of what he writes will find nothing at all to indicate that he subscribes to, believes in, the things that he adumbrates. (The quotation marks around *pure* and *purity* should have been enough to show that.) The writer is trying to account in part for how most of the very best art of the last hundred-odd years came about, but he’s not implying that that’s how it *had* to come about... ‘Pure’ art was a useful illusion, but this doesn’t make it any the less an illusion. Nor does the possibility of its continuing usefulness make it any the less an illusion.” Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1995), 93–94.

¹⁰⁶ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 36.

¹⁰⁷ I have one more quarrel with Clark’s synopsis of Greenberg’s argument. The first of the “more familiar” arguments made by the two essays, he writes, is “the description of the ersatz art produced for mass consumption by the ruling classes of late capitalism as part of their vile stage management of democracy, their pretending—it becomes perfunctory of late—‘that the masses actually rule.’” Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” 145. This, I think, is a strong reading of Greenberg’s claim that, because the regimes of Germany, Italy, and Russia could not raise the cultural level of the masses “by anything short of a surrender to international socialism,” they would “flatter the masses by bringing all culture down to their level.” Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 47. According to Greenberg, kitsch wasn’t created by the ruling classes either for the reason Clark cites or any other; it developed in response to a demand. “[T]he new urban masses,” he writes, “set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption.” *Ibid.*, 39. Clark (like Dwight Macdonald) implies that, since kitsch was being foisted on the unwitting masses, it had an ideological function. For Greenberg, the preference for kitsch was not the result of false consciousness. It was a choice made by those who, lacking the “comfort and leisure” that formal culture required, nevertheless wanted the “diversion that only culture of some sort” could provide.

Greenberg's discussion of the avant-garde would not have failed to evoke Lenin's "vanguard of the proletariat" for the most partisan readers of *Partisan Review*. "[I]n order to 'serve' the mass movement," Lenin had written in 1902, "we must have people who will devote themselves exclusively to Social-Democratic activities, and that such people must train themselves patiently and steadfastly to be professional revolutionaries."¹⁰⁸ Workers' spontaneous apprehension of their situation wasn't just unlikely; it was impossible. "Class political consciousness," he continued, "can be brought to the workers *only from without*, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers."¹⁰⁹ If they were going to understand class struggle as anything other than simply improving their lot (Lenin's primary target in this text was trade unionism), they had to recognize their relationship not just to their employers but also to the bourgeoisie. But if the bourgeoisie wasn't going to enlighten them on this score and they weren't able to grasp this relationship on their own, an intermediary was needed. And this mediation was, at least in part, a matter of connecting theory and practice: "These people who cannot pronounce the word 'theoretician' without a sneer, who describe their genuflections to common lack of training and backwardness as a 'sense for the realities of life,'" Lenin protested, "reveal in practice a failure to understand our most imperative *practical* tasks."¹¹⁰ Only professional revolutionaries were in a position to link practice to the theory that focused its aims. The vanguard was therefore indispensable not just to the

¹⁰⁸ Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement*, ed. V. J. Jerome, trans. J. Fineberg and G. Hanna (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 123. Lenin used the Russian word *avangard* in this text. See Donald D. Egbert, "The Idea of 'Avant-Garde' in Art and Politics," *The American Historical Review* 73, no. 2 (December 1967): 339, doi:10.2307/1866164.

¹⁰⁹ Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, 78-79.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

revolutionary goals of the proletariat but to class struggle itself. “[T]he spontaneous struggle of the proletariat will not become its genuine ‘class struggle,’” Lenin concluded, “until this struggle is led by a strong organization of revolutionaries.”¹¹¹

Class consciousness involved the intellectual transformation of workers, which could only be achieved through the guidance and training provided by professionals. It amounted, in other words, to the intellectualization, or revolutionary professionalization, of everyone. “[T]he organization of the revolutionaries must consist first and foremost of the people who make revolutionary activity their profession (for which reason I speak of the organization of *revolutionaries*, meaning revolutionary Social-Democrats). In view of this common characteristic of the members of such an organization, *all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals*, not to speak of distinctions of trade and profession, in both categories, *must be effaced*.”¹¹² The objective wasn’t to descend—or condescend—to the level of amateurs, but to raise amateurs to the level of professionals, and Lenin was convinced that this was precisely where they had fallen short. “We are directly *to blame* for doing too little to ‘stimulate’ the workers to take this path, common to them and to the ‘intellectuals,’ of professional revolutionary training, and for all too often dragging them back by our silly speeches about what is ‘accessible’ to the masses of the workers, to the ‘average workers,’ etc.”¹¹³

¹¹¹ Ibid., 132. Or again, “The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness.” Vladimir Lenin quoted in Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*, 2nd edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 283.

¹¹² Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, 109.

¹¹³ Ibid., 130.

Like Lenin, the *Partisan* editors were wary of those who dismissed theoretical analysis: “When watery political journalism tinged with some literary phraseology usurps the place of criticism, an anti-esthetic soon gets mistaken for a new esthetic... This distaste for theory reveals a misconception of the role and nature of criticism.”¹¹⁴ But it wasn’t just their theoretical capacity that set (professional) critics apart. Arguing for a “usable past,” Rahv and Phillips also wanted to ensure that modern art would not be overthrown by the revolution (their advocacy for a “usable past” was largely to blame for accusations that they were apologists for the bourgeois tradition). Those who rejected the idea of a usable poetic tradition maintained that the poetry associated with it expressed “private sorrows and personal methods.” T. S. Eliot and his “kindred reactionaries” were the culprits, since their “attempt to use their technical devices for the expression of the revolutionary spirit” involved a “fundamental contradiction.” For the *Partisan* editors, this approach was “more like a search for *Marxian* ancestors than a sound orientation toward the critical reworking of the past.”¹¹⁵

The role the *Partisan* editors envisioned for the magazine is exemplified by Lenin’s vanguardism. In a 1934 editorial they wrote, “The critic is the ideologist of the literary movement, and any ideologist, as Lenin pointed out ‘is worthy of that name only when he marches ahead of the spontaneous movement, points out the real road, and when he is

¹¹⁴ Wallace Phelps (William Phillips) and Philip Rahv, “Criticism,” *Partisan Review* II, no. 7 (May 1935): 16–17. “Political journalism” was to “criticism” what “trade unionism” was to “class struggle” for Lenin.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23–4. As Rahv and Phillips wrote, “In our opinion the problem of the literary heritage is a problem of understanding its process of development... In this sense, all literary history is our heritage... The notion of tradition, however, as a field from which ‘usable elements’ can be plucked, separates techniques from their substance, leading to a formalist approach to the past.” William Phillips and Philip Rahv, “Some Aspects of Literary Criticism,” *Science & Society* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1937): 216–17.

able, ahead of all others, to solve all the theoretical, political and tactical questions which the “material elements” of the movement spontaneously encounter.”¹¹⁶ (Max Eastman, former editor of *The Masses*, in contrast believed that the intellectual “should take a lead from the movement and not try to direct it himself.”¹¹⁷) The development of revolutionary literature would be a dialectical process, but the editors were especially concerned to clarify both the purview of the critic and the scope of criticism in relation to that process:

[T]he development of revolutionary literature is not unilinear; its progress is a process unfolding through a series of contradictions, through the struggle of opposed tendencies, and it is the business of criticism * to help writers resolve these contradictions. Unless criticism fulfills this task, the progress of revolutionary literature is retarded and certain writers may even be shunted off their revolutionary rails.¹¹⁸

The term “criticism” is glossed in a footnote:

*By ‘criticism’ we do not mean the body of formal analysis alone. Throughout this editorial most of our references to ‘critics’ and ‘criticism’ are meant to include the whole organizational and editorial leadership of revolutionary literature, the writer’s critical attitude to himself and others, as well as formal analysis.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Wallace Phelps (William Phillips) and Rahv, “Problems and Perspectives in Revolutionary Literature,” 4–5.

¹¹⁷ Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans; a History of Literary Radicalism in America*, 74. See Max Eastman, “The Cult of Unintelligibility,” *Harper’s Magazine*, April 1929, <http://harpers.org/archive/1929/04/the-cult-of-unintelligibility/>.

¹¹⁸ Wallace Phelps (William Phillips) and Rahv, “Problems and Perspectives in Revolutionary Literature,” 4. Rahv and Phelps initially used the term “revolutionary literature” to refer to the “proletarian literature” that was emerging at the time. “The last year has seen a quickening of revolutionary literature in America,” they write, “Cantwell, Rollins, Conroy and Armstrong have steered fiction into proletarian patterns of struggles. In the theatre, *Peace on Earth*, *Stevodore* and *They Shall Not Die* show a parallel growth. The emergence of a number of little revolutionary magazines, together with the phenomenal success of the weekly *New Masses*, has provided an outlet for the briefer forms of writing.” A few months later, Phelps would not name names when he argued that, “a new generation of revolutionary writers is rising” and that, “T. S. Eliot is one of the strongest literary influences on us.” The job of his generation, he argued, was to “use whatever heritage” was at its disposal for its “revolutionary tasks,” but the “proletarian generation” had “not yet fulfilled its promises.” *Ibid.*, 3; Wallace Phelps, “Three Generations,” *Partisan Review* I, no. 4 (Sept/Oct 1934): 51; 55.

¹¹⁹ Wallace Phelps (William Phillips) and Rahv, “Problems and Perspectives in Revolutionary Literature,” 4.

Criticism served as the dialectical linchpin: if its “business” was to guarantee the progress of revolutionary literature and keep writers on the rails, it was the critic and not the proletarian writer who would lead the literary revolution. *Partisan* was clearly expected to play a central role in this process as part of a vanguard of professionals that included the “whole organization and editorial leadership of revolutionary literature.”¹²⁰

Despite the editors’ emphasis on vanguardism, use of the term “avant-garde” was rare in the pages of *Partisan Review* until Dwight Macdonald invoked it in the last of a series of three essays on the Soviet cinema, which was published in the Winter 1939 issue (the term was also used in passing in that issue’s unsigned editorial). Advocating for “revolutionary literature” and “revolutionary writers,” Rahv and Phillips had steered clear of terms with obvious bourgeois connotations. Among other things, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” recast *Partisan’s* position, obviating the need to resolve the question of modern poetry and art by shifting the emphasis to culture. While the value of modern art to the new society might be debatable, culture itself was as necessary for proponents of leftism as it was for the *Partisan* critics. If what was at stake was “the survival in the near future of culture in general,” as Greenberg wrote, then disputes about the relative value of realism and abstraction amounted to “lecturing on navigation as the ship was going down.”¹²¹ As the poet Louis MacNeice wrote at the outbreak of the war, “If the war made nonsense of Yeats’ poetry and of all the works that are called ‘escapist,’ it also made nonsense of the

¹²⁰ This does not mean that the editors distinguished between a literary and a political vanguard, only that the same principle applied within the literary realm.

¹²¹ The phrase is Auden’s. Quoted in D. George Boyce, “Yeats and Auden: Politics of Poetry, 1891-1939,” in Jeremy Jennings and A. Kemp-Welch, *Intellectuals in Politics: From the Dreyfus Affair to the Rushdie Affair* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 129.

poetry that professes to be ‘realist.’”¹²² Greenberg’s focus on the need to “keep culture moving” also cast vanguardism in a different light: for *Partisan*, it had always been a question of where the intellectual stood in relation to the proletariat. (“Marching ahead” was tacitly assumed to describe a spatial rather than a temporal position, since the intellectual—who, by convention if not in fact, belonged to the petit bourgeoisie—obviously couldn’t precede the proletariat into class consciousness. As Marx said in an 1871 interview, “I have satisfied myself of one thing, that it is a society of genuine working men but that these workmen are directed by social and political theorists of another class.”¹²³) By shifting vanguardism onto the plane of culture, Greenberg realigned the intellectual, who was no longer imagined to be “with” or “beside” the proletariat. In doing this, Greenberg simply took the next step in a process that had already been set in motion: between the magazine’s revival in December 1937 and the outbreak of the war, the editors’ position shifted from wanting to be “ahead” to needing to be “apart,” from “out in front” of the proletariat to “separate” or “alienated” from society. By effecting this change without appearing to compromise the magazine’s leftist credentials, the publication of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” shifted the terms of the debate. Not coincidentally, the third essay on Greenberg’s early writing explored the question of *Partisan*’s position.

Orton and Pollock’s “Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed” deals with the context of Greenberg’s early writing more specifically than Clark’s and Guilbaut’s essays do. Rejecting the notion that the avant-garde is “a process inherent in the evolution of art” or the engine that drives artistic innovation, the authors underscore the difference between the

¹²² Ibid., 138.

¹²³ Quoted in Neal Harding, “Intellectuals and Socialism: Making and Breaking the Proletariat,” in *ibid.*, 195.

“avant-garde” (which they associate with a particular identity) and the ideology of “avant-gardism” (which governed discourse and practice alike when their essay was published). The avant-garde is not a mechanism, they argue, but a “product of self-consciousness on the part of those who identify themselves as, and with, a special social and artistic grouping within the *intelligentsia* at a specific historical conjuncture,” a “special socio-artistic intellectual agency through which culture can be advanced,” whose function and construction are determined by a “broader discursive formation.”¹²⁴

Self-consciousness, agency, identity: these terms suggest that the avant-garde doesn’t simply describe a relational structure but, rather, instantiates one. And if it’s positional (and oppositional) by definition, the avant-garde can’t be an attribute, much less the equivalent, of modernism. It also means that a given instance of the avant-garde must be historically specific. Orton and Pollock identify two “avant-garde moments”—or, more precisely, they argue that there have only been two *successful* ones—which, in spite of the wedge they have attempted to drive between the avant-garde and modernism, nevertheless coincide with modernism’s “birth” in Paris and its apogee in New York. Characterizing the avant-garde as a kind of socio-artistic agency shifts the discussion from art practices to practitioners, which tends to anthropomorphize it.

Where I part ways with Orton and Pollock is in their insistence upon Greenberg’s dual definition of the avant-garde as both “a novel *form* of culture produced in bourgeois society in the mid-nineteenth century” and “a novel *force* which advances and keeps culture at a high level.”¹²⁵ This description is accurate, as far as it goes, but Orton and

¹²⁴ Orton and Pollock, “Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed,” September 1981, 317.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Pollock overemphasize the duality, separating the form from the force and locating the latter too specifically. The *Partisan* editors, they write, “believed that cultural change could only be initiated by an international community of intellectuals and that the cultural epicenter—the *avant-garde*—of the community would be the Trotskyist intellectuals whose best work was being published in *Partisan Review*.”¹²⁶ While Clark equates the *avant-garde* with modernism, Orton and Pollock equate it with *Partisan*, a reading that, I would argue, is too narrow. It seems plausible that Rahv and Phillips would have agreed with this interpretation, given their vanguardist view of the magazine, but Greenberg’s position is more nuanced. Greenberg also anthropomorphized the *avant-garde* (“the *avant-garde* had succeeded in ‘detaching’ itself from society,” “the *avant-garde*... sensing danger,” “the *avant-garde* imitates the processes of art,” etc.), but in each instance, the meaning would remain the same if “*avant-garde* culture”—or just “culture”—were substituted for “the *avant-garde*.”¹²⁷ This is not the case for Orton and Pollock, who begin by asking “what it was that allowed these artists and intellectuals to regard themselves as an *avant-garde*,” and subsequently refer to “the cultural epicenter—the *avant-garde*—of the community.”¹²⁸ In an effort to separate it from the ideology of *avant-gardism*, Orton and Pollock sever the *avant-garde* from Greenberg’s binary (they don’t neglect kitsch altogether, but they discuss it only in passing). By decontextualizing it in this way, their reading loses its specificity—omitting, in the process, the problem that Greenberg was trying to address.

Although each of these essays contains valuable insights regarding Greenberg’s early criticism, they are (with the exception of Orton and Pollock’s) limited by their close reading

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 315.

¹²⁷ Greenberg, “*Avant-Garde and Kitsch*,” 36, 38, and 44.

¹²⁸ Orton and Pollock, “*Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*,” September 1981, 306; 315.

of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” in tandem with or through “Towards a Newer Laocoön”—and “Modernist Painting.” Taking part in the critique of formalism that pervaded art discourse in the late 70s and early 80s, these essays pay less attention to the discursive context of Greenberg’s essays than to the ways in which they anticipate the theory that he would fully articulate only in subsequent texts. (As Francis Francina argues, “‘Modernist Painting’ represents, as it were, a distillation, the ‘literal essence,’ of a critical approach based on aesthetic beliefs codified during the 1950s.”¹²⁹) While Greenberg’s first published essay on art has a place in this narrative, it also engaged with a historically specific debate about what was at stake for culture and criticism in the late 30s.

“Avant-Garde and Kitsch” poses the problem of its central binary in terms that echo *Partisan’s* resistance to the Popular Front: just as the real enemy of socialism wasn’t fascism but capitalism, the real enemy of culture wasn’t social (or socialist) realism but kitsch. Abstraction could not save culture any more than realism could. Kitsch depended on avant-garde culture, but it could survive without it because, as Greenberg points out, kitsch didn’t progress. “[T]he true and more important function of the avant-garde was not to ‘experiment,’” Greenberg writes, “but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence.”¹³⁰ If “the rich and the cultivated” (the ruling classes) were now turning their backs on culture, as Greenberg claimed, that left the “cultivated” (intellectuals) to find a way to keep it moving. Just as the

¹²⁹ Francis Francina, “Institutions, Culture, and America’s ‘Cold War Years’: The Making of Greenberg’s ‘Modernist Painting,’” *Oxford Art Journal* 26, no. 1 (2003): 78. Or, as Hilton Kramer wrote of the heavily revised essays that appeared in *Art and Culture*, rather than a “chronicle of the forties and fifties,” they were “a catalogue of his present views.” Hilton Kramer, “A Critic on the Side of History: Notes on Clement Greenberg,” *Arts Magazine* 37, no. 1 (October 1962): 60.

¹³⁰ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 36.

lesser-of-two-evils choice—bourgeois democracy—threatened to thwart socialism, kitsch threatened to expropriate culture. Culture depended on the criticality of the avant-garde and the criticism that responded to it (which included but certainly wasn't limited to the criticism published by *Partisan*). To understand how this meant within the critical context in which it was articulated, it's necessary to examine both its discursive site—the little magazine—and how criticism functioned within that site. Before moving on to a discussion of the little magazines of the 30s, however, I need to address the critical discourse that they engaged in.

Chapter 2

Critical Discourse

The Muddle of Criticism

The term “criticism” was almost universally equated with “literary criticism” in the first decades of the twentieth century. The subtitle of Norman Foerster’s 1928 book *American Criticism*—“Studies in Literary Theory from Poe to the Present”—clarified the scope of his study, but it went without saying that by “American criticism” Foerster meant “American literary criticism.”¹⁸¹ However, as Edmund Wilson pointed out in an article published the same year, criticism of contemporary literature was practically nonexistent (it was limited to reviews, or “literary journalism,” a point I will come back to). More important, before John Crowe Ransom began to argue for criticism of “literature as literature” in the mid-30s, criticism that positioned the work in some way (by employing a critical framework or theory, for instance, rather than offering subjective impressions) focused on its moral, aesthetic or social value. During the World War I era, the precursors to whom American critics looked were nineteenth-century writers and critics like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Augustin Saint-Beuve, Henry James, Matthew Arnold, Anatole France, and Hippolyte Taine.

Various types of criticism—“impressionistic,” “aesthetic,” “scientific,” and “appreciative”—formed a field of critical practices at the turn of the century, but didn’t constitute a “critical field” in the sense in which I’m using this term. Before unpacking this distinction, I want to quote several practitioners on the state of the field at that time and to cite a description of the field offered by Gertrude Buck in her 1916 book *The Social Criticism of Literature*.

¹⁸¹ See Norman Foerster, *American Criticism, A Study in Literary Theory from Poe to the Present* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928). It’s perhaps worth noting that the New Critics didn’t call themselves New Literary Critics.

In a 1900 essay published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Lewis E. Gates distinguished between “vital appreciation,” which represented criticism “in its purest and most suggestive form,” and “whimsical impressionism.”¹³² Viewed in a certain way, Gates wrote, the history of literary criticism since Addison was the history of “the ever-increasing refinement of the critic’s sensorium,” of the critic’s “increasing sensitiveness to delicate shades of spiritual experience in his reaction to literature,” and of “a growing tendency on the part of the critic to value, above all else, his own intimate relation to this or that piece of literature.”¹³³ Rejecting the over-refinement of this “literature about literature,” Gates argued that appreciative criticism took the objective character of the work into consideration, requiring the critic to “go outside the work of art and beyond his own momentary state of consciousness” to account for its “historical setting,” its “psychological origin,” and its worth as an illustration of “aesthetic law.” Although the ultimate aim of this attempt to temper the subjectivity of the critic’s response was “not to explain and not to judge or dogmatize, but to enjoy,” it needed to be grounded in “something far more permanent than [the critic’s] own fleeting moods.”

Impressionistic criticism was not only “personal, subjective, impressionistic, and eclectic,” but stemmed from the need to take into account the “eternal flux of things.”¹³⁴ Or as Anatole France put it, “All of us judge everything by our own measure. How could we do otherwise? Since to judge is to compare, and we have only one measure, which is ourselves; and this measure is constantly changing. We are all of us the sport and playthings

¹³² Gates, “Impressionism and Appreciation,” 77.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 74–75.

¹³⁴ Samuel C. Chew, “Anatole France,” *The North American Review* 220, no. 825 (December 1924): 300; Benj. M. Woodbridge, “Leopardi and Impressionism,” *Italica* 22, no. 1 (March 1945): 32, doi:10.2307/475316.

of mobile appearances.”¹³⁵ Given that “the present moment” was the “one thing certain in a fluctuating world,” writes one observer about Walter Pater and France, the problem for these two critics was “how to give the highest quality to the moments as they pass.”¹³⁶

Appreciative criticism, as Gates notes, combined aspects of scientific and impressionistic criticism, but the term was also used more generally to describe criticism aimed simply at augmenting the reader’s apprehension or appreciation of literature, and some writers didn’t distinguish between impressionistic and appreciative criticism.¹³⁷

Several years after Gates published his essay, Irving Babbitt called for a “judicial” criticism to oppose both impressionistic and scientific criticism. The impressionist’s interest in books that appealed to his sensibility differed from the scientific critic’s concern for the way a book was “related as a phenomenon to other phenomena,” but neither the “significance” of a book to a scientific critic (Taine) nor its “suggestiveness” to an impressionist (Paul Bourget) afforded “any real means of escape from the quicksands of relativity to some firm ground of judgment.”¹³⁸ The middle ground or “right mean” that Babbitt sought would “lie in a standard that is in the individual and yet is felt by him to transcend his personal self and lay hold of that part of his nature that he possesses in common with other men.” But, appealing to the authority of Aristotle (who “always assumed an ideal reader”), Babbitt goes on to say that, “in order to define our critical standard completely,” the “judgment of the keen-sighted few in the present needs to be

¹³⁵ Irving Babbitt, “Impressionist versus Judicial Criticism,” *PMLA* 21, no. 3 (1906): 694, doi:10.2307/456769.

¹³⁶ Chew, “Anatole France,” 300.

¹³⁷ See, for instance, Harvey Whitefield Peck, “The Social Criticism of Literature,” *The Sewanee Review* 29, no. 2 (April 1921): 135–36.

¹³⁸ Babbitt, “Impressionist versus Judicial Criticism,” 693.

ratified by the verdict of posterity.”¹³⁹ Valuing a book “according to its immediate effect on the average man” (or what Babbitt calls, “for want of a better term,” the “humanitarian fallacy”) would not yield the proper kind of judgment because it “fit in so perfectly with a commercialism which finds its profit in flattering the taste of the average man, and an impressionism that has lost the restraining sense of tradition.”¹⁴⁰

Emerson, Babbitt argued, was “the necessary corrective of Saint-Beuve,” by which he meant that critics needed “to cultivate, as a counterpoise to their use of historical and biographical method, a feeling for absolute values.” What was needed was Emerson’s “coat of elastic steel,” or, as Babbitt put it, a “critical canon” that would “restore to its rights the masculine judgment but without dogmatic narrowness. With such a canon, criticism might still cultivate the invaluable feminine virtues—it might be comprehensive and sympathetic without at the same time being invertebrate and gelatinous.”¹⁴¹ Criticism, in other words, had to strike the correct balance: between the One and the Many; between the transient and the timeless; between “masculine judgment” and “feminine virtues,” etc. The “keen-sighted few” would not be concerned with questions of sensibility but with universal standards and absolute values. “What is most needed just now,” Babbitt wrote a few years later in *The Masters of Modern French Criticism*, “is not great doctors of relativity, like Renan and Saint-Beuve, but rather a critic who, without being at all rigid or reactionary, can carry into his work the sense of standards that are set above individual caprice.”¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Ibid., 698–699; 700.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 701.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 702; 704.

¹⁴² Quoted in “Review of *The Masters of Modern French Criticism* by Irving Babbitt,” *The North American Review* 198, no. 692 (July 1913): 141.

Robert Wernaer, writing the year after Babbitt published his essay, observed that, “There is a restlessness in the world of criticism to-day. Its leading exponents, the impressionistic, appreciative, and scientific critics, do not enjoy any longer the unalloyed confidence of former years... there is a disquieting undercurrent set into motion by not a few, asking for something the criticism of to-day cannot give them.” What these various forms of criticism were missing was “a standard, a criterion, a code of laws or principles, which should form a basis for critical *judgments*. There is an urgent demand for *judicial criticism*.”¹⁴³ But Wernaer’s conception of judicial criticism differed from Babbitt’s. The critic should not look to Babbitt’s “absolute values,” but should instead be “constructive in finding laws and establishing principles” in order to “build with them the foundation of a new criticism.” Wernaer rejected appreciative criticism because it never formed a judgment, but the real problem, which was the issue he had with impressionistic and aesthetic criticism as well, was a “superficial, faulty, or too partial conception of beauty.”¹⁴⁴ Critics should not only be judges, but also “guides, supporters, friends of beauty,” that is, “constructive agents in the whole field of beauty.” Rather than pitting judicial criticism against the other critical approaches, however, Wernaer believed that criticism must be a synthesis of all four. The “true critic” would be impressionistic, appreciative, aesthetic and judicial. “He will unite the best each method can give, in order that he may be ‘constructive.’”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Robert M. Wernaer, “The New Constructive Criticism,” *PMLA* 22, no. 3 (1907): 421, doi:10.2307/456722.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 444; 424.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 443-45.

The sense that criticism needed to be grounded in something more than “a momentary shiver across a single set of possibly degenerate nerves,” as Gates put it, or “the impressions of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of the world” in Walter Pater’s formulation, is clear from the various calls for appreciative or judicial criticism.¹⁴⁶ But neither these critical approaches nor the ones they critiqued dominated the field (Babbitt’s judicial criticism, or New Humanism as it came to be called, would come to occupy this position only in the late 20s, when its position was challenged by other critics).¹⁴⁷ Alluding to the general perception of the disorder or confusion of this field, Gertrude Buck titled the first chapter of *The Social Criticism of Literature* “The Muddle of Criticism.”

For Buck, the critical field was defined by the opposition between “deductive” (judicial) and “inductive” (scientific) criticism. Based on “accepted principles,” deductive criticism stood “firmly upon some accredited canon of literature,” while inductive criticism set out “to discover certain facts.” The facts that scientific criticism uncovered might lead to certain inferences, Buck argued, but these inferences had nothing to do with the work’s value: scientific criticism would “confine itself to accounting for a given piece of literature, steadfastly refusing to evaluate it.” In so doing, however, it would challenge the claim that the literature of the past, from which judicial criticism necessarily derived its standards,

¹⁴⁶ Gates, “Impressionism and Appreciation,” 76; Walter Pater, quoted in William Van O’Connor, *An Age of Criticism: 1900-1950* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1952), 21.

¹⁴⁷ “[The New Humanists] were not popular in their own time, for they were the first to wage a sustained attack against the naturalism and relativism that had gained consent with the emergence of Darwinism and pragmatism at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Not until the end of the 1920s did they win a wide audience for their views.” J. David Hoeveler, *The New Humanism: A Critique of Modern America, 1900-1940* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 3.

“should fix values for the literature of the present and of the future.” For scientific criticism, literature was “perpetually growing, a creature of organic development” rather than a “fixed, inorganic structure.”¹⁴⁸ In theory, judicial criticism allowed for the judgment of the work because its standards didn’t change; scientific criticism could “account” for change, but couldn’t evaluate the work that resulted from it. The synchronic and the diachronic remained irreconcilable or at least unreconciled.

Aesthetic criticism, the “latest claimant to the title of the one true criticism,” stood in opposition not only to judicial and scientific criticism but also to impressionistic and appreciative criticism, and was devoted to “explaining the effects produced by the play or poem on the reader, and evaluating these effects by reference to established aesthetic laws.”

Buck maps the field of practices as follows:

Scientific criticism, as we have seen, condemns judicial criticism for judging literature solely by its conformity with accepted models or canons; and accuses it of blocking the progress of literature by this procedure. Judicial criticism, on the other hand, distrusts scientific criticism because it offers no fixed, external standards of judgment. Impressionist criticism holds both scientific and judicial criticism to be irrelevant to the one essential question: How does this piece of literature affect me, the reader? Scientific and judicial criticism, in their turn, ridicule impressionist criticism as superficial and egoistic. Appreciative criticism will accept the aid of scientific and of impressionist criticism, but sees both as inadequate to reach the final end of criticism, namely, the full experiencing of a piece of literature; while it finds judicial criticism incapable of even starting in the direction of this goal. Aesthetic criticism, rejecting all previous types, except deductive criticism, on the ground that they furnish no sure standard of judgment, discredits deductive criticism also, by the familiar declaration that it has only a traditional basis for its conclusions.¹⁴⁹

Buck’s question as to whether there was a central idea of criticism underlying all of these types went unanswered, but she posed it in order to set it against George Saintsbury’s global

¹⁴⁸ Buck, *The Social Criticism of Literature*, 3-4.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

definition of criticism, which had become “intolerable”: “the reasoned exercise of Literary Taste—the attempt, by examination of literature, to find out what it is that makes literature pleasant, and therefore good.”¹⁵⁰

Buck’s map is a useful guide, since these five critical approaches—appreciative, impressionist, judicial, aesthetic, and scientific—will reappear, some in slightly different guises, throughout this chronicle. As Buck argues, these critical approaches were positioned in relation to each other, but, with the exception of judicial criticism and aesthetic criticism, their subjective or objective aims prevented them from critically constructing their objects. A form of criticism that critically constructs its object is one that advances “a construction of the intelligibility of the artwork” (to paraphrase Barthes) in terms of a critical framework, theory, or program: it is a critical construction of the work’s meaning and its value. Judicial criticism, for example, constructed the meaning and value of its object (literary works) in terms of the work’s conformity with “a standard that is in the individual and yet is felt by him to transcend his personal self and lay hold of that part of his nature that he possesses in common with other men” and “absolute values” (as these values and that standard were construed by the New Humanists). In this way, judicial criticism positioned its object in a way that could be challenged or opposed by a different critical construction. In its “purest” form (impressionistic), subjective criticism allows individual critics to take a position, but, for precisely this reason, it lacks a critical position of its own; in the case of objective (scientific) criticism, the premise that criticism should take a position is rejected altogether. The distinction I’m making here is between “critical positions” and “critical position-takings.” Impressionistic criticism and judicial criticism

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 13.

could occupy the same “field of critical practices” (because they represented different critical *positions*), but they could not occupy a “critical field” because impressionistic criticism didn’t critically construct its object (it wasn’t a critical *position-taking*). A “critical field,” as I am using this term, emerges when different positions are taken in relation to the positions occupied by others in the field.

There was no consensus as to what should replace the continuing “refinement of the critic’s sensorium” or the goal of “finding out what made literature pleasant” in the early years of the twentieth century, but judicial critics and aesthetic critics would offer “standards of judgment” (based on an “accepted canon” or “aesthetic laws” respectively), which the other types of criticism lacked. What’s important for my purposes is the move away from critical modalities that focused on the work’s consumption or effect (impressionistic, appreciative) toward critical models that focused on the work itself (judicial, aesthetic) or its production and context (scientific). By the early 30s, New Humanism (judicial criticism) and Marxism (a critically positioned form of scientific criticism) would dominate the field of literary criticism, but the term “critical discourse,” as I’m using it here, includes critical practices that were not confined to this field. As it happens, those practices began to emerge around the time that Buck published her book.

Aesthetic Criticism and Social Criticism

The New York Intellectuals are descended from the generation of critics to which Van Wyck Brooks and Randolph Bourne (who were known as the “young intellectuals”) belonged. The young intellectuals, a group that also included Walter Lippmann, Waldo Frank and Lewis Mumford, were trying to establish a new social role—what I will refer to as

the “intellectual-critic”—and an “independent social criticism,” which would require “a new intellectual style—that of synthesizing the insights which had previously been the property of different specialisms.”¹⁵¹ These critics, who began writing in the 1910s, differed from their forbears, Paul Bourke observes, in one all-important respect: William James, John Dewey, Thorstein Veblen, Charles Beard and Lester Ward were all academics. “They spoke within disciplines: philosophy, economics, history, political science and sociology and to that extent the very style of their formulations was predetermined.” In the late nineteenth century, the university had offered “an institutional connection and a promise of identity which was quite distinctive in the sense that it had not existed before the last quarter of the nineteenth century and it was not to continue to perform precisely this function for very long after 1900.”¹⁵²

William James linked the “intellectual” (in an early American use of this term) specifically to the academy in a speech given to the Association of American Alumnae at Radcliffe College in 1907:

In our democracy where everything else is shifting, we alumni and alumnae of the colleges are the only permanent presence that corresponds to the aristocracy in older countries. We have continuous traditions, as they have, our motto too is noblesse oblige; and unlike them, we stand for ideal interests solely, for we have no corporate selfishness and wield no powers of corruption. We ought to have our own class consciousness, ‘Les Intellectuels!’ What prouder club-name could there be than this one.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Bourke, “The Social Critics and the End of American Innocence,” 70.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 68.

His use of the French word is no surprise, given the fact that the term “intellectual” had only recently gained wide currency as a result of its association with the Dreyfus Affair.¹⁵⁴

But James was particularly concerned to put some distance between the academy and the “school” of public opinion that was developing in the mass media: “In our essential function of indicating the better man, we now have formidable competitors outside.

McClure’s Magazine, the *American Magazine*, *Collier’s Weekly*, and in its fashion, the *World’s Work* constitute together a real popular university along this very line.”

It would be a pity, James continued, if a future historian had to write something like the following:

‘By the middle of the twentieth century the higher institutions of learning had lost all influence over public opinion in the United States. But the mission of raising the tone of democracy which they had proved themselves so lamentably unfitted to exert was assumed with rare enthusiasm and prosecuted with extraordinary skill and success by a new educational power; and for the clarification of their human sympathies and elevation of their human preferences the people at large acquired the habit of resorting exclusively to the guidance of certain private literary adventures commonly designated in the market by the affectionate name of tencent magazines.’¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ See Bruce Robbins, “Introduction: The Grounding of Intellectuals,” in Bruce Robbins, *Intellectuals: Aesthetics, Politics, Academics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), xv-xvi. As Raymond Williams points out, the term had been in use since the 1820s, but it took on a more specific connotation, as Jeremy Jennings and Tony Kemp-Welch note, in the late nineteenth century: “This arose from the fact that intellectuals—in this case writers such as Emile Zola, André Gide, Marcel Proust and Anatole France—were prepared to intervene in the public sphere of politics and to protest in the name of Justice in order to secure the release of the innocent Captain Alfred Dreyfus.” See Jeremy Jennings and Tony Kemp-Welch, “The Century of the Intellectual: From the Dreyfus Affair to the Rushdie Affair,” in Jeremy Jennings and A. Kemp-Welch, *Intellectuals in Politics: From the Dreyfus Affair to the Rushdie Affair* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 7.

¹⁵⁵ Bourke, “The Social Critics and the End of American Innocence,” 68.

If left unchallenged, these “private literary adventures” might begin to wield more influence than the higher institutions of learning. “Must not we of the colleges see to it that no historian shall ever have to say anything like this?,” James asked rhetorically.¹⁵⁶

The late nineteenth century witnessed the rise of the “quality magazines,” run by a powerful group of editors associated with the “genteel tradition” (a label that referred to the “genteel” values associated with Victorian standards of taste that had guided cultural production since the Civil War), which “attracted and held their new readers by entering the now acceptable field of American fiction.”¹⁵⁷ These magazines—*Harper’s Monthly*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *The North American Review*, *Scribner’s* and *The Century*—controlled the literary field up until the 1890s, when competition from the “ten-cent magazines” forced them to include more contemporary materials (the quality magazines cost 35 cents), even as they remained “slow in pace and serious in tone, uninterested in contemporary matters and deferential to the interests and tastes of [their] middle-class readers.”¹⁵⁸ Genteel culture dominated the institutional apparatus until the end of the nineteenth century: in addition to the magazines, those who espoused this tradition controlled the Eastern universities, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the social clubs, and the publishing houses. “To win the recognition of this conglomerate,” writes John Tomsich, “an author need only appear in the pages of the *Century*.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁵⁷ The term “genteel tradition” was coined by George Santayana in an address to the Philosophical Union of the University of California on August 25, 1911. See “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,” in George Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays*, ed. Doug Douglas L. Wilson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

¹⁵⁸ John Tomsich, *A Genteel Endeavor: American Culture and Politics in the Gilded Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971), 16–17.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Although still dominant in the years leading up to World War I, the quality magazines would be challenged by the “ten-cent” magazines (*McClure’s* and *Collier’s*) and the “general interest” magazines, on one hand, and the little magazines that were founded in the teens (*Poetry*, *Little Review*, *The Others*) on the other. By the turn of the century, ten-cent magazines accounted for 80 percent of all the magazines purchased.¹⁶⁰ Their circulations also increased exponentially after 1900 (the *Saturday Evening Post’s* went from 3,000 to 2 million between 1897 and the end of World War I).¹⁶¹ The social critics wrote for *The New Republic*, a “journal of opinion” that was co-founded in 1914 by Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann and Walter Weyl; a short-lived little magazine called *The Seven Arts*, which was co-edited by Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, and James Oppenheim; and, later, *The Dial*.

As the new magazines proliferated, a real critical field could be said to have come into existence. Within this field *Poetry* (a promoter of aesthetic criticism) and *The Seven Arts* (the principal site of social criticism) functioned in relation to the quality magazines and the general interest magazines as well as the ten-cent magazines. Bourne and Lippmann were drawn to the “generalizing language” of William James and John Dewey, since it had the capacity “to offer formulations which transcended the scope of technical intellectual pursuits and which had relevance for all fields of social inquiry.”¹⁶² Academic

¹⁶⁰ Carl F. Kaestle, “Literacy and Diversity: Themes from a Social History of the American Reading Public,” *History of Education Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 528, doi:10.2307/368848. Kaestle reports that *Ladies’ Home Journal’s* circulation reached a million by 1904 and, by 1920, fourteen other magazines had done the same.

¹⁶¹ Tom Reynolds, “Selling College Literacy: The Mass-Market Magazine as Early 20th Century Literacy Sponsor,” *American Periodicals: A Journal of History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 15, no. 2 (2005): 165.

¹⁶² Bourke, “The Social Critics and the End of American Innocence,” 70.

journals were, of course, too specialized to gain a wide readership and “social criticism” was developed to occupy a particular critical and intellectual position within this field; its relationship to the academy is clear, but it emerged as a response to pressure from the field’s other pole as well. The goal of the social critics was to engage the “intelligent reading public” in a discourse that didn’t require the disciplinary expertise of the academic “specialisms.” Social criticism wasn’t a new type of literary criticism (it wasn’t the “social criticism of literature” that Buck had argued for in her book); rather, it represented a broader form of critical inquiry.¹⁶³ Whereas Wernaer and Babbitt were interested in critical judgments (and the standards required to make them), the social critics were interested in engaging critically with contemporary social, political, and cultural issues (and the contextual analysis that this entailed). Alan Trachtenberg describes social criticism as the antithesis of formalism, since it “avoided detailed discussions of texts” in its search for the “generalizing formulation” or the statement that synthesized “movements of thought and feeling and sum[med] up a historical moment.” It was an attempt “to show the work of specific artists as part and parcel of their times.”¹⁶⁴

“What is unusual about the writings of Croly, Lippmann, Bourne and Brooks,”

Bourke writes, “is the high level of abstraction and eclecticism, the marked self-

consciousness of performing a novel function in assessing a whole culture, the concern to

¹⁶³ Literature “is not alone a creature but also a creator of the society it serves,” Buck argues, an understanding she certainly shared with the social critics. But her goal was ultimately more pedagogical than critical. The “social criticism of literature” would not “impose” the critic’s opinion on the reader, but would “insist only that [the reader] should honestly reach such a conclusion as he can reach, and then make each conclusion a stepping-stone to some further judgment, either of this book or another. Value thus inheres, not in the judgment itself, but in the whole process of arriving at it and proceeding from it—that is, in the vital and continuous contact with literature which makes it literature indeed.” Buck, *The Social Criticism of Literature*, 48–49; 60.

¹⁶⁴ Alan Trachtenberg, *Critics of Culture: Literature and Society in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Wiley, 1976), 9.

repudiate old style dissent, the concern for effectiveness and public identity as critics, and finally the consistent preoccupation with establishing a group consciousness for men like themselves.”¹⁶⁵ The new social role that these writers set out to create achieved James’s goal of “having its own class consciousness,” translating “Les Intellectuals” into English. It met with so much success that social critics would displace academic critics shortly after the turn of the century, becoming what might be called “intellectual critics,” or, better, “intellectual-critics” (the hyphen serving to unite two nouns). Consequently, Bourke concludes, “the history of modern American liberal theory after about 1910 can be written without attending to the academic community as the prime *source* of critical attitudes. In 1900 it could be said that the test for a liberal theory was the degree to which one approached the position of certain academics; within two decades the test had changed.”¹⁶⁶ Indeed, as C. Hartley Grattan would write in 1931, “The strictly academic mind has almost no standing in American intellectual life... Bluntly, the American intellectuals could find no value in their work if it did not have a measurable influence on the intelligent reading public. For this reason it is, and has always been, easy to sneer at the American intellectuals as super-journalists.”¹⁶⁷

Gertrude Buck’s “muddle of criticism” can be attributed to the waning—but still prevailing—authority of the genteel tradition. This tradition was one of the chief targets of

¹⁶⁵ Bourke, “The Social Critics and the End of American Innocence,” 65.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁶⁷ C. Hartley Grattan, “The Treason of the Intellectuals,” in *Behold America!*, ed. Samuel Schmalhausen (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1931), 144. Henry May wrote in 1956 that, “It is immediately apparent, as one turns through the literature about the twenties, that most of the striking contributions have not come from men we usually think of as historians, but rather from journalists, literary critics, and social scientists.” Henry F. May, “Shifting Perspectives on the 1920’s,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43, no. 3 (December 1956): 405, doi:10.2307/1893530.

the young intellectuals, who were convinced that younger American artists needed something more than aesthetic criticism to overcome its persistent influence. In “Traps for the Unwary,” published in *The Dial* in 1918, Bourne began by asking “What place is there to be for the younger American writers who have broken the ‘genteel’ tradition with a sudden violence that elicits angry cries of pain from the critics, so long regarded by the significant classes as guardians of our cultural faith?” As Bourne argued, “Both [philistines and puritans] are moralists before they are critics of literary art,” but the real problem was that the genteel tradition was still being “carried along by an up-to-date cultivated public—small perhaps, but growing—who are all the more dangerous because they are so hospitable. The would-be literary artist needs to be protected not so much from his enemies as from his friends.” Pointing to the example of Amy Lowell, who had just published *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, Bourne insisted that, “A new criticism has to be created to meet not only the work of the new artists but also the uncritical hospitality of current taste... the new critic must intervene between public and writer with an insistence on clearer and sharper outlines of appreciation by the one, and the attainment of a richer artistry by the other.” Bourne believed that obtaining this “absolutely contemporaneous criticism” would happen “when the artist himself has turned critic.”¹⁶⁸

Brooks, writing the previous year in *The Seven Arts*, had complained about the lack of any criticism of contemporary literature: “It is a curious fact that of the various minds now at work in the field of criticism in this country those who have been permitted

¹⁶⁸ Randolph Bourne, “Traps for the Unwary,” *The Dial* LXIV (March 28, 1918): 278–9. Arnold felt that the possibility of the “good critic and the good artist in the same person” was a utopian ideal. See Morton Dauwen Zabel, “The Condition of American Criticism: 1939,” *The English Journal* 28, no. 6 (June 1939): 419, doi:10.2307/806423.

to speak for the American people *ex cathedra* have never in any serious way occupied themselves with our own contemporary literature.” Brooks leveled his critique at both the older generation of critics, Babbitt and Paul Elmer More (another New Humanist), and the critics of the “middle generation,” including William Lyon Phelps and J. E. Springarn (both, broadly speaking, appreciative critics).¹⁶⁹ “Have they ever been at pains to grasp the contemporary American mind and its problems, to discover what the contemporary American mind is, and whether it is able to assimilate the whole culture of the world before it has formed any personal conception of what culture is?”¹⁷⁰ These critics were unable to connect “at any point” with contemporary creative activity because they ignored “the economic and psychological interpretations of life according to which literature is one of the manifestations of a society organic in all its parts.”¹⁷¹ In a similar vein, Bourne allegorized the critical environment that prevailed at the time in the “History of a Literary Radical,” published the same year. The situation in which his fictional character “Miro” found himself was intolerable because criticism of modern literature was virtually nonexistent. “As Miro looked around the American scene,” Bourne wrote, “he wondered where the critics were to come from.” It was not among the older critics that his protagonist would find them, but (in the actual context) among the young intellectuals: “He would have

¹⁶⁹ In his early criticism, Springarn advocated for what he called the “creative critic,” who could “identify himself with the genius evident in the work of art,” or, as William Van O’Connor put it, “those among the impressionists who were more concerned to re-create the work than to exhibit their own delicate sensibilities.” A follower of the Italian aesthetician Benedetto Croce, Springarn believed that criticism required “rigorous thought in aesthetics” and that judgment was “only possible to a man of taste.” The greatest need of American criticism, he wrote in “Scholarship and Criticism” (1922), was “a deeper sensibility, a more complete submission to the imaginative will of the artist, before attempting to rise above it into the realm of judgement.” O’Connor, *An Age of Criticism*, 65–66.

¹⁷⁰ Van Wyck Brooks, “Our Critics,” *The Seven Arts*, May 1917, 103; 105.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

to look for the critics among the young men who had an abounding sense of life, as well as a feeling for literary form. They would be men who had not been content to live on their cultural inheritance, but had gone out in the modern world and amassed a fresh fortune of their own.”¹⁷²

Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry*, took exception to Bourne’s “over-emphasis of the critic’s importance” in an editorial published in the May 1918 issue of the magazine. The critic might be important to the public, she wrote, but “he is not very important to the artist.” By “presenting his art to the world,” the little theaters and the little magazines were “doing more to supply the essential needs of the poet and the playwright than any amount of ‘the new criticism’ could.”¹⁷³ The poet’s only problem was “to get himself expressed in his art, and to get his art before his public.”¹⁷⁴ It appears that Bourne disagreed with Monroe not only about the critic’s function but about the poet’s public: it wasn’t, in his view, Aristotle’s “ideal reader,” but neither was it the general public—or even the readers of *Poetry*—that Monroe had in mind. “Poetry appears for the first time on our critical horizon,” Bourne observed, “as neither a refined dessert to be consumed when the day’s work is done, nor as a private hobby which the business man will deride if he hears about it, but as a sound and important activity of contemporary American life.”¹⁷⁵ If poetry had to appear “on our critical horizon” to be deemed a “sound and important activity of contemporary American life,” then the critic who considered its importance to be central rather than peripheral was the public that it mattered to and for. “Instead of fighting the

¹⁷² Philip Rahv, *Literature in America: An Anthology of Literary Criticism* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1957), 283.

¹⁷³ Harriet Monroe, “Mr. Bourne on Traps,” *Poetry* 12, no. 2 (May 1, 1918): 91-92.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁷⁵ Bourne, “Traps for the Unwary,” 278.

Philistine in the name of freedom, or fighting the vulgar iconoclast in the name of wholesome human notions, it might be better to write for one's own band of comprehenders," he wrote in "History of a Literary Radical," "Far better for the mind that aspired towards 'culture' to be told not to conform or to worship, but to search out its group, its own temperamental community of sentiment, and there deepen appreciations through sympathetic contact."¹⁷⁶

Accompanied by Brooks (who published a kind of sequel to Bourne's text in the next issue of *The Dial*), Bourne responded to Monroe's editorial, asserting that he had had no intention of "condemning the little theaters and little magazines, which, by providing a medium of publicity and experimentation, have done so much, as H. M. truly said, to stimulate the artistic imagination of the younger writers." Indeed, the new poetry and the little magazines were proof that "more careful and better oriented criticism" had arrived. It wasn't that *Poetry* had neglected criticism, the two critics wrote, "But by criticism we mean discussion of a larger scope."¹⁷⁷ The aesthetic criticism that was published in *Poetry* was more narrowly focused than what Brooks and Bourne were arguing for: "You can discuss poetry and a poetry movement solely as poetry—as a fine art, shut up in its own world, subject to its own rules and values; or you can examine it in relation to the larger movement of ideas and social movements and the peculiar intellectual and spiritual color of the time."¹⁷⁸ Treating the new poetry "entirely in terms of itself" was the "surest way to drive it into futility and empty verbalism": it would "go to seed" unless it was understood "as an expression of life, pregnant with possibilities." The importance of Lowell's new book

¹⁷⁶ Rahv, *Literature in America: An Anthology of Literary Criticism*, 284.

¹⁷⁷ Bourne and Brooks, "The Retort Courteous," 341-42.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 342.

wasn't the exposure it provided the "much-discussed" poets whose work it dealt with, but, rather, its "attempt to place them with reference to the American intellectual soil, and to the changing American attitudes towards beauty and the joy of life." She handled the poets "unsparingly, separating the false in their work from the true, and placing them in relation to the larger intellectual and artistic whole."¹⁷⁹ To be a "sound and important activity of contemporary American life," poetry required serious criticism that didn't focus exclusively on the work itself but placed it in relation to a larger social whole.

Bourne and Brooks were convinced that hospitality was "no longer enough" for the younger literary generation, whose work did not rank with "the imported work of our younger contemporaries." This "army of talent" needed "the demand, the spur, the suggestiveness" of a criticism aimed at "carrying the fresh and creative expression of the present towards a greater wisdom and clarity and ardor of life." The new poetry might be "sure enough of its ground," but because the public was getting aesthetic rather than social criticism, it was "still moving hazily in a mist of values and interpretations" and wanted "the new without the unsettling." As a result of the public's hospitality and the lack of social criticism, "many of the writers disturb us by somehow perversely refusing to broaden their imaginative and intellectual horizons."¹⁸⁰

Monroe could not let Bourne and Brooks have the last word on this topic. In a follow-up article titled "Aesthetic and Social Criticism," she conceded that critics might "legitimately indulge" in a "discussion of a larger scope" and examine the work "in relation to the larger movement of ideas and social movements and the peculiar intellectual and

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 342-43.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 343-44.

spiritual color of the time,” but insisted that, in the end, their discussion would “have to estimate values at last by a strictly aesthetic standard.” The poem or picture, she wrote, “will stand by its aesthetic adequacy in the triumphant expression of the vision in the artist’s soul.”¹⁸¹ Leaving aside the question of how the aesthetic adequacy of this vision might be decided, it should be noted that “aesthetic” and “social” criticism, despite their differences, were allied in their opposition to the moralism that was the hallmark of the criticism associated with the genteel tradition, whose influence would be felt into the 20s.¹⁸² Although it would be recast in the 30s (albeit in more pointed and political terms), the binary opposition between aesthetic and social criticism would remain more or less intact until the *Partisan* editors attempted to bridge—or, better, obviate—this divide.

Monroe was intent on maintaining the priority—and anteriority—of creative activity, which, in her view, didn’t depend on criticism for anything. Criticism’s function was to respond to a finished product rather than to pave the way for the work’s production. By contrast, Bourne and Brooks’s belief that criticism could, and should, play an active role in shaping “creative expression” was implicit in their assumption that the goal of criticism was to move that expression “towards a greater wisdom and clarity and ardor of life.” This was also the impetus behind their call for an “absolutely contemporaneous” criticism (not to mention their belief that it would be realized “when the artist himself has turned critic”). One reader of *Poetry*, who largely agreed with Monroe’s editorial, nevertheless supported the critics’ advocacy of contemporaneous criticism, writing that, “The only criticism that is of value to the artist and to his contemporaries is contemporaneous criticism, the kind that

¹⁸¹ Harriet Monroe, “Aesthetic and Social Criticism,” *Poetry* 13, no. 1 (October 1918): 41.

¹⁸² Tomsich, *A Genteel Endeavor: American Culture and Politics in the Gilded Age*, 4.

is perfectly able to navigate in an uncharted sea, take soundings, and proclaim new depths and new shores. We have too little of this in the United States; indeed, except in *Poetry* and the other ‘little magazines’ I don’t know where to look for it.” But, pivoting back to Bourne and Brooks, she asked, “Why should the critics cry out continually upon the need of this criticism instead of giving it to us?”¹⁸³ This was certainly a fair question to ask in Bourne’s case (who had, after all, written the initial essay). What Bourne was calling for was a sort of hybrid literary-social or social-literary criticism, which would actually have been *narrower* in scope than the social criticism that he himself practiced, since it would have focused more specifically on the cultural sphere.¹⁸⁴

Babbitt’s “keen-sighted few” were unidentified—and unidentifiable—since they represented Aristotle’s ideal reader; Bourne’s “band of comprehenders,” on the other hand, were the contemporaries, or “contemporaneous critics,” who would, in Barthes’s phrase, effect a “construction of the intelligibility of [their] time.” However, with the dissolution of *The Seven Arts*, which lasted only a year (it ceased publication in 1917), Bourne’s “comprehenders” were disbanded before the group managed to fully coalesce (Bourne himself died about nine months after the exchange with Monroe). The “discussion of a larger scope” that Brooks and Bourne had called for would be realized in the cultural criticism that evolved from social criticism, coming into its own in the 30s. In the meantime, aesthetic and social criticism would remain at opposite ends of the critical spectrum. I want to turn now to the little magazines of the 20s and 30s. For the most part,

¹⁸³ A. C. H., “Of Puritans, Philistines and Pessimists,” *Poetry* 12, no. 4 (July 1918): 229.

¹⁸⁴ William Van O’Connor writes, “Had he lived, Brooks believes, Bourne would have turned from politics and social concerns to a more strictly literary criticism.” Bourne died in 1918. O’Connor, *An Age of Criticism*, 77.

the little magazines of the 20s focused on avant-garde literature, but there were a couple that featured criticism.

Little Magazines

During the late nineteenth century, I've noted, the quality magazines published original fiction and poetry, but, as advanced literature became increasingly experimental in the 1910s and 1920s, this responsibility increasingly fell to the little magazines—or, more accurately, the littles were started to serve this function, since they didn't simply make up for the lack of creative writing in the large-circulation magazines but were instead where experimental writing that would never have been considered for publication anywhere else appeared. "In its finest hour," wrote one observer about *The Little Review*, "it serialized *Ulysses* for three years, until the editors were arrested for publishing 'obscene literature.'"¹⁸⁵ Producing almost entirely for other producers, the littles of the 20s (the so-called "golden age" of the little magazine), including *Poetry*, *Broom*, *Secession*, *The Others*, *The Double Dealer*, and *The Little Review*, to name just a few, were the first to publish writers like Yeats, Hart Crane, Williams, Dreiser, Cocteau, Apollinaire, and Hemingway. As William Troy wrote in 1930, "Beginning as the lonely gesture of a few discontented individuals or factions, the little magazine rapidly became the ordinary mode of communication for the revived spirit of literary reform."¹⁸⁶

Because their primary purpose was to provide opportunities for unknown, avant-garde writers to publish, criticism remained somewhat marginalized in these publications.

¹⁸⁵ Warner Berthoff, "Review of *The Little Review Anthology* by Margaret Anderson," *The New England Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (June 1953): 270, doi:10.2307/362462.

¹⁸⁶ William Troy, "The Story of the Little Magazines," *Bookman* LXXI (February 1930): 657.

Moreover, there was still very little criticism of contemporary literature. “The writers who have recently been deploring ‘the age of criticism,’” wrote Robie Macauley in the preface to the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of *Kenyon Review*, “ought to remember that there was very little American criticism of any value before the 1930s. We were almost totally lacking in what Edmund Wilson described as the ‘interest of the intelligence fully awakened to the implications of what the artist is doing, that is to say, to his responsibility.’”¹⁸⁷ Reminiscing about his own experience, the literary critic René Wellek concurred: “[T]he contrast between the Princeton of 1927-8, where even eminent scholars seemed hardly aware of the issues of criticism, and the Yale of 1962, where criticism and its problems are our daily bread and tribulation, is striking, and such an impression can easily be substantiated by a similar contrast between *The American Mercury* of 1927... and the 1962 quarterlies: *The Kenyon*, *The Hudson*, *The Sewanee*, *Criticism*, etc.”¹⁸⁸

In a 1928 article that was later anthologized with the title “The Critic Who Does Not Exist,” Wilson argued that the United States didn’t simply lack “a serious literary criticism”; rather, the “literary atmosphere” was actually a “non-conductor of criticism.” A genuine literary criticism should not merely “tell us whether the reviewer ‘let out a whoop’ for the book or threw it out the window,” Wilson complained, arguing that historians reviewed new books on history and physicists reviewed new books on physics, but new books of literature and poetry were given to “almost any well-intentioned (and not even necessarily literate) person who happens to present himself; and this person then describes

¹⁸⁷ McCauley, *The Little Magazine in America*, 73.

¹⁸⁸ René Wellek, “Philosophy and Postwar American Criticism,” *Comparative Literature Studies*, 1963, 1-2.

in a review his emotions upon reading the book.”¹⁸⁹ The distinction Wilson was making between the “reviewer” (or “literary journalist”) and the “critic” would be the focus of a series of articles published in *The Nation* a few years later, but Wilson was convinced that there had not been a single American critic who “regularly occupied himself in any authoritative way with contemporary literature” since the death of Stuart P. Sherman. (The only New Humanist who dealt with contemporary literature, Sherman had broken with this group several years before he died in 1926.)¹⁹⁰

It wasn’t judgment per se, but critical judgment—or simply criticality—that Wilson was after (he was not interested in the kind of critical standards that Babbitt had called for). “A work of art,” he wrote, “is not a technique, or a set of ideas, or even a combination of both, but I am strongly disposed to believe that our literature would benefit by a genuine literary criticism which should deal expertly with art and ideas.”¹⁹¹ It was unfortunate that, despite the “immense amount of literary journalism” that was being published in New York, writers like Sherwood Anderson and Eugene O’Neill were working “in almost complete intellectual isolation.” They were receiving “but little intelligent criticism and developing, in their solitary labors, little capacity for supplying it themselves.”¹⁹² What Wilson was arguing for was something akin to Bourne’s “contemporaneous critic,” or what Greenberg, quoting Matthew Arnold, would refer to three years later as a “critical atmosphere.”¹⁹³ The “little intelligent criticism” that these writers were receiving was published in *The New Republic* (where Wilson served as associate editor), *The Nation*,

¹⁸⁹ Wilson, *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties*, 369-70.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 371.

¹⁹¹ Wilson, “Literary Politics,” 102.

¹⁹² Wilson, *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties*, 370.

¹⁹³ Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928-1943*, 37.

and a few little magazines that featured criticism: *The Dial*, *The Hound & Horn*, and *The Symposium*.

Originally subtitled a Harvard Miscellany, *The Hound & Horn* was founded in 1927 by Lincoln Kirstein, a Harvard undergraduate. A prototype of the literary reviews that rose to prominence in the 40s, it published many of the writers who had been associated in the early 20s with *The Fugitive* (the assumption, as one observer had it, was that they were “fleeing from, or attacking, the shackles of sentimental Southern poetry of their day”), a little magazine founded in Nashville by a group of poets that included John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren, who met regularly to read and discuss poetry.¹⁹⁴ Yvor Winters and R. P. Blackmur (an autodidact who worked in a bookstore in Cambridge) were frequent contributors to *The Hound & Horn* and served as assistant editors. Together with *The Dial*, it set the critical standard of the 20s.

The Dial, whose circulation peaked at 30,000 in 1923, didn’t really qualify as a little magazine, although this wasn’t just because of its size. As one observer wrote, it wasn’t so much a little magazine as “a magazine which did not seek mass circulation.”¹⁹⁵ *The Dial’s* historical importance is largely due to its pairing of the ethos of a little magazine with an audience that was closer in size—and probably constitution—to that of *The Nation* or *The New Republic*. By definition, little magazines appeal almost exclusively to initiates, but, as Louis D. Rubin, Jr. has argued, *The Dial*, particularly before Marianne Moore became editor in 1925, “was much more of an attempt than was a magazine such as the *Partisan*

¹⁹⁴ Frederick John Hoffman, Charles A. Allen, and Carolyn F. Ulrich, *The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 114 ff.; 120.

¹⁹⁵ Richard S. Kennedy, “Review of *Years of Transition: The Dial 1912-1920* by Nicholas Joost,” *The New England Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (September 1968): 476, doi:10.2307/364005.

Review to bridge the widening gap, commented on by a number of *The Dial's* contributors in their writings, between the specialist in the arts and the general reader.”¹⁹⁶ Preparing to publish *The Waste Land* in the November 1922 issue—described retrospectively by William Carlos Williams as an event that “wiped out our world as if an atomic bomb had been dropped on it”—the editors commissioned an essay to accompany it.¹⁹⁷ More significantly, they “tried to find a critic whose opinion would help readers to decide in its favor. They wanted a man of reputation who would write a notice: serious criticism would come later.”¹⁹⁸ This would not have been necessary, much less desirable, if it had been published in a more “orthodox” little magazine—in which case its publication wouldn’t have had the same impact. As one commentator put it, “Had the poem, unattended by [Edmund] Wilson’s essay... appeared in *The Little Review* or *Poetry*, its effect would doubtless have been neither more nor less stunning than in London during October when it came out in the first number of *Criterion*.”¹⁹⁹

In their 1927 book *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, Robert Graves and Laura Riding echoed the *Dial* editors’ sentiments regarding the critic’s function, distinguishing between modern poetry, which did not need to be taken seriously, and modernist poetry, which did:

Poetry, like fashions in clothes, has to be ‘accepted’ before the man in the street will patronize it. Next to the permanently ‘accepted’ literature, the plain reader places literature of dead movements of his own time, literature that does not have to be accepted. ‘Modern’ poetry means to him poetry that will pass; he has a good-humored tolerance of it because he does not have to take it seriously. ‘Modernist’ poetry is his way of describing the

¹⁹⁶ Louis D. Rubin, Jr., “Several Literary Magazines,” *The Sewanee Review* 73, no. 2 (Spring 1965): 11.

¹⁹⁷ William Wasserstrom, “TS Eliot and ‘The Dial,’” *The Sewanee Review* 70, no. 1 (Winter 1962): 82.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

contemporary poetry that perplexes him and that he is obliged to take seriously without knowing whether it is to be accepted or not.²⁰⁰

While the “plain reader” knew how to respond to “permanently accepted” literature, modern poetry, and the “dead movements of his own time” (the reference here is to Imagism and Georgianism), the appropriate response to modernist poetry was less clear. But if the plain reader lacked the ability to form an opinion about this poetry, how was it possible to determine if a particular poem was acceptable? As Graves and Riding went on to say, “The cautiousness of the plain reader’s opinion creates an intermediary stage between himself and this poetry: the literary critic.”²⁰¹

Modernist poetry required the critic, made this role necessary. For the plain reader, however, it was the legitimizing role rather than the critical function of the critic that mattered. “Serious criticism” would not only “come later,” it would be published elsewhere. Graves and Riding identified the “unity between form and subject-matter” as the central problem of modernist poetry, arguing that *The Waste Land* should be considered a short poem (since most modernist poems were short) in spite of its 433 lines because its form and subject matter were “structurally identical.”²⁰² The trend, they argued, was “toward treating poetry like a very sensitive substance which succeeds better when allowed to crystalize by itself than when put into prepared moulds,” since poetry was “groping for some principle of self-determination to be applied to the making of the poem—not lack of government, but government from within.”²⁰³ And Clifton Fadiman, writing in 1933,

²⁰⁰ Laura Riding Jackson and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1927), 102.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 57–58.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 47.

defined what he called “traditional modernism” as “any kind of writing which is in active *formal* or *technical* or *emotional* rebellion against what may be vaguely termed the literary norm... those who want to break up the old forms and substitute new ones.”²⁰⁴ As *The Dial*'s editors understood it, their task was simply to introduce modernist literature to both American practitioners and a (relatively) general audience. Writing in the late 20s, they concluded that, “Our mission was accomplished; contemporary art had ‘arrived.’”²⁰⁵ Its introduction made, modernist literature needed to be explicated and its value defended, giving rise to what would be called the “age of criticism.”

When little magazines began to reappear in the mid-30s (*The Dial* and *The Hound & Horn* ceased publication in 1929 and 1934 respectively), their focus shifted from literature to literary criticism—the result, also, of the increasingly urgent question of the social role of writers and critics. Of the leftist journals founded by the various John Reed Clubs—*Anvil* (which merged with *Partisan* in February 1936), *Blast*, *Cauldron*, *Left Front*, and *Dynamo*, among others—*Partisan* had the most significant impact and the longest run. By the early 40s, *Partisan* and *The Kenyon Review*, edited by John Crowe Ransom, occupied the left- and right-wing poles, respectively, of the field of literary criticism.²⁰⁶ The littles of the 30s represented a political position, even, or especially, when they didn't

²⁰⁴ Clifton Fadiman, “Stray Thoughts on Literary Modernism,” *Arts and Decoration* XL, no. 2 (December 1933): 29.

²⁰⁵ Berthoff, “Review of *The Little Review Anthology* by Margaret Anderson,” 270.

²⁰⁶ *New Masses* changed from a monthly to a weekly publication in 1934 (the year *Partisan* was launched). Mike Gold took over as editor in June 1928, writing in his inaugural editorial, “Less literature and more life is to be our slogan. An effort will be made to enlist the great submerged unpublished voices of America.” According to one observer, “From June 1928 on, the *New Masses* was dedicated almost exclusively to ‘the world of revolutionary labor,’ and was no longer split by the conflict of generations or the division between ‘art’ and ‘politics’ which had plagued *The Masses* and *The Liberator*.” In other words, it consolidated its position on proletariat literature. See David Peck, “‘The Tradition of American Revolutionary Literature’: The Monthly *New Masses*, 1926-1933,” *Science & Society* 42, no. 4 (Winter, 1979/1978): 389.

declare one: *Kenyon* might have been apolitical (and would have been considered reactionary for that reason alone), but Ransom's earlier connection with the ultra-conservative Fugitive group and Agrarian politics contributed to the journal's position within the critical field. That this field was understood to be political as much as literary is not entirely attributable to the historical context; it was also a consequence of the fact that literary criticism was still assumed to include a philosophical or political dimension—not an exclusively literary one.

Kenyon Review: Literature and the Professors

When Ransom started *The Kenyon Review* in 1939, his purpose, as Gordon Hutner writes, was “nothing less than to create a journal where literature and literary criticism would be treated with the same seriousness as politics or philosophy, not as an adjunct to such inquiries.”²⁰⁷ While *Partisan's* brief was to combine radical art and politics, Ransom resisted calls by *Kenyon's* trustees and president, Gordon Chalmers, for a general periodical like *The Yale Review*. Writing to Chalmers in early 1938, Ransom argued instead for a review devoted to arts and letters whose emphasis would be criticism: “In no field is there better room for a new periodical... There are not Reviews enough to take care of the good literary critics who have emerged in this and the previous decade.” A few months later, in a report on “the present state of our periodical project,” Ransom wrote, “At present there is nothing in America published under just this classification; but we would be a successor to several very brilliant periodicals which used to flourish in this field:

²⁰⁷ Gordon Hutner, “Reviewing America: John Crowe Ransom’s *Kenyon Review*,” *American Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (March 1992): 102, doi:10.2307/2713182.

Seven Arts, The Dial, Hound and Horn.”²⁰⁸ Although it would be similar to these publications in some respects, what Ransom had in mind was novel, at least in the U.S., not because it would be exclusively literary but because criticism would be foregrounded. In the end, Ransom got his way for a purely practical reason: the small liberal arts college could not afford to publish a 200-page review (the size of both the *Yale* and *Southern Reviews*). At half that size, *The Kenyon Review* would necessarily have to limit its scope.

Ransom wrote that he foresaw “so much future for critical studies that my own are just beginning; it’s the biggest field that could possibly be found for systematic study, almost a virgin field.”²⁰⁹ He wanted Allen Tate, a former student, as co-editor of the magazine, pointing out to him in a letter that, “we could really found criticism if we got together on it.”²¹⁰ Ransom wasn’t referring to criticism per se but to criticism of *literature as literature* (as opposed to criticism that understood literature to be a reflection of social, political, or philosophical values). The critics of the 20s would have been hard-pressed to define literary value as such; literature didn’t lack intrinsic value, but its critical value—a function of moral value (New Humanism) or social value (the quasi-socialist criticism of Brooks and Bourne)—wasn’t irreducible. By the late 30s, New Humanism, which rose to prominence in the 20s, no longer dominated the field and the question of what constituted a proletarian literature had lost its urgency. Established just before the war broke out when even the most committed leftists were finding it increasingly difficult to defend Stalinism, *Kenyon* rode the wave of leftist political disillusionment that prevailed in the 40s.

²⁰⁸ Marian Janssen, *The Kenyon Review, 1939-1970: A Critical History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 21-22.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

Although *Kenyon* and *Partisan* were typically considered to be at least antithetical if not adversarial, there were close ties between some of the New York Intellectuals and the New Critics, whom *Kenyon* was taken to represent. Had Ransom succeeded in getting either of his top choices as co-editor, *Kenyon* might have ended up being more insular—and less influential. Again for financial reasons, the journal was unable to engage either Tate or Robert Penn Warren, Ransom’s second choice. Chalmers chose Philip Blair Rice, a leftist whose connection with Lionel Trilling brought other New York Intellectuals into the *Kenyon* fold. In spite of his dislike of Marxist critics—whom he once compared to “the bull in the china shop, the swine that eats the pearls; so simplified is their strategy for art”—Ransom recognized the “genius” of Trilling, Delmore Schwartz, and Philip Rahv (who was also a close friend of Tate’s).²¹¹ And, although *Kenyon* published the writers most commonly associated with New Criticism (Yvor Winters, William Empson, R. P. Blackmur, etc.), the journal’s critical agenda was, I would argue, the promotion of a new criticism—not New Criticism. As Ransom wrote, “We should not wish to be construed as representing some ‘school’ or theory of literature or art, unless a very broad one. Within the limits of our taste we take the best writing we can find, or commission writing from the best writers we can approach.”²¹² Ransom wasn’t interested in starting a critical movement (unless “movement” is taken literally to mean a shift from outside to inside the university); he was interested in establishing a discipline that addressed literature as literature, however that might be understood. While there’s ample evidence that the “best writers” tended to be New Critics, the journal also published writers like Kenneth Burke and Edmund

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 40.

Wilson in addition to the New York Intellectuals. Ransom was certainly responsible for the consolidation of New Criticism, but not (or not entirely) for its institutionalization.

Because of their aversion to ideological orthodoxy, the *Partisan* editors, for their part, weren't deterred from publishing the *Kenyon* critics or from publishing in *Kenyon* themselves. Writing in the inaugural editorial of the new *Partisan*, they pledged that, "Conformity to a given social ideology, or to a prescribed attitude or technique, will not be asked of our writers."²¹³ More fundamentally, the reviews' shared commitment to the Pound/Eliot tradition of modernist literature (as Graves and Riding defined it) outweighed their divergent politics. Committed leftists, the editors of *Partisan* were equally committed to modernist literature and, although the magazine might have had a greater political affinity with the *New Masses* (particularly when it was published by the John Reed Club), it was more closely aligned aesthetically and theoretically with *Kenyon*.

Recruited by the newly appointed president of Kenyon College to start a literary journal, Ransom left a teaching position at Vanderbilt in part because he was being pressured to finish his dissertation, which he "refused to pursue on principle" because "a true understanding of literature had nothing to do with the mainly biographical and bibliographical emphases that were the doctorate's usual basis."²¹⁴ (Wellek, writing in 1963, maintained that this was still the case: "In its epistemological assumptions much literary scholarship and discussion is still positivistic, relying on a naïve precritical conception of 'fact' and assuming a simple mechanistic concept of cause in biographical circumstances,

²¹³ "Editorial Statement," *Partisan Review* IV, no. 1 (December 1937): 4.

²¹⁴ Janssen, *The Kenyon Review, 1939-1970*, 15.

literary influences and social and historical backgrounds.”²¹⁵) There was a clear division—of responsibility if not, formally, of labor—between scholars and critics: literary history, which was what counted as scholarship, was the province of the academy; criticism was both outside and, according to convention, after literary history.

In his contribution to a 1940 *Kenyon* symposium titled “Literature and the Professors,” Arthur Mizener used a specific example, *The Art and Life of William Shakespeare*, recently published by one “Professor Spencer,” a “distinguished professor of English Literature at Johns Hopkins University,” to demonstrate the inability of literary scholarship to deal seriously with poetry. Because scholars took “the [fixed] value of the literature they are working over” for granted, criticism was at the very least unnecessary. Mizener insisted, however, that despite the “manifest distrust of criticism among scholars,” they couldn’t deny its importance given that “The history of literature is itself a series of critical judgments, and all the vast accumulation of texts, biographies, monographs and learned articles rests on the judgment that the authors they are about are important.”²¹⁶ The point of the author’s claim that his book was “first and foremost a sober compilation and selection from a large body of fact and inference” was, Mizener argued, to establish that the “sober business of fact” took precedence over “the intoxicated act of criticism.”²¹⁷

The real problem with “Professor Spencer’s” approach was that it limited the inferences that could be made about meaning: “The most obvious kind of meaning a play can have for him is a biographical meaning.” That a great play might be a kind of “statement of the world in which every word and every action has its meaningful part” was

²¹⁵ Wellek, “Philosophy and Postwar American Criticism,” 5.

²¹⁶ Arthur Mizener, “Scholars as Critics,” *The Kenyon Review* 2, no. 4 (Autumn 1940): 414.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 415.

not even within the realm of possibility for Spencer.²¹⁸ However, his failure to reach any serious conclusions about Shakespeare's plays wasn't the result of any personal shortcoming but was instead a consequence of "the conception of the literary scholar's function which dominates the learned profession and with it Professor Spencer."²¹⁹

Mizener's conclusion is worth quoting in full, since it rehearses not only the functions but the respective purviews—and the problems posed by them—of critics and scholars. He writes:

The vast majority of scholars are devoting their attention to the accumulation of facts about books and authors and taking for granted the end for which these facts ought to be accumulated. They habitually look on the critical activity which concerns itself with that end as at best pleasantly idle and at worst dangerous. Their very considerable ability is being devoted rather to the very ingenious, immensely complicated, pseudo-scientific game of scholarship in the conventional sense. Meanwhile the serious evaluation of literature is carried on outside our universities by talented amateurs who are, as no one is more acutely aware than they, without adequate learning. This is not a very reasonable state of affairs.²²⁰

It was this unreasonable state of affairs that *Kenyon* intended to address.

Ransom's overall objective, outlined in an essay published in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* in 1937, was, as he told Tate, to "found criticism," by which he meant that criticism should "receive its own charter of rights and function independently."²²¹ Ransom alleged that, although there were many critics who might explain what the business of criticism was, they were amateurs who "have not been trained to criticism so much as they have simply undertaken a job for which no specific qualifications were required." Of the "trained performers" who appeared to have some of the "competence" that the critic needed, it was

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 419.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 422.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ Ransom, *The World's Body*, 237.

the university professor who was “the very professional we need to take charge of the critical activity”; it was, Ransom maintained, his “business.” Admitting that it might be distasteful to put it this way, he argued for something like “Criticism, Inc., or Criticism, Ltd.”: in lieu of occasional criticism by amateurs, the enterprise needed to be “taken in hand by professionals.” And, when Ransom emphasized that it needed to become more scientific, he meant that it should be “developed by the collective and sustained effort of learned persons—which means that its proper seat is in the universities.” It didn’t need to be more *like* science—it would “never be a very exact science, or even a nearly exact one”—it needed to be more systematic. Whether disciplines like criticism (or psychology, sociology, or even economics) were called sciences or just “systematic studies,” the point was that “the total effort of each to be effective must be consolidated and kept going.”²²²

Citing a recent article by Ronald Crane titled “History versus Criticism in the University Study of Literature,” which advocated for a shift to the critical, Ransom wrote, “To me this means, simply: the students of the future must be permitted to study literature, and not merely about literature.”²²³ New Humanist critics and more recently “the Leftists” had made some inroads in redirecting the course of literary studies, but these were merely diversions, since their aims were moral or ethical, whereas “Criticism is the attempt to define and enjoy the aesthetic or characteristic values of literature.” English professors routinely acknowledged that the “ultimate purpose of graduate research in English literature” was to “lay the foundations of literary criticism,” only to declare in the next breath that criticism was something that anybody could do. Ransom begged to differ,

²²² Ibid., 228–29.

²²³ Ibid., 230.

arguing that “the more eminent (as historical scholar) the professor of English, the less apt he is to be able to write decent criticism, unless it is about another professor’s work of historical scholarship, in which case it is not literary criticism.”²²⁴ Asking rhetorically what criticism was, Ransom wrote that it was easier to say what it was not, adding a list of “nots” to Crane’s finding that it was not historical scholarship or Neo-Humanism.

Ransom’s somewhat speculative attempt to distinguish poetry from prose was, he said, an attempt to start the discussion. “Poetry distinguishes itself from prose on the technical side by the devices which are, precisely, its means of escaping from prose. Something is continually being killed by prose which the poet wants to preserve.” The poem is “nothing short of a desperate ontological or metaphysical maneuver” and the poet “perpetuates in his poem an order of existence which in actual life is constantly crumbling beneath his touch. His poem celebrates the object which is real, individual, and qualitatively infinite.”²²⁵ Criticism needed to be able to deal with the object of poetry, an order of existence toward which it was always moving, always asymptotically. “Criticism, Inc.” was not quite a manifesto, but it was as close as Ransom would come to writing one.

Ransom was in a unique position: he had rejected academic authority and standards (on the basis that they weren’t rigorous enough), but had managed to retain a position—a powerful one with a platform—within the academy. (It comes as no surprise that it wasn’t an academic but, rather, a practitioner, Robert Frost, who recommended him for the job.²²⁶) He wasn’t “giving up” anything by leaving Vanderbilt because he saw no value in either the

²²⁴ Ibid., 232.

²²⁵ Ibid., 237–38.

²²⁶ William E. Cain, “Review of *The Kenyon Review 1939-1970: A Critical History* by Marian Janssen,” *American Literature* 62, no. 3 (September 1990): 521, doi:10.2307/2926762.

means or the end of the academy's (critical) pursuits. While the move to *Kenyon* might have consigned him to oblivion under different circumstances, founding *Kenyon* allowed him to challenge the academy from the only position that counted. Moreover, had he chosen validation by the academy, his position would have been compromised, if not untenable. Academic legitimation only mattered if the academy changed its standards—to his.

New Criticism—or *Kenyon* insofar as it functioned as the site of New Criticism—is a textbook example of position-taking within the field of cultural production as Bourdieu theorized it. Ransom had no intention of offering an *alternative* to the reigning critical models—Marxism and New Humanism—or to the academy's biographical monograph; instead, the journal was positioned against the extra-literary concerns of the one and the lack of rigor of the other, with at least the implicit goal of calling their legitimacy into question (if not displacing them). It wasn't that he considered these methodologies to be mutually exclusive; he simply didn't think anything other than criticism of literature as literature qualified as criticism. By the 40s, New Criticism would dominate the literary critical field that had begun to emerge with the challenge to New Humanism in the late 20s and the subsequent position-takings of the "leftists" and the *Partisan* critics.

The Kenyon Review, with Ransom as editor, turned out to be a kind of crux of criticism. The journal provided the ideal position from which to launch a campaign for "Criticism, Inc.": occupying a liminal space between scholarship and criticism as it was practiced, it allowed Ransom to operate inside the academy as an outsider, to challenge the center without remaining marginalized. While scholarship didn't depend on criticism for

its authority, the link between them was recognized by the academy, which meant that Ransom's disciplinary challenge could not simply be dismissed. What Ransom forced the academy to confront was the fact that critical judgment was integral to scholarship.

The truly remarkable nature of Ransom's challenge is illustrated by the fate of several other New Critics who attempted critiques of the academy from positions within it. Tate, for example, lost his job at Princeton after delivering a contentious lecture admonishing the literary profession for burying literature under "a mass of biographical details." In his lecture, delivered in the spring of 1940 to the English Club, he took the historical scholar to task for abdicating the "moral responsibility" to judge contemporary literature based on the erroneous belief that "we cannot judge the literature of our time because we do not know whether the future will approve of it."²²⁷ If History had decided the greatness of past works and we had to wait for it to do the same—or not—for contemporary works, who, he wanted to know, was History? (This was the "ratification by the verdict of posterity" that Babbitt espoused.)

Citing the corrective to late-nineteenth-century criticism that New Humanism represented, he maintained that Babbitt "saw on the one hand the ignorant journalist critics, 'decadent romantics,' for whom intensity of feeling was the sole critical standard; and on the other hand the historical scholars, who had no critical standard at all but who amassed irrelevant information." Unfortunately, Tate argued, scholarship was still mired in information: "It was—and still is—a situation in which it is virtually impossible for a young

²²⁷ Allen Tate, "Miss Emily and the Bibliographer," *The American Scholar* 9, no. 4 (Autumn 1940): 452.

man to get a critical, literary education.”²²⁸ “Because the literary scholar in his monistic naturalism cannot discern the objectivity of the forms of literature,” he went on to say to a roomful of literary scholars, “he can only apply to literature certain abstractions which he derives, two stages removed, from the naturalistic sciences; that is to say he gets these abstractions from the historians who got them from the scientists.”²²⁹ Implying that these scholars not only relied on a borrowed methodology but did so because they were unable to identify the proper object of their study didn’t go over very well and, as a result, Tate’s conclusion—that “the formal qualities of a poem are the focus of the specifically critical judgment because they partake of an objectivity that the subject matter, abstracted from the form, wholly lacks”—wasn’t received in the spirit in which it was offered.²³⁰ Tate might have assumed that providing a solution to the problem would mitigate the effect of its exposure, but, if that was the case, he overestimated his audience’s tolerance for candor. The faculty found a much simpler solution to the problem: they dismissed it—and Tate.

Similarly, at Louisiana State University, where Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren were co-editors of *The Southern Review*, a power struggle within the English department led to the magazine’s demise and Warren’s departure in 1942. Brooks and Warren had come to LSU from Vanderbilt, where Warren had been the youngest member of the Fugitive group (he was only sixteen when he joined). Brooks, in particular, took an activist role in trying to reform LSU now that it was no longer under Huey Long’s thumb. Leading a group called the Nineteen, he proposed a seven-point program to upgrade academic standards, which was countered by a petition signed by 160 members of

²²⁸ Ibid., 455.

²²⁹ Ibid., 458.

²³⁰ Ibid., 456.

the faculty defending the status quo. Trying a different tack, Brooks and Warren attempted to influence the selection of the university's new president by appealing to the chairman of the board of supervisors, who responded by requesting that they consider some of his wife's poems for *Southern Review*. It was not a good sign when the first act of the new president, who turned out to be a retired army corps commander named Campbell Hodges, was to abolish the faculty senate.²³¹ Six months later, Hodges turned the question of the disposition of the magazine over to a group of deans whose "large majority did not value what had been considered throughout Letters... the jeweled medallion on the buckle of the Bible belt located in a province of rustics, mystics, planters, Babbitts, Gantrys, and jelly beans," as one writer put it.²³² With the deans' assurance that the magazine had to go, Hodges scrapped it under the pretense of having to economize because of the war.

While it's clear that the academy would not tolerate speech that directly challenged the status quo, Kenyon occupied a marginal position within it (located far from the center of power, in Gambier, Ohio, it had all of 300 students when Ransom arrived), which meant that *Kenyon's* polemics might have amounted to nothing more than a voice in the wilderness. As long as criticism (in both senses of the term) remained within the space of the journal, it seems, it wasn't a threat. From the start, Ransom took advantage of his outsider status, using *Kenyon* as a platform for dissent. In response to the publication of Tate's lecture in the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, Ransom defended Tate's argument, writing, "The official academic point of view is that all the literature has been written, and is

²³¹ A. J. Montesi, "The Southern Review (1935-1942)," *Chicago Review* 16, no. 4 (1964): 202, doi:10.2307/25293814.

²³² Harold B. McSween, "Cleanth Brooks, LSU, and the 'Southern Review,'" *The Sewanee Review* 104, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 280.

now a branch of history. If a poem is only an instance of its history, the young writer is not going to find out how to study the poem.”²³³ Tate’s remarks having helped to “crystallize some editorial intentions,” Ransom announced that *Kenyon* would collaborate with *Southern Review* on a symposium titled “Literature and the Professors.” “The combined essays,” he wrote, “should have a more formidable effect than that of those single studies that find publication now and then, and here and there.”²³⁴ Of the five papers published in the Autumn 1940 number, three of them—Trilling’s, Brooks’s, and Mizener’s—argued for a more “reasonable state of affairs,” to use Mizener’s characterization, or as Trilling put it, “[I]f literature and the teaching of it are to justify themselves *as themselves* and not as handmaids of other disciplines, and if they are to have their proper influence, those who study and those who teach must have as the common element of their various methods the knowledge of what literature is.”²³⁵ *Kenyon*’s immediate and overwhelming success not only helped establish criticism’s seriousness, it required the academy to take notice. And when it did, it ended up co-opting rather than opposing the new criticism, codifying it to the point where Ransom himself began to find it suspect.²³⁶

²³³ John Crowe Ransom, “Mr. Tate and the Professors,” *The Kenyon Review* 2, no. 3 (Summer 1940): 349.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 350.

²³⁵ Lionel Trilling, “Literature and Power,” *The Kenyon Review* 2, no. 4 (Autumn 1940): 442.

²³⁶ Ransom observed in 1948 that “New Critical ‘stock’ was low... and a reevaluation was in order.” A year later, Cleanth Brooks also called for a “general stock-taking,” adding that the New Critical era “has come to fruition, or has arrived at a turning point, or, as some writers hint, has now exhausted its energies.” William E. Cain, “The Institutionalization of the New Criticism,” *MLN* 97, no. 5 (December 1982): 1101, doi:10.2307/2905979.

Partisan Review: "A magazine is a form of criticism"

On the right, *Kenyon* pitted the professional against the academic and the amateur; on the left, *Partisan* countered the "leftist" and the amateur with the revolutionary (Marxian) critic. Amateurism might have been a common target, but it was conceived differently by the *Partisan* editors. The journals' principal point of convergence was their shared belief that T. S. Eliot was, as Harvey Teres put it, "the critic to be reckoned with."²³⁷ Eliot was both forerunner and contemporary, inspiration and cautionary tale, but, most crucially, he was the model of a poet who was an equally important critic and editor. He was, in a word, the artistic and critical touchstone of both magazines. This presented no major ideological obstacles for Ransom and the new critics, but the *Partisan* editors had to make a case for their allegiance: defending vanguard literature was problematic enough, but advocating for Eliot's criticism—even the early criticism—in the mid-30s required a disclaimer at the very least.

The *Partisan* editors didn't delay in (over)stating the equivocal nature of their position on Eliot as they began to lay out the magazine's critical agenda. In the second issue of the original magazine, published in the spring of 1934, Wallace Phelps (William Phillips) began a review of Eliot's latest output, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* and *After Strange Gods*, with a quotation from the latter, a volume of three lectures delivered at the University of Virginia: "And reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable."²³⁸ The historical specificity of this observation would only have been compounded for the New York Intellectuals, the group

²³⁷ Harvey Teres, "Remaking Marxist Criticism: *Partisan Review's* Eliotic Leftism, 1934-1936," *American Literature* 64, no. 1 (March 1992): 130, doi:10.2307/2927492.

²³⁸ Wallace Phelps, "Eliot Takes His Stand," *Partisan Review* I, no. 2 (May 1934): 52.

of predominantly Jewish writers that made up *Partisan's* constituency. Acknowledging the large following that Eliot's early criticism had garnered, Phelps linked the poet's increasingly reactionary politics to a pronounced decline in his critical faculties in an effort, it would seem, to isolate the earlier criticism from the recent work: "[T]his influence is rapidly thinning down," Phelps writes, "as the expansions of his views in his later writing shows a shocking confusion on fundamental questions, an evasion of the major critical problems of our time, and an ever more ecstatic espousal of the church, the state, an aristocracy of intellect, racial purity." Not mincing words, he concluded, "Only the blind would hesitate to call Eliot a fascist."²³⁹ He admitted to some salvageable aspects of *The Use of Poetry*—Eliot's "properly point[ing] out the superiority of Dryden... over Johnson, and of Wordsworth and Coleridge over Arnold" and his apparent recognition that "one of the most important questions in criticism is the relation of art to 'life'"—but was otherwise compelled to demonstrate Eliot's wrong-headedness, both critically and ideologically, concluding, ultimately, that "Eliot is rubbing shoulders with every myth and dogma which is used by capitalism to maintain itself."²⁴⁰

And yet, neither his reactionary politics nor his critical confusion was grounds for discounting Eliot's earlier insights—or his contribution to modernist literature. Indeed, Eliot represented both the standard to be met and a kind of limit case for determining the scope of what Phelps referred to as the "usable past." In an essay titled "Form and Content," Phelps raised the issue of "the usable elements in our literary heritage," arguing that form, which he defined as a "mode of perception," and content, described as the work's

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 53–54.

“complete meaning,” must be seen “*as two aspects of a unified vision.*”²⁴¹ Underlying this vision—and the key to delineating a usable past—was the poet’s sensibility. The task of the revolutionary writer was to forge a “relatively new” sensibility “compounded of his Marxian outlook, proletarian experience and whatever available literary sensibilities exist.”²⁴² Rather than treating form as a kind of container for content, creative method involved “the imaginative assimilation of political content,” a process effected through the medium of sensibility. In other words, (political) content shouldn’t be “isolated from the rest of experience,” but, rather, “merged into the creation of complete personalities and the perception of human relations in their physical and sensual immediacy.”²⁴³ Disputing the claim that proletarian literature could not avoid didacticism—or, worse, that it attempted “to enforce a specific article in the conventional moral code”—Phelps argued that it introduced “a new way of living and seeing into literature. It does not enforce the new view; it embodies it.”²⁴⁴

“Like Eliot,” writes Teres, “the editors argued that for systems of ideas to operate successfully they would have to be thoroughly embedded in the structure and feeling of the work. Their idea that through the operation of a perceptive sensibility a proletarian writer could transform political doctrine into a work of imaginative power was a direct application of Eliot’s insights into successful religious verse.”²⁴⁵ What was important to them was that “experiences be communicated so that their social significances are experienced

²⁴¹ Wallace Phelps, “Form and Content,” *Partisan Review* II, no. 6 (February 1935): 33.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁴³ Wallace Phelps (William Phillips) and Rahv, “Problems and Perspectives in Revolutionary Literature,” 8.

²⁴⁴ Wallace Phelps, “The Anatomy of Liberalism,” *Partisan Review* 1, no. 1 (March 1934): 49.

²⁴⁵ Teres, “Remaking Marxist Criticism,” 143.

subjectively by the reader. Felt experience must carry more than personal signification—it must bring the reader face-to-face with broader social contradictions.”²⁴⁶

The interdependence of form and content that Phillips emphasized dovetails with Ransom’s understanding of the relationship between “determinate” and “indeterminate” meaning in an essay published a few years later. “Few poets serve, as Wordsworth and Shelley may be thought to do, as texts for the really authoritative study of ideas,” Ransom wrote, “The more interesting thing to study is the coexistence and connection of [determinate meaning] and [indeterminate meaning]—the ideas and the indeterminate material in which they are enveloped.” Because the composition of poetry involved a meter and an argument essentially trying to displace one another, form and content were not only structurally interdependent, as the *Partisan* editors argued, but ontologically interdependent. “I suggest,” Ransom wrote, “that the meter-and-meaning process is the organic act of poetry.” For Ransom, poetic meaning was embodied not *in* but *by* the poem and couldn’t be said to “exist” otherwise.

Contrary to the received history of the New Critics, neither they nor the New York Intellectuals were as one-sided about form as the social realists were about content (or subject matter). The New Critics might not have been concerned about the work’s social or political value in the narrow sense, but, like Phelps and Rahv, form wasn’t their sole concern. Their interest was in the work *as a whole*; but for advocates of realism (either social or socialist), form played a supporting role at best. And, like the “coexistence and connection of determinate and indeterminate meaning” that interested Ransom, the *Partisan* editors stressed the dialectical interaction of consciousness and environment and

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 135.

the reciprocal influence of the parts of the superstructure or, as Phelps put it, “an incomplete fusion produces an unsuccessful work,” they are “interpenetrating, mutually affective elements.”²¹⁷

If what Ransom was proposing was something like a metaphysics of criticism, the *Partisan* editors were interested in its physics. Addressing the diverse field of revolutionary literature, which contained “a number of trends embodying contradictory aims and assumptions,” Phelps and Rahv had focused on criticism’s dialectical function in the editorial I quoted previously: “[T]he development of revolutionary literature is not unilinear; its progress is a process unfolding through a series of contradictions, through the struggle of opposed tendencies, and it is the business of criticism to help writers resolve these contradictions.”²¹⁸ They understood its business to be something altogether different from the kind of professional practice that Ransom was arguing for, but they were equally convinced of its centrality—and of the role publications played in fostering it. Their editorial not only made the business of the magazine explicit but was also intended to locate *Partisan* within the critical field. “A magazine,” they wrote, “is a form of criticism. By its selection of manuscripts, by its emphases in criticism, and by the tone that it adopts, its position is defined.” Reiterating the essence of their claim that criticism included “the whole organizational and editorial leadership,” they effectively cast *Partisan* in the role of literary vanguard. “Our emphasis,” they wrote, “has been on creative experimentation and critical precision, leaving more immediate political questions to other periodicals in the field,

²¹⁷ Phelps, “Form and Content,” 36.

²¹⁸ Wallace Phelps (William Phillips) and Rahv, “Problems and Perspectives in Revolutionary Literature,” 4.

especially the *New Masses*.”²⁴⁹ Granting the *New Masses* political primacy allowed them to assume cultural authority in a not-so-subtle attempt to establish “creative experimentation” as the more revolutionary approach to proletarian literature—and themselves as its ideological arbiters.

For Ransom, professionalization meant the academy’s recognition of criticism as a discipline that dealt with an ontologically distinct form of discourse. Although Rahv and Phelps were convinced that it should become more rigorous, they viewed criticism’s potential for systematization through a materialist lens. In a 1937 article published in a new Marxist periodical titled *Science and Society* they wrote:

Once literature is seen as an organic part of social existence, impinging on all areas of material and intellectual life, criticism enters the arena of ideological forces as a *conscious* factor. Thus criticism of any work of literature involves a criticism of the social world of which it is both a product and a recreation, and by raising itself to the stature of a social judgment, criticism becomes itself a social force and must be judged as such. In this way, its effectiveness becomes one of the measures of its validity.²⁵⁰

If criticism’s effectiveness “as a social force” could be gauged in a kind of quasi-empirical way, the next step was not difficult to take. “Once criticism has a body of general principles against which it can be checked,” they argued, “it is well on its way to scientific status.”²⁵¹

Rahv and Phelps published their summa on criticism in the April-May 1935 issue of *Partisan*. Simply titled “Criticism,” the essay begins with the complaint that, “[A] good deal of what is presented as Marxian criticism is not being written by recognized Marxian critics but by people who lack both the critical temperament and a knowledge of Marxism.” Objecting to the “vociferous aversion” to theoretical analysis that they had encountered—

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁵⁰ Phillips and Rahv, “Some Aspects of Literary Criticism,” 214.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

charges of “bourgeois estheticism,’ ‘academicism,’ and what not”—they argued that, “Whether revolutionary or bourgeois, criticism is in the main a form of conceptual analysis, and is primarily directed at readers familiar with the problems of literature.”²⁵² Not only was criticism *not* intended for a mass audience but, if poetry was expected to have “as direct an agitational effect on as wide a mass of readers as possible,” it would tend to be used as “a vehicle for expressing a meaning nowise different from the logical meaning of straight political writing” and the assumption that it might “undertake all the tasks of a political education” placed a burden on literature that it could not bear. “At most,” they contended, “a poem usually helps to crystallize latent urges to action stimulated by a variety of other influences.”²⁵³

While the *Partisan* editors didn’t advocate for professionalism as such, references to “recognized Marxian critics” and readers “familiar with the problems of literature” leave no doubt that they drew a clear distinction between those lacking the requisite “temperament” and experts or professionals (this was also implicit in their vanguardism). “Criticism,” they wrote, “is to be judged by its validity, by its generalizing power, and not by its temperature, or by the number of readers who can easily digest it. Its effect is a slow one, in that through influencing actual creation as well as popularizations of thought, it finally reaches its mass audience in an indirect form.”²⁵⁴ To paraphrase Lenin, Rahv and Phelps were convinced that without revolutionary theory there could be no revolutionary literature.

²⁵² Wallace Phelps (William Phillips) and Rahv, “Criticism,” 16–17.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 18–19.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

Using Faulkner's *Sanctuary* as an example, they argued that the novel didn't wear its ideology on its sleeve but instead contained what they called "specific content"—"attitudes towards character, painting of moods, patterns of action, and a variety of sensory and psychological insights"—that betrayed a discernible world-view, or ideology. Because "content" and "ideology" tended to get conflated in discussions of form and content, they used the term "specific content" to refer to "the *actual* substance of a work or art," stressing that it was "*not identical with any immediately recognizable reactionary or progressive non-literary program.*" Not ontologically but materially distinct from ideology, specific content didn't have a direct correlate outside literature and, therefore, the equation of specific content with ideology "falsifie[d] literary history."²⁵⁵

To counter the argument that there was no usable tradition in poetry the editors suggested that the assumption that nothing was usable "save that which is near-Marxian" amounted to a "dialectical mistake." One thing, however, was clear: the very existence of different schools and currents of revolutionary writing attested to a range of objectives with "a diversity of specific influences in the uses of tradition," making criticism indispensable: "The job of criticism is to clarify the aims and premises of each current, to relate one to the other, and to encourage some rather than others. It must fight those currents that are moving away from the aims of Marxism. And it is in the interaction between the critical and creative faculties that a greater consciousness of creative methods will emerge."²⁵⁶ Returning again to the interrelationship of criticism and creative writing, they reinforced the importance of their integration.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 20–21.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 25.

“Criticism” would be their last statement on the subject before the magazine folded in October 1936. The dissolution of the John Reed Clubs and the loss of Communist Party funding was one reason for its demise; the editors’ demoralization at the institution of the Popular Front was another. When *Partisan* resumed publication as an independent magazine in December 1937, Rahv and Phillips (he’d shed his party name by this time) were joined by a new group of editors. Their mission statement was emphatic if not polemical in its insistence that “the cause of revolutionary literature is best served by a policy of no commitments to any political party.” Calling the Communist Party out for attempting to “outlaw all dissenting opinion,” they argued that, “This projection on the cultural field of factionalism in politics makes for literary cleavages which, in most instances, have little to do with literary issues.”²⁵⁷ Just as critical aptitude was unrelated to the English professor’s eminence “as historical scholar,” thinly veiled political disputes were extra-literary concerns. Distinguishing the “dissident generation” that they represented from “yesterday’s celebrities and today’s philistines,” the editors refused to back down in the face of a “series of attacks in the Communist Party press” that had appeared before the first issue of the new magazine was even published.²⁵⁸ With its separation from the Communist Party, the magazine pursued what has been described as a Trotskyist line, but it’s clear that the editors were already inclined to believe, as Trotsky wrote in the magazine several months later, that, “Art can become a strong ally of revolution only in so far as it remains faithful to itself.”²⁵⁹

²⁵⁷ “Editorial Statement,” 3.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁵⁹ Leon Trotsky, “Art and Politics,” *Partisan Review* V, no. 3 (September 1938): 10.

* * *

Over the course of the next decade, *Kenyon* followed through on Ransom's intention to "convert" the academy by convincing university professors that they were the "very professionals" who needed to "take charge of the critical activity"—that criticism was their business. *Partisan* had to negotiate a different political and critical terrain as the editors began to shift their position on the relationship between the intellectual and the proletariat. This was the point at which Greenberg became involved with the magazine, which raises the question of what motivated him to contribute.

It's clear from remarks made in his letters to Lazarus that Greenberg read a number of little magazines in the 30s. He was surprised, but evidently pleased, to receive a year's subscription to *Criterion* as a graduation gift from a relative and appears to have been an avid reader of *The Hound & Horn* before it ceased publication in 1934.²⁶⁰ He entered poetry contests and submitted poems to *Kenyon* and *Southern Review* as well as to publications like *Pagany* that focused exclusively on literature.²⁶¹ Although he didn't mention *Partisan Review* in his letters until he began to socialize with Lionel Abel and Harold Rosenberg in the late 30s, he was effusive about *The New Republic* as a young college graduate: "Have faith in women and read the 'New Republic' too."²⁶² *Esquire* published two of his short stories in the mid-30s, although Greenberg was enormously relieved that he'd submitted them under a pseudonym because he was ashamed of both the stories and their publisher. His dim view of *New Masses* doesn't come as much of a surprise given the kind of magazine he hoped would publish his work: "Instead of being

²⁶⁰ Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928-1943*, 23; 33, 44, and 79.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 208, 211, and 55.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 51.

contributed to by ‘pink radicals proud of their intellectual intelligence and collegiate expression’ it is written up by heavy handed coal-heavers, lumberjacks, garbage collectors, etc.”²⁶³

Greenberg harbored an intense desire to be recognized as a poet from the time he was in college until well after he’d published his first essay on art. In 1931 he wrote to Lazarus that he had “an awful craving” to see a poem about “the oscillation of the electrons, how out of death you get life and immortality” in print. “Then with a blazing blush,” he continued, “I say faintly to myself, ‘poet.’”²⁶⁴ Unemployed and short of funds, he began to visit the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney at about the same time. “I’ve been seeing many pictures lately,” he wrote, “being as it’s the cheapest thing to do.”²⁶⁵ Although he continued his trips to these museums (as well as a handful of modern art galleries), he appears to have been much less interested in the artists he began to meet when he finally moved out of his father’s house and took an apartment in Greenwich Village in the spring of 1938 than he was in the critics and poets who contributed to *Partisan*.²⁶⁶ Having admitted to using the painter Igor Pantuhuff (from whom he was taking drawing lessons) “as a means not as an end,” he asked rhetorically, “Who the hell else have I to talk to? Do you think I see him because I like him?”²⁶⁷ As the little magazines continued to turn down his submissions, he wrote, toward the end of the decade, “If only

²⁶³ Ibid., 3.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 55.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 32.

²⁶⁶ See also his remark in “New York Painting Only Yesterday”: “[F]or over two years (1941-43), while I was an editor of *Partisan Review*, I was almost entirely out of touch with art life.” Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4*, 19.

²⁶⁷ Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928-1943*, 193.

some part of the world wd say one of my poems is good, then I'd be all sureness and audacity and I wd. write wonderful stuff."²⁶⁸

His response to the invitation to publish the text that would evolve into "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" leaves no room for interpretation regarding his priorities in the late 30s. "This irks me," he complained when Dwight Macdonald made the suggestion, "because I want either to re-submit the Brecht piece or send in a poem. A poem, most of all. And there is the danger that if once they get the idea in their heads that I'm a critic, they'll decide—they're like that—that I'm not a poet no matter how good my poetry may be."²⁶⁹

The essay's success brought only skepticism about his audience and scorn for the editors: "PR wants me to write more stuff for them along the same lines. They are more impressed by other people's opinion than by their own." Lazarus had clearly offered some words of encouragement in his last letter, since Greenberg ended his with the line, "Thanks for thinking of me as a poet. I think of myself that way not yet."²⁷⁰ Literature, as Philip Rahv had put it, was the "nerve center" of culture.²⁷¹

While the writers who contributed to *Kenyon* described themselves as literary critics (since that was the challenge that Ransom was spearheading), the *Partisan* critics associated themselves with the intelligentsia (a mid-nineteenth-century term that referred to "Russia's most alienated, radical intellectuals") and considered themselves to be social or cultural critics rather than critics of a particular art or discipline.²⁷² James Gilbert offers this

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 177.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 194.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 212.

²⁷¹ Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*, 114.

²⁷² Charles Kurzman and Lynn Owens, "The Sociology of Intellectuals," *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 71.

definition of cultural criticism: “Broader than literary criticism, cultural criticism focused on observation and measurement of the social environment... It did not attempt to inject politics into literature, but aimed at broadening the writer’s awareness of all aspects of life, including the political.”²⁷³ By the 30s, cultural criticism had clearly become more politicized (and was now associated with the particular kind of Marxist criticism that was practiced by the *Partisan* circle), but its practitioners were always intellectuals first and critics second (or “intellectual-critics”), meaning that they might be described as critics in general rather than literary, theater, or art critics. In contrast to the *Kenyon* critics, the *Partisan* editors weren’t interested in criticism’s disciplinary autonomy—in fact, just the opposite, since, as they argued, criticism itself could become a “social force” by “raising itself to the stature of a social judgment.”

Greenberg wasn’t concerned about being mistaken for an art critic—as opposed to a literary critic—because this wasn’t a distinction that mattered; he was concerned about being identified as a practitioner. He certainly considered himself an intellectual but, perhaps ironically, he remained wary of the “party line” of the *Partisan* editors (complaining to Lazarus about the “failure” of “Towards a Newer Laocoön”—because “only painters & aesthetes liked it”—he wrote, “I am to write only what the readers are sure to like.”)²⁷⁴ He finally began to reconcile himself to the idea of being a critic around the time he published “Laocoön.” “[C]riticism is the only living genre left,” he wrote in the summer of 1940, “The readers of *Partisan Review*, for example, read the articles much more avidly and with more pleasure than the poems & stories. And I can in an article say more of what I really

²⁷³ Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*, 34.

²⁷⁴ Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928-1943*, 223.

want to say. At the same time I'd, of course, rather write poetry."²⁷⁵ Reluctant, at first, to identify himself as a critic, Greenberg's commitment to literary practice undoubtedly influenced both his approach to criticism and his understanding of the role it might play in cultural production, which is the topic I will address in the next chapter.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 222.

Chapter 3

A Critic on the Side of Culture

Culture and Criticism

As the *Partisan* editors continued their efforts to “clarify the aims and premises” of revolutionary literature, Ransom was laying the groundwork for *Kenyon*, which began publication in 1939. Whatever the extent of Greenberg’s understanding of or allegiance to Marxist principle, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” was engaged in a discourse that was undergoing a significant shift. As Clark notes, Greenberg also read *Scrutiny*, the English literary journal founded by F. R. Leavis in 1932.²⁷⁶ He may or may not have read Leavis’s *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, but Greenberg’s essay echoes one of the central themes of this 1930 pamphlet. Leavis begins with the assertion that, “In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends.” The primary responsibility of the minority was to preserve the language “without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent” and, he continues, “By ‘culture’ I mean the use of such language.”²⁷⁷ If the minority was the “consciousness of the race (or of a branch of it) at a given time,” Leavis blamed the machine for the accelerated “change in habit and the circumstances of life,” which had brought about social changes that were responsible for the fact that there was “no longer an informed and cultivated public” or, as he quotes Eliot’s somewhat more sympathetic formulation, “When there is so much to be known, when there are so many fields of knowledge in which the same words are used with different meanings, when every one knows a little about a great many things, it becomes increasingly difficult for anyone to know whether he knows what he is talking about or

²⁷⁶ Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” 148.

²⁷⁷ F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (Folcroft, PA: Folcroft Press, 1969), 4–5.

not.”²⁷⁸ For Leavis the current plight of culture was exemplified by the lack of standards, a living tradition of poetry “spread abroad,” and a discriminating public.

Anyone in the United States who had been following the debate between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey regarding the public’s fitness for participation in the political sphere, in which the two had been engaged for nearly a decade, would have been familiar with the questions raised by Leavis. A champion of the minority, Leavis came down squarely on Lippmann’s side of the debate, although he focused on the cultural rather than the social and political implications of the minority’s role. Although culture had always “been in minority keeping,” he argued, the minority now confronted a “hostile environment.” Unlike the different levels of response that were possible with a work like *Hamlet*, only a “very small specialized public” read *The Waste Land*, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, *Ulysses* or *To the Lighthouse*, which were out of reach even for those who considered themselves to be educated. As a result, the minority was “being cut off as never before from the powers that rule the world,” which meant that “civilization” and “culture” were at risk of becoming “antithetical terms”—an alarming prospect.²⁷⁹ “It is not merely that the power and the sense of authority are now divorced from culture,” he wrote, “but that some of the most disinterested solicitude for civilization is apt to be, consciously or unconsciously, inimical to culture.”²⁸⁰ Returning to the question of the machine in his conclusion, he advised against the impulse to find some consolation in the “utterly new”

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 5-6-18.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 25-26.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 26.

offered by mass culture. The “utterly new,” he concluded, “surrenders everything that can interest us.”²⁸¹

In Greenberg’s leftist version of this argument, responsibility for culture’s alienation from civilization isn’t laid solely at the feet of technology but is more specifically attributable to capitalism. Greenberg presents Leavis’s binary even more succinctly: “There has always been on one side the minority of the powerful—and therefore the cultivated—and on the other side the great mass of the exploited and the poor—and therefore the ignorant. Formal culture has always belonged to the first, while the last have had to content themselves with folk or rudimentary culture, or kitsch.”²⁸² Concurring with Leavis, Greenberg argues that it is the difficulty of avant-garde culture that has brought about its alienation: “The avant-garde’s specialization of itself, the fact that its best artists are artists’ artists, its best poets, poets’ poets, has estranged a great many of those who were capable formerly of enjoying and appreciating ambitious art and literature, but who are now unwilling or unable to acquire an initiation into their craft secrets.” Greenberg admits, however, that it is not to its “*social* advantage” that the avant-garde is what it is: “Quite the opposite.” For him, as for Leavis, it isn’t a matter of culture’s accessibility. “The masses,” writes Greenberg, “have always remained more or less indifferent to culture in the process of development. But today such culture is being abandoned by those to whom it actually belongs—our ruling class.”²⁸³ Guilbaut is certainly correct about Greenberg’s debt to (or at least affinity with) Trotsky, who wrote in “Art and Politics,” published the previous year in *Partisan*, that, “Not a single progressive idea has begun with a ‘mass base,’ otherwise it

²⁸¹ Ibid., 31.

²⁸² Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 44.

²⁸³ Ibid., 38.

would not have been a progressive idea. It is only in its last stage that the idea finds its masses.”²⁸⁴ Greenberg’s emphasis is slightly different (and closer to Leavis’s), since he’s explicit about the class to which culture “belongs.” But when Greenberg warns that the avant-garde “is becoming more timid every day” and “academicism and commercialism are appearing in the strangest places,” he is not only departing from Leavis’s script but is addressing a more local concern by touching on an issue that had become increasingly important to *Partisan* as the war approached.²⁸⁵

Alarmed by the implications of the “lesser-of-two-evils” rhetoric of the Popular Front, Rahv invoked Julien Benda’s famous locution, the “treason of the intellectuals,” in an impassioned response to the Moscow Trials published in April 1938. “Intellectuals,” he wrote, would “fight to save culture from being put to a violent death at the hands of fascism, but they are perfectly willing to let it expire peacefully in the bed of bourgeois democracy.”²⁸⁶ Up until the outbreak of the war, the *Partisan* editors were united in their belief in the need to hold out for the revolution, or as Rahv put it, “Only unalterable opposition to capitalism, only the utilization of the imperialist war for revolutionary ends, opens any prospects to humanity and its culture.”²⁸⁷ The issue, as he saw it, was intellectuals’ lack of resolve, and, speaking the language of capital, he took this opportunity to lay out the intellectual’s position within society: “Marxism has taught us that the intellectuals are a special grouping within the middle class,” whose only “real property” is the sphere of

²⁸⁴ Trotsky, “Art and Politics,” 9. Hilton Kramer would later write that, in his early years as a critic, Greenberg was a Trotskyist, “which is to say, an anti-Stalinist Marxist.” Hilton Kramer, “Clement Greenberg & the Cold War,” *The New Criterion* 11 (March 1993): 4.

²⁸⁵ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 38.

²⁸⁶ Philip Rahv, “Trials of the Mind,” *Partisan Review* IV, no. 5 (April 1938): 4-5.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

“technical and spiritual culture” to which the social division of labor had assigned them. Given their role as “the guardians of values,” Rahv argued, “it might be naïve to expect them to cleave to revolutionary ideas at a time when the proletariat is in rout,” but, if they neglected this responsibility, they risked destroying the values they depended on “for permanent sustenance.”²⁸⁸ Guarding those values, in other words, was as much a matter of self-preservation as duty.

Benda, writing in 1927, distinguished between the layman, “whose whole function consists essentially in the pursuit of material interests” and “another, essentially distinct humanity” that had existed up until the last half century.²⁸⁹ What he meant by “that class of men whom I shall designate ‘the clerks’” was “all those whose activity essentially is *not* the pursuit of practical aims,” whose attachment was “to the purely disinterested activity of the mind.”²⁹⁰ For Benda, a check on the pursuit of material interests was of vital importance: “Civilization, I repeat, seems to me possible only if humanity consents to a division of functions, if side by side with those who carry out the lay passions and extol the virtues serviceable to them there exists a class of men who depreciate these passions and glorify the advantages which are beyond the material.”²⁹¹ What concerned him even more than the fact of the clerk’s disappearance, however, was his (since it was understood that the clerk was a man) willing participation in his own displacement. Social conditions in the modern world—changes in the clerk’s social status that made him both “subject to all the responsibilities of a citizen” and increasingly bourgeois and careerist—may have played a

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 9.

²⁸⁹ Julien Benda, *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, trans. Richard Aldington (London; New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 43.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 43; 44.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 139.

part, but Benda was discouraged by the clerk's complicity in the collapse of his position.²⁹²

"What I think serious," Benda concluded, "is that this class of men should cease to perform their office."²⁹³

Writing three years before *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* was published, Benda was convinced that civilization depended on the "division of functions" that separated the interested from the disinterested. Leavis worried that there would be dire consequences if the minority lost its sway over "the powers that rule the world," rendering "civilization" and "culture" antithetical. To lay out the terms of his own binary, Greenberg begins "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" by asserting that, "one and the same civilization" produces a "poem by T. S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song."²⁹⁴ Although this is the only reference to civilization in his essay, Orton and Pollock speculate on how Greenberg related it to culture: "It seems quite likely that 'civilization' refers to the general condition of social order of a particular society and that 'culture' is the work and practices of intellectual and artistic activity."²⁹⁵ Greenberg might simply have been pointing out that avant-garde culture and kitsch were both products of Western civilization—which he distinguished from the particular social context that had contrived to produce this cultural binary—but it's fairly certain that he would have agreed with Leavis's prognosis: "The prospects of culture, then, are very dark. There is the less room for hope in that a standardized civilization is rapidly

²⁹² Ibid., 158.

²⁹³ Ibid., 139. A fundamental change had occurred when the clerks "began to play the game of the political passions." At that moment, "The men who had acted as a check on the realism of the people began to act as its stimulators." The onset of this change—the loss, disappearance, or rejection of the intellectual's autonomy—coincided more or less with the advent of modernism: it had started, Benda reminds us several times, a half century before.

²⁹⁴ Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 34.

²⁹⁵ Orton and Pollock, "Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed," September 1981, 316.

enveloping the whole world.”²⁹⁶ However, Greenberg’s insight regarding this relationship led him to a different conclusion: (avant-garde) culture’s alienation was the only thing that could save it from (standardized) civilization.

Raymond Williams historicizes the relationship between these terms in *Society and Culture: 1780-1950*, whose “organizing principle” was “the discovery that the idea of culture, and the word itself in its general modern uses, came into English thinking in the period which we commonly describe as that of the Industrial Revolution.”²⁹⁷ In a chapter titled “The Romantic Artist,” Williams raises the topic of civilization in a discussion of the political and economic changes that were taking place in eighteenth-century England and the concomitant changes in “ideas of art, of the artist, and of their place in society.” The growth of a new middle-class reading public in the first half of that century altered the relationship between the writer and the public, and by the early nineteenth century dissatisfaction with the public among writers had become “acute and general.” Shelley’s comments in his “Defense of Poetry” were characteristic: “Time reverses the judgment of the foolish crowd. Contemporary criticism is not more than the sum of the folly with which genius has to wrestle.”²⁹⁸ The final appeal was to an ideal reader, an “embodied spirit of the People” that represented “a standard that might be set above the clamor of the writer’s actual relations with society.”²⁹⁹

Late in the eighteenth century, Adam Smith had written that, “In opulent and commercial societies to think or to reason comes to be, like every other employment, a

²⁹⁶ Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, 30.

²⁹⁷ Williams, *Culture and Society*, vii.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

particular business, which is carried on by a very few people, who furnish the public with all the thought and reason possessed by the vast multitudes that labor.”³⁰⁰ It was the business, then, of “a very few people”—a special class of people, who, starting in the 1820s, would be called “intellectuals”—to furnish the multitudes with thought and reason. With respect to increasing specialization, Smith argued that art was now “purchased, in the same manner as shoes or stockings, from those whose business it is to make up and prepare for the market that particular species of goods.”³⁰¹ Artists countered this argument, Williams writes, by emphasizing “the special nature of art-activity as a means to ‘imaginative truth’” along with the idea that the artist was “a special kind of person.”³⁰² However, this response wasn’t—or wasn’t only—a matter of professional vanity, but evinced a commitment to “the embodiment in art of certain human values, capacities, energies, which the development of society towards an industrial civilization was felt to be threatening or even destroying.” It was a protest, “on general human grounds,” against the kind of society that was being created by industrialization.³⁰³

Coleridge pitted culture not just against industrialism but against civilization: “The permanency of the nation... depend[s] on a continuing and progressive civilization. But civilization is itself a mixed good, if not far more a corrupting influence, the hectic of disease, not the bloom of health, and a nation so distinguished more fitly to be called a varnished than a polished people, where this civilization is not grounded in cultivation, in the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our

³⁰⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*

³⁰¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 35.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

humanity.” Measuring civilization’s “health” in this way, Coleridge used the term “cultivation” for the first time “to denote a general condition, a ‘state or habit’ of the mind” and it is from this time, Williams writes, that “the idea of Culture enters decisively into English social thinking.”³⁰⁴ Coleridge also argued for what he called a “National Church,” or “Clerisy,” which amounted to a kind of secularized clergy that “comprehended the learned of all denominations; the sages and professors of... all the so-called liberal arts and sciences.” “[O]nly by the vital warmth diffused by these truths”—those propounded by the National Church—“throughout the many, and by the guiding light from the philosophy, which is the basis of divinity, possessed by the few, can either the community or its rulers fully comprehend, or rightly appreciate, *the permanent distinction and the occasional contrast between cultivation and civilization.*” Culture, which had been understood as “a personal qualification for participation in polite society” in the eighteenth century, was redefined as “a condition on which society as a whole depended.”³⁰⁵ It not only represented a position opposed to the market, but functioned as a check on (industrial) civilization.

Thomas Carlyle, taking up the idea of Coleridge’s “Clerisy,” also advocated for a class of men—“Writing and Teaching Heroes” or, in a phrase that Stephen Colbert would be less likely to adopt, an “organic Literary Class”—who were concerned with “the quality of the national life.” These are prototypes, of course, for the disinterested “clerk” whose decline Benda would later lament, but before I return to the first half of the twentieth century, I want to stress the fact that Carlyle, anticipating Leavis, was concerned about the separation of culture that these changes had brought about: “Never, till about a hundred

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 59; 61.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 61–63.

years ago, was there seen any figure of a Great Soul living apart in that anomalous manner; endeavoring to speak forth the inspiration that was in him by Printed Books, and find place and subsistence by what the world would please to give him for doing that. Much had been sold and bought, and left to make its own bargain in the market place; but the inspired wisdom of a Heroic Soul never till then, in that naked manner.”³⁰⁶

Rahv cited Benda without pressing the point, since he was hardly defending an idealist view of the intellectual, but, like Benda, he was deeply affected by the sense of betrayal he felt, and this became a central leitmotif of the articles published in *Partisan* by a range of critics as the war approached.³⁰⁷ A year after “Trials of the Mind” appeared, Macdonald quoted Bourne’s 1917 essay “War and the Intellectuals,” which accused intellectuals of having “effectively willed” the First World War, and went on to argue that, “For an understanding of these dark matters the intellectuals have only to look at what is going on in their own sphere. The reactionary nature of the coming war reveals itself in the effects on our culture of merely preparing for it. Tying themselves to the bourgeois war machine, the intellectuals have given up their privilege—and duty—of criticizing ruling class values.”³⁰⁸ The following issue of *Partisan* included the “Statement of the L.C.F.S. [League for Cultural Freedom and Socialism],” appended at the end of the issue and signed by a number of those affiliated with the magazine, which contained the ominous prediction that, “If in the totalitarian states intellectual life is an affair for the police, in America it is

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 85.

³⁰⁷ For Benda, any “passion”—political, moral, intellectual, esthetic, etc.—no matter how “disinterested” was all that was needed to disqualify the clerk: “[E]very life which pursues only spiritual advantage or sincerely asserts itself in the universal, situates itself outside the real. Political passions... seem to me essentially realist passions.” Benda, *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, 35.

³⁰⁸ Dwight Macdonald, “War and the Intellectuals: Act Two,” *Partisan Review* VI, no. 3 (Spring 1939): 10.

preparing, under pressure of anti-fascist hysteria, for voluntary abdication.”³⁰⁹ The magazine’s opposition to this “voluntary abdication” became a new rallying point, the united front presented by its contributors replacing—or simply refining—the previous hostility to the Communist Party line.

Rahv returned to this issue in an editorial titled “Twilight of the Thirties,” which, with the “Statement of the L.C.F.S.,” framed the contents of the summer 1939 issue. As he rehearsed his now familiar complaint, he couldn’t even bring himself to use the term “intellectual”: “[M]ost of the artists and ‘thinkers’ are voluntarily subjecting themselves to a regimen of conformity, are ‘organically’ as it were—obediently and at times even with enthusiasm—adapting their products to the coarsening and shrinking of the cultural market.”³¹⁰ The scare quotes notwithstanding, the emphasis here is on the producers for the cultural market. Rahv had alluded to a decline in literary standards—or defensively attempted to deny it—in earlier writings. “On all sides today human beings are emptying themselves of individuality, finding it safer to become *tools*,” he had written the previous year, “Literature, for example, after the bohemian roar of the twenties and the ‘proletarian’ gnashing of teeth of the early thirties, is gradually subsiding into the gentility of accommodation.”³¹¹ The slow pace of attrition had given way to “a rapid decline of standards in all spheres of the intellect and of the imagination” and now he would go so far as to wonder aloud whether they were witnessing “the first stage of a process that might be called the withering away of literature.”³¹²

³⁰⁹ “Statement of the L.C.F.S.,” *Partisan Review* VI, no. 4 (Summer 1939): 125.

³¹⁰ Rahv, “Twilight of the Thirties,” 5.

³¹¹ Rahv, “Trials of the Mind,” 10.

³¹² Rahv, “Twilight of the Thirties,” 4–5.

At this point, Rahv begins to frame the issue in a new way:

This is the one period in many decades which is not being enlivened by the feats and excesses of that attractive artistic animal known as ‘the younger generation.’ With very few exceptions, the younger writers today, instead of defying, instead of going beyond, are in fact imitating and falling behind their elders. There still are remnants, but no *avant-garde* movement to speak of exists any longer.³¹³

It’s possible that Rahv was cribbing from Greenberg, who had submitted a draft of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” to the *Partisan* editors in April. Whether or not this was the case, both Rahv and Phillips had been concerned about the new generation of writers since the early days of the magazine. Phillips’s “Three Generations,” published in the fall of 1934, attempted to make a case for a “proletarian generation” that represented a synthesis of the political novelists of the 1910s (Dreiser, Anderson) and the lost generation of the 1920s (Joyce, Eliot). But, as Phillips was forced to admit, “The proletarian generation has not yet fulfilled its promises.”³¹⁴ One of the problems the *Partisan* editors found themselves grappling with in making their case against *New Masses* and the Popular Front was that they were having an increasingly difficult time finding examples of high caliber experimental fiction and poetry. (Harold Rosenberg would argue for a similar decline in the visual arts several years later, writing in 1940 that, “for more than a decade,” there had been “a steady deflation of that intellectual exuberance which had sent out over the earth the waves of cubism, futurism, vorticism—and, later, dadaism, the ‘Russian’ ballet,

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

³¹⁴ Phelps, “Three Generations,” 55; Writing in the *New Masses* in December 1936, Phillips repeated this lament: “few signs of any important movement growing out of a new generation of writers.” “Have all our critical guarantees that proletarian literature would expand and mature to the point of dominating American literature been just so much professional optimism?” Quoted in Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*, 153–54.

surrealism.”³¹⁵) Rahv might have been able to point to the political climate as the cause of the current “ebb of creative energy,” but this was no consolation. In the absence of an avant-garde, the “academicians, the time-servers, the experts in accommodation, the vulgarizers and the big money adepts” were “ruling the literary roost.”³¹⁶

Reflecting the tenor and substance of most *Partisan* editorials, which often took the form of a series of news items, “Twilight of the Thirties” is local in its concerns (Rahv begins by castigating an author who had recently repudiated his anti-war novel), raw and polemical in tone, more journalistic in style than Greenberg’s meditation on the avant-garde. Although he was expressing what was by then a common *Partisan* concern, Greenberg was much more circumspect when he wrote that the avant-garde was “becoming more timid every day” and “academicism and commercialism” were “appearing in the strangest places.” One reason for the difference in tone, aside from temperament, was that Rahv took the anti-war novelist’s about-face personally: he had been engaged with the community that he was addressing for years and it would have been difficult for him to achieve the kind of objectivity that someone with less at stake could. Rahv’s piece differed from Greenberg’s not only in its form but in its form of address, since he wasn’t just *writing for* a constituency, he was also *speaking to* them. Allowing the historical arc of his argument to fill the rhetorical void, Greenberg dispensed with the exhortations of Macdonald and Rahv because he wasn’t trying to goad writers and artists to adopt a different attitude. Which is not to say that Greenberg was aiming for “objectivity” (a stance that would have been almost unimaginable in the leftist magazines of the 30s). Instead, the essay owes its

³¹⁵ Harold Rosenberg, “On the Fall of Paris,” *Partisan Review* 7, no. 6 (1940): 440.

³¹⁶ Rahv, “Twilight of the Thirties,” 5.

rhetorical heft to the Manichean character of his binary, complemented (stylistically) and bolstered (structurally) by the argument's historical framework. Although Greenberg was clearly writing for the same constituency, he was also, in a sense, speaking over their heads, since an underlying assumption of his essay was that, given the current paucity of avant-garde artists and writers, it had to be addressed to critics.

Having waded into "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," I've launched into my own close reading, but there's one more point to make about Rahv's editorial. "I do not believe," Rahv writes, perhaps with a nod to Greenberg, "that a new *avant-garde* movement, in the proper historical sense of the term, can be formed in this pre-war situation. For obituaries, however, the time is not yet; despite multiple pressures a literary minority can still maintain its identity. And even if it cannot look forward to an expansive career, still what it can do is to warn."³¹⁷ As "an avant-garde movement" is elided with "a literary minority" that can "maintain its identity," Rahv ends up with a definition of the avant-garde that bears a striking resemblance to Orton and Pollock's.³¹⁸ Now made over into the avant-garde, *Partisan* needed to recognize its duty, which Rahv interprets in a specific way. "To speak of modern literature," he concluded, "is to speak of that peculiar social grouping, the intelligentsia, to whom it belongs. The intelligentsia, too, is a modern product, created by the drastic division of labor that prevails under capitalism... An examination of the special role and changing status of the intelligentsia is, therefore, essential to any social

³¹⁷ Ibid., 14.

³¹⁸ This tallies with James Gilbert's assessment: "Cultural change could be initiated by an international community of intellectuals, and the vanguard of that community would be the Trotskyist intellectuals whom Rahv and Phillips published in their revived magazine." Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*, 187.

examination of modern literature.”³¹⁹ Not surprisingly, this was the task to which *Partisan* would devote itself in the 40s.

“Avant-Garde and Kitsch” appeared in the issue following the one that was bookended by “Twilight of the Thirties” and the “Statement of the L.C.F.S.” It’s clear that Greenberg’s view of the avant-garde differed from Rahv’s in fundamental ways (not the least of which was whether culture was the province of the ruling class or the intelligentsia). The binary that Greenberg introduced also differed from the distinctions that Leavis had highlighted in *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*. Leavis was explicit about his debt to Matthew Arnold, for instance, but it’s impossible to ignore the similarity between Greenberg’s binary and Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*—particularly when we learn the title of the lecture from which the first chapter of Arnold’s famous book derived: “Culture and its Enemies,” delivered in June 1867, was Arnold’s last lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford. While Greenberg would have been careful to avoid making a direct reference to the nineteenth-century critic, Leavis not only quoted him in the epigraph of his pamphlet but his text begins with the declaration that, “For Matthew Arnold it was in some ways less difficult,” referring not so much to the plight of culture in the twentieth century but to Arnold’s freedom to use phrases like “the will of God” and “our true selves.”³²⁰

Greenberg might not have had much to say about Arnold’s “sweetness and light”—not to mention “the will of God”—but it’s hard to imagine him disagreeing with aspects of the following:

³¹⁹ Rahv, “Twilight of the Thirties,” 10-11.

³²⁰ Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, 3. See Wallace Phelps, “Eliot Takes his Stand,” *Partisan Review*, vol. 1 no. 2 (April-May 1934): 53-54.

Plenty of people will try to give the masses, as they call them, an intellectual food prepared and adapted in the way they think proper for the actual condition of the masses... Plenty of people will try to indoctrinate the masses with the set of ideas and judgments constituting the creed of their own profession or party... but culture works differently. It does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes; it does not try to win them for this or that sect of its own, with ready-made judgments and watchwords. It seeks to do away with classes.³²¹

The argument Greenberg would develop in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” evolved from his critique of Macdonald’s claim that cultural conditioning was to blame for the masses’ preference for the products of Hollywood. Although Greenberg had no illusions about culture’s ability to “do away with classes”—and certainly didn’t follow Arnold in his belief that the State was “the truest friend we all of us can have”—he was convinced that “culture works differently.”³²² “Formal culture,” as he called it, required a public that “could command the leisure and comfort that always goes hand in hand with cultivation,” but, because its traditional source of support was no longer willing or able to sustain it, criticism was now implicated in the fight for its survival.³²³ My point here is not to argue for the Arnoldian origins of Greenberg’s criticism (although I think a case could be made for this), but to contrast Greenberg’s emphasis with Leavis’s. Although the two critics certainly didn’t disagree about what was at stake, the conventionality of Leavis’s Jeremiad against the evils of standardization and mass-production made his insights far less penetrating.

³²¹ Matthew Arnold and Jane Garnett, *Culture and Anarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 52.

³²² *Ibid.*, 134–5. As Arnold wrote, “[C]ulture suggests the idea of the State. We find no basis for a firm State-power in our ordinary selves; culture suggests one to us in our best self.” Quoted in William V. Spanos, “The Apollonian Investment of Modern Humanist Education: The Examples of Matthew Arnold, Irving Babbitt, and I. A. Richards,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 1 (Autumn 1985): 21, doi:10.2307/1354280.

³²³ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 39.

Leavis focuses initially on Arnold's preoccupation with the "mechanical," a theme that Williams traces back to Edmund Burke's nostalgia for the "organic society." This was a familiar theme by the time Arnold wrote, in the sentence Leavis used as his epigraph, "And this function is particularly important in our modern world, of which the whole civilization is, to a much greater degree than the civilization of Greece and Rome, mechanical and external, and tends to become more so." Tellingly, Leavis left out the passage that supplied the antecedent for "this function," which points to the breadth of the claim that Arnold was making for culture: "If culture, then, is a study of perfection, and of the harmonious perfection, general perfection, and perfection which consists in becoming something rather than in having something, in an inward condition of the mind and spirit, not in an outward set of circumstances,—it is clear that culture, instead of being [a] frivolous and useless thing... has a very important function to fulfill for mankind."³²⁴ Like Coleridge and Carlyle, Arnold believed that culture was in the hands of a minority. In his case, however, the minority consisted of the "remnants" or "aliens" within each class who were "not disabled by the ordinary notions and habits of their class" but were led by "a general *humane* spirit, by the love of human perfection." Arnold was arguing not only against the perception that culture was, perhaps, a "desirable quality in a critic of new books"—that it "sat well" on a professor of *belles lettres*—but against the conclusion that this perception had led to: that men of culture were "the only class of responsible beings in the community who cannot with safety be entrusted with power." He wasn't interested in securing power

³²⁴ Arnold and Garnett, *Culture and Anarchy*, 37.

for men of culture; rather, he was convinced that, “Now, then, is the moment for culture to be of service.”³²⁵

For Greenberg, culture was threatened on all sides: by the ruling class’s desertion, by the avant-garde’s attrition, and by the masses’ clamoring for kitsch. I want to return, briefly, to Clark’s reading of Greenberg’s early essays, since I think the purity that Clark is so intent on condemning is a red herring that obscures the significance of the distinction that Greenberg was making between Alexandrianism and the avant-garde. Clark’s claim that, “The pursuit has been purity, whatever the detours and self-deceptions” is flanked on one side by the line from “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” about the main strands in the avant-garde’s history having “conspired to narrow and raise art ‘to the expression of the absolute’” and on the other by this line from “Towards a Newer Laocoön”: “The arts lie safe now, each within its ‘legitimate’ boundaries, and free trade has been replaced by autarchy. Purity in art consists in the acceptance... of the limitations of the medium.”³²⁶ What Clark leaves out is Greenberg’s qualification of his statement about the “absolute,” which is crucial to understanding why Greenberg raised the issue of “purity” to begin with.

“It has been in search of the absolute,” Greenberg writes, “that the avant-garde has arrived at ‘abstract’ or ‘non-objective’ art—and poetry, too.” He continues:

The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape—not its picture—is aesthetically valid; something *given*, increate, independent of meanings, similars, or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.³²⁷

³²⁵ Ibid., 31; 35.

³²⁶ Clark, “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art,” 145.

³²⁷ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 36.

To create something “valid solely on its own terms” there could be no remainder (cf. Phillips’s claim that, “an incomplete fusion [of form and content] produces an unsuccessful work”). But Greenberg reminds us that the “absolute is absolute” and that, in art, the absolute is invoked, not in the name of absolute values (as Babbitt would have it) but in the name of aesthetic values. It turns out that the artist wasn’t imitating God, but, rather, the “disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves.” And this “imitation of *imitating*,” as Greenberg calls it, using the word “imitate” in its Aristotelian sense, was the guarantor of abstract art’s aesthetic validity: “The non-representational or ‘abstract,’ *if it is to have aesthetic validity*, cannot be arbitrary and accidental, but must stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original (emphasis added).”³²⁸ Greenberg was not (yet) arguing for the self-criticality of the modernist artwork, which would be central to the argument of “Modernist Painting”; he was making a case for the necessity of self-reflexivity to the abstract artwork’s aesthetic validity.

If the aesthetic validity of abstract art was conditional, there could be “invalid” abstract art. Greenberg stopped short of saying that abstract art that did not meet the conditions required for validity was not viable “as art,” but it’s implied. Viability, in any case, was not enough to produce avant-garde art and, therefore, the equation of “abstract art” and “avant-garde art” was a false one, or at least an incomplete one. In “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” the issue was not the supremacy of abstract art over representation (this would be the claim of “Towards a Newer Laocoön”), but, rather, the problem of “arbitrary” or “accidental” abstract art—that is, abstraction that did not obey “some worthy constraint.” If the *only* worthy constraint was the “processes or disciplines” of art and literature, as

³²⁸ Ibid., 36–37.

Greenberg argues, then self-reflexivity was necessary to produce avant-garde art. And it needed this necessity. Greenberg was trying to establish as the basis—or grounds—for (abstract) art’s validity the fact that the only authority it could recognize was its own. The pursuit was not purity, but the validity that purity guaranteed.

For Greenberg, the difference between the avant-garde and Alexandrianism—the fact that the avant-garde moved—not only justified the avant-garde’s methods, but made them necessary. “The necessity,” Greenberg writes, “lies in the fact that by no other means is it possible to create art and literature of a high order.”³²⁹ If culture was “a condition on which society as a whole depended,” and if the survival of “the only living culture we now have” (i.e. the avant-garde) was in question, then culture *as such* was in jeopardy—making objections to the avant-garde’s “purism” seem pedantic at the very least. Or, as Greenberg put it, “To quarrel with necessity by throwing about terms like ‘formalism,’ ‘purism,’ ‘ivory tower’ and so forth is either dull or dishonest.”³³⁰ What was at stake, ultimately, was the survival of a society that depended on culture.

What Leavis was concerned about, by contrast, was the decline of standards (an issue raised by the literary critic I. A. Richards, who is the other touchstone of Leavis’s essay). His anxiety about the audience—both the discerning minority and the too-suggestible majority—leaves him wringing his hands over the prospect that culture will fall prey to the false prophets of the popular press. “If there is no public to break into a roar of laughter when Mr. [Arnold] Bennett tells us that R. H. Mottram, like James Joyce, is a genius or that D. H. Lawrence and R. H. Mottram (poor Mr. Mottram!), are the two real British

³²⁹ Ibid., 38.

³³⁰ Ibid.

geniuses of the new age,” Leavis asks, “how should there be a public to appreciate Mr. Bennett’s modesty about poetry?”³³¹

I want to digress here for a moment, since Leavis’s anxiety regarding the commercial press was echoed in a five-part series published in *The Nation* by Margaret Marshall, the magazine’s literary editor, and the critic Mary McCarthy in the fall of 1935. In these articles, which reviewed the literary criticism of the last ten years, Marshall and McCarthy engaged in a similar exercise, critiquing those who had hailed Louis Bromfeld as “the important American writer” and ranked Thornton Wilder with Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville “and the one or two other giants of American Letters.”³³² Like Leavis, they pointed to the rise of advertising and the publishers’ need to sell newspapers to account for the misguided evaluations of critics who wrote for the *Herald Tribune*, the *Saturday Review of Literature*, the *New York Times Book Review*, and the *New Masses*.³³³ They applauded the efforts of *The Nation* and the *New Republic*, although they gave the quarterlies—*Yale Review*, the *Virginia Quarterly*, and, previously, the *Symposium* and the recently defunct *Hound & Horn*—the most credit for remaining independent.³³⁴

³³¹ Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, 17.

³³² Mary McCarthy and Margaret Marshall, “Our Critics, Right or Wrong,” *The Nation* 141, no. 3668 (October 23, 1935): 468–69.

³³³ It should be noted that advertising agencies had “only a limited influence” before World War I. It was only after the war that “large-scale organization became dominant in magazine publishing and advertisers exerted a far greater influence on format and content.” Matthew Schneirov, *The Dream of a New Social Order: Popular Magazines in America, 1893-1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 12.

³³⁴ See Mary McCarthy and Margaret Marshall, “Our Critics, Right or Wrong IV.: The Proletarians,” *The Nation* 141, no. 3674 (December 4, 1935): 653–55; Mary McCarthy and Margaret Marshall, “Our Critics, Right or Wrong V.: Literary Salesmen,” *The Nation* 142, no. 3678 (January 1, 1936): 22–23.

The issue was the distinction between “reviewers” and “critics.”³³⁵ “It is my contention,” wrote K. S. Thompson in 1934, “that the American reviewer of books is by no means a critic. To qualify as a critic, a reviewer should be somewhat judicial, show a certain knowledge of literature and history and some acquaintance with the meaning of the words he reads and uses.”³³⁶ Joseph Wood Krutch, who was also on the editorial staff, defended Marshall and McCarthy’s series and published his own views on the topic two years later (the same year that Ransom published “Criticism, Inc.”) in an article titled “What is a Good Review?” The best review, he argued, was one that was not “trying to be something else”—like an “independent essay” or “aesthetic discourse”—and the “ambitious reviewer” should be dissuaded from attempting “to demonstrate his capacities by producing something ‘more than a review.’”³³⁷ The absent foil here—the too-ambitious reviewer who was trying to be “something else”—is, clearly, the “critic” and Krutch could easily have been thinking of the *New York Intellectual* (or at least the little magazine), whose stock-in-trade was the book review that doubled as something like an “independent

³³⁵ *The Nation*, along with *The New Republic*, wrote Morton Dauwen Zabel, was one of the “two or three reputable ‘journals of opinion’ still extant in America” whose book departments “remain after twenty years the best places in which to find liberal, independent criticism, often highly detailed and invariably written out of an active interest in modern creative art, a clear knowledge of its purposes, and a sense of its direction.” See Morton Dauwen Zabel, “The Condition of American Criticism: 1939,” *The English Journal* 28, no. 6 (June 1939): 422–3, doi:10.2307/806423.

³³⁶ K.S. Thompson, “Are Reviewers Critics?,” *The Nation* 138, no. 3574 (January 3, 1934): 22. Henry James, writing in 1891, might have been the first to distinguish between criticism and reviewing: “If literary criticism may be said to flourish among us at all, it certainly flourishes immensely, for it flows through the periodical press like a river that has burst its dikes... What strikes the observer above all, in such affluence, is the unexpected proportion the discourses uttered bears to the objects discoursed of—the paucity of examples, of illustrations and productions, and the deluge of doctrine suspended in the void; the profusion of talk and the contraction of experiment, of what one may call literary conduct... Then we see that these conditions have engendered the practice of ‘reviewing’—a practice that in general has nothing to do with the art of criticism.” Henry James, “Criticism,” in *Literary Opinion in America*, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel, vol. 1 (New York: Torchbooks, 1962), 47.

³³⁷ Joseph Wood Krutch, “What Is a Good Review?,” *The Nation* 144, no. 16 (April 17, 1937): 438.

essay.” His distinction was implicitly linked to context: “reviewers” writing for the popular press shouldn’t try to “demonstrate their capacities” as critics, since this was not their place. By the end of the decade, some would argue that reviewers and critics were engaged in entirely different endeavors.

Writing nearly a decade before the *Partisan* editors began making their appeal to the producers of culture (and in a very different cultural and political context), Leavis was concerned about its consumers. Greenberg focused on culture itself—and the critic’s relationship to it. He was not concerned with “the culture which the individual may envisage as an ideal or set himself to acquire,” but with “the culture that a whole society may develop and transmit,” as T. S. Eliot would put it a few years later.³³⁸ And for this reason he owes more to Arnold than he might have acknowledged. Greenberg mentioned Arnold in several of his early letters to Lazarus. A year after he graduated from college (and nearly eight years before he moved to Greenwich Village where he met the *Partisan* critics), he wrote, “I need, like Matthew Arnold’s romantics, a critical atmosphere.”³³⁹ He was probably referring to an 1864 lecture titled “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” in which Arnold argued that, “The grand work of literary genius is... inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere.”³⁴⁰ Arguing against those who “asserted the inherent superiority of the creative effort of the human spirit over its critical effort,” Arnold maintained that, while creative activity was more important, it nevertheless depended on criticism. “[T]he creation of a modern poet,” he wrote, “to be worth much, implies a great

³³⁸ T. S. Eliot, “Notes Towards a Definition of Culture,” *Partisan Review* XI, no. 2 (Spring 1944): 145.

³³⁹ Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928-1943*, 37.

³⁴⁰ Arnold, *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*, 2.

critical effort behind it.”³⁴¹ Indeed, Arnold continued, becoming more insistent, creative activity was impossible without the ground that criticism provided for it: “Criticism first; a time of true creative activity, perhaps,—which, as I have said, must inevitably be preceded amongst us by a time of criticism,—hereafter, when criticism has done its work.”³⁴²

According to Arnold, Burke was so great because, though he lived in an “epoch of concentration” rather than an “epoch of expansion”—meaning that he had witnessed the French Revolution’s “movement of ideas” from the intellectual to the political sphere—he nevertheless “saturate[d] politics with thought.”³⁴³ In other words, while Burke didn’t have the benefit of a critical atmosphere, he refused to abandon the intellectual sphere, saturating politics with thought rather than decamping for the political sphere along with everyone else. For Arnold, the realm of ideas (with which he associated criticism) was antithetical to the realm of practice (with which he associated politics), and the distinguishing feature of criticism was its disinterestedness. (Benda was clearly taking his cues from Arnold.)

Arnold was arguing for culture, on one hand, and criticism on the other, which is, ultimately, what connects Leavis and Greenberg. Although Leavis’s argument in *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* might leave something to be desired, Williams makes an important claim for his criticism, writing that, “The process which Arnold began, when he virtually equated ‘culture’ with ‘criticism,’ is completed by Leavis.”³⁴⁴ Quoting I. A. Richards in his pamphlet, Leavis asserted that, “Matthew Arnold, when he said that poetry is a

³⁴¹ Ibid., 1; 3.

³⁴² Ibid., 7.

³⁴³ Ibid., 5.

³⁴⁴ Williams, *Culture and Society*, 254.

criticism of life, was saying something so obvious that it is constantly overlooked.”³⁴⁵ To suggest that Greenberg played an analogous role in the U.S. is not to argue for the equivalence of these critics *as critics*. Rather, it points to a parallel in their relationship to a certain convergence of culture and criticism. By focusing on culture rather than on its producers or consumers, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” anticipated Greenberg’s later preoccupation with modernist self-criticality, but it also contributed to the functional shift that criticism was undergoing within the context of the little magazine.

Taking Sides

In spite of their many differences, *Kenyon* and *Partisan* found common ground in their interrogation of the function of criticism—and the judgment it entailed. Allen Tate rejected the belief that “we cannot judge the literature of our time because we do not know whether the future will approve of it,” asking, in effect, who was responsible for the judgments of History. (This idea dates back to Shelley’s rejection of contemporary criticism and his appeal to “a standard that might be set above the clamour of the writer’s actual relations with society.”) And Ransom had pointed out that literary historians could not acknowledge their debt to criticism because of their view that, “all the literature has been written, and is now a branch of history” and, consequently, “a poem is only an instance of its history.” When literary history masqueraded as literary criticism, the role of judgment was repressed. The *Partisan* critics faced a similar dilemma, albeit for different reasons, since History drove the dialectic. Rejecting the determinism of the “literary counterpart of mechanical materialism” (i.e. leftism), they insisted that the critic’s job was “to encourage some [currents of revolutionary

³⁴⁵ Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, 4.

literature] rather than others.” Failure to do so, they warned, might hinder literature’s progress and writers might even be “shunted off their revolutionary rails.”

In the 1940s, as the *Partisan* editors became increasingly concerned about the fate of the intellectual, the *Kenyon* critics pushed for the justification of literature and literary education “as themselves and not as handmaids of other disciplines,” as Trilling put it. A curious result of this shift was that critical judgment could now be ascribed to critics rather than the invisible hand of History. Greenberg appears to have had little interest in either the professional role of the critic (*Kenyon*) or the social role of the intellectual (*Partisan*), but he nevertheless shared these critics’ concerns regarding judgment. Writing about Jerome Mellquist’s *The Emergence of an American Art* in the early 40s, he complained that the book “establishes no scale for the understanding. The various critical estimates have no coherence, and are conceived without reference to any explicit or implicit hierarchy of values.” Further, “Mr. Mellquist does not place or evaluate” the artists’ work but, rather, “describes, without conscience either as a writer or critic, his reactions to it.” And, finally, “Mr. Mellquist adds nothing to our conception of Marin’s art because he does not put it into any perspective.”³⁴⁶ The use of terms like “scale,” “hierarchy,” “place,” and “perspective” points to the relational focus of Greenberg’s criticism: judgment was an unavoidable aspect of criticism that “placed” or ranked artists’ work.³⁴⁷ Greenberg was even more explicit when he wrote that if younger poets were going to “insist on wondering about what’s going to happen to us all,” they could at least try to understand history. “If they do

³⁴⁶ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1*, 107.

³⁴⁷ Greenberg had already developed this habit by the time he was in college: “Gauguin is over-rated, Karfiol is usual, Pascin is French and Rouault’s big canvas in blue, black, and glaze is the best picture in the house with Matisse, Cézanne and Dufy next in that order. ‘Picasso is simply Decadent!’” Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928-1943*, 18.

this,” he argued, “they will have ideas, and if they have ideas they will have programs, and if they have programs they will take sides.”³⁴⁸

For the *Partisan* critics, “taking sides” had initially meant alignment with the proletariat. It meant encouraging “some currents rather than others” in order to “fight those currents that are moving away from Marxism.” Later, they would take the intellectual’s side. Taking sides was, of course, the obligation implied by the binary that was constructed in and by “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” Greenberg would have agreed that a “magazine was a form of criticism,” although, at this juncture, its critical function had a prospective quality: “Good writing does not grow like flowers in the fields, which need only a receptacle in order to bear fruit, which awaits only a magazine with high standards and an open-minded policy to come drifting in on the first wind... The function of a little magazine is to be an agent. In order to act as an agent and stir up good writing there must be some kind of positive notion, some working hypothesis, as to what this good writing of the future will be like. As Kant says, you only find what you look for.” This observation, offered in an article on the “renaissance” of the little magazine, owes something to Arnold’s view that the creation of the modern poet “implies a great critical effort behind it,” but, like Arnold, Greenberg didn’t leave the meaning of this statement open to interpretation: “If writing as creative activity is not to disappear,” he went on to say, “it is up to us.”³⁴⁹ (Greenberg’s focus on the future rather than the “restraining sense of tradition” and his pivot from “absolute values” to “aesthetic values” distinguish his understanding of critical judgment from Babbitt’s.) This is the kind of rhetoric that led Guilbaut to conclude that Greenberg had

³⁴⁸ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1*, 47.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

developed his theory of modern art “in order to create a structure” that “would play an aggressive, dominant role on the international scene.” But Greenberg might have had something else in mind. The criticism that was read, as Greenberg acknowledged, more avidly than the little magazine’s poetry and fiction, had a job to do. To paraphrase Arnold, this was the moment, in Greenberg’s view, for criticism—or the convergence of culture and criticism—to be of service.

Convergence

By the time *Partisan Review* was founded almost two decades after *The Seven Arts* had come and gone, social criticism was well established. The *Partisan* critics published both social criticism in the style of Brooks and Bourne and cultural criticism, which followed the course that Bourne had urged, examining art and literature “in relation to the larger movement of ideas and social movements and the peculiar intellectual and spiritual color of the time.” Neil Jumonville calls the New York Intellectuals “generalist cultural critics,” which he defines broadly as “reviewers and essayists who wrote on contemporary issues of political, social, and cultural importance” and goes on to gloss the constituent parts of his descriptor:

As generalists, they took all of culture and society as their province, rather than restricting themselves to the specialized fields they also knew; as reviewers and critics, they were constantly evaluating and adjudicating ongoing cultural and political production; as intellectuals, they were involved in current issues and struggles, rather than detached and neutral scholarship.³⁵⁰

Jumonville separates these parts for heuristic purposes only, since the whole is a synthesis that is in some sense irreducible. (Some observers have understood this definition to work

³⁵⁰ Jumonville, *Critical Crossings*, 3.

in both directions—the New York Intellectual is the definition of “generalist cultural critic” and vice versa.) “Criticism at its best,” he continues, “is a debate about the purpose of life” and is “founded on dissent,” both of which were of paramount importance to the *Partisan* critics. “Performed properly,” he concludes, “it reaches beyond the measurement of a particular artifact, explores the possibilities and boundaries of life, and informs the demands that culture places on our lives. It is, as Matthew Arnold noted, life’s criticism of itself.”³⁵¹

Whether Arnold himself made this claim or it is simply Jumonville’s interpretation of Arnold’s “poetry is a criticism of life” is unclear, but I would argue that Greenberg’s perception differed slightly from both formulations. The critic who made his initial foray into the critical field with “Avant-garde and Kitsch” and declared two years later that, “If writing as creative activity is not to disappear it is up to us” did not believe that avant-garde art and literature could “substitute [themselves] for the values capitalism has made valueless,” as Clark argues—that cultural revolution was either tantamount to social revolution or was capable of inciting it. (“At most,” Rahv and Phillips had argued, “a poem usually helps to crystallize latent urges to action stimulated by a variety of other influences.”³⁵²) In an essay published in the Winter 1939 issue of *Partisan*, Harold Rosenberg criticized Thomas Mann’s “assumption that art itself possesses a specific, independent tempo of development which can be imposed on social change.” “Asserting that culture is menaced with destruction by Pure Politics,” Rosenberg writes, “Mann sees it rising to save itself by its own action and self-affirmation.” His profound skepticism toward

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Wallace Phelps (William Phillips) and Rahv, “Criticism,” 19.

Mann's position is summed up in the question he poses in response: "But will the ruling class pass over voluntarily to socialism in the name of Culture?"³⁵³

Greenberg wasn't disturbed by the possibility that the public might take Arnold Bennett seriously nor did he believe that culture could "save itself"; rather, he was concerned about whether criticism might matter for culture. It was avant-garde culture—not, or not only, artworks or poetry—that had the capacity to produce a critique of capitalism, and criticism played an integral role in its production. "Every minute more the fuss about Mann irks me more," Greenberg wrote in a letter dated January 13, 1939, "The intellectuals—like Swift's true critics—have excrescencies to nibble on. But only because Mann deals with important questions explicitly. Let them try their teeth on Joyce, the unfashionable now, who deals with these same things better, only implicitly, so that their elucidation by a critic will prove to be a real accomplishment of criticism, not a pretext for writing importantly."³⁵⁴ Mann, in other words, essentially robbed critics of the opportunity to play their role, allowing them to "write importantly" but nothing else. Greenberg, who separates himself from "the intellectuals" here, might have been critiquing the obviousness of Rosenberg's analysis of Mann's fiction, but he wasn't repudiating Rosenberg's argument.

But it's not clear that Greenberg would have agreed with Jumonville's claim that "Criticism... is life's criticism of itself" either. Criticism might be integral to "creative activity," but the convergence of culture and criticism didn't amount to their synthesis—to the subordination, that is, of culture by criticism. Greenberg's belief that "the function of a little magazine is to be an agent" is anticipated by the claims that Bourne and Brooks were

³⁵³ Harold Rosenberg, "Myth and History," *Partisan Review* VI, no. 2 (Winter 1939): 19; 37.

³⁵⁴ Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928-1943*, 189.

making for criticism. The lesson that the *Partisan* critics had learned from the social criticism of the World War I era was that criticism had a role to play in cultural production. Criticism, according to this view, didn't passively await its object but worked as an agent to shape and construct it. The avant-garde might still be dependent on the ruling classes for economic support, but its cultural support must come from criticism. But if criticism and culture were interdependent (like form and content), criticism could not displace culture.

Cultural critics, following the model provided by social critics, assumed the imbrication of creative activity and criticism, but there's an important difference between their understanding of this relationship and Greenberg's. While Bourne and Brooks had written vaguely of criticism's aim of "carrying the fresh and creative expression of the present towards a greater wisdom and clarity and ardor of life" and the *Partisan* editors had insisted on the dialectical nature of revolutionary literature whose progress might be retarded if criticism didn't fulfill its task, Greenberg spoke of "find[ing] what you look for." Progress was linked to the goals of the revolution for the *Partisan* critics, who were more concerned about identifying a "usable past" for literature than they were about finding the "good writing of the future." Implicit in Greenberg's "working hypothesis" is the idea that he had some notion of what he was looking for (although at least one writer referred to the critics who "absorbed much of the thought of Randolph Bourne" as "horizon-chasers").³⁵⁵ As cultural producers, critics would need to play a more active role. And, for Greenberg,

³⁵⁵ C. Hartley Grattan, "The Present Situation in American Literary Criticism," *The Sewanee Review* 40, no. 1 (March 1932): 15.

the process of “stirring up good writing” involved the “placement” or ranking of writers and artists.

In September 1940, Greenberg declared in a letter to Lazarus that, “[E]veryone dislikes technical criticism of painting; and there’s no other decent kind.”³⁵⁶ Several months later, Greenberg contributed his first review to *The Nation* and was writing “technical criticism” of art exhibitions by the end of the following year. Although it hasn’t generated much discussion, Greenberg’s migration from *Partisan Review* to *The Nation* was crucial to his development as a critic. Rahv and Phillips apparently opposed the publication of “Towards a Newer Laocoön,” which met with less success than “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” and Greenberg’s next essay on art was rejected even though he was by then a *Partisan* editor (he told Lazarus that it was deemed “well-written but ‘unsound’”).³⁵⁷ *Partisan* never published any of his poems, but Greenberg did succeed in publishing the piece on Brecht’s poetry that he had mentioned to Lazarus. Unable to duplicate the success of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” and hoping to “make some money doing book-reviews,” Greenberg contrived to meet Margaret Marshall (the literary editor of *The Nation*) in the fall of 1940, who, he wrote, “offered me a review in the vaguest terms: when I see a book I’m interested in.”³⁵⁸ Greenberg published his first book review in *The Nation* in February 1941; occasional book reviews soon morphed into a weekly column on art. More interested in the critic’s (cultural) role than he was in the intellectual’s (social) role (or the literary critic’s professional aspirations), he began to chart a course between *Kenyon* and *Partisan* when he started writing his column in *The Nation*.

³⁵⁶ Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928-1943*, 226.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

Greenberg's innovation, if it can be called that, was to merge a cultural criticism that reached beyond the "measurement of a particular artifact" and technical criticism—another kind of convergence. One observer, reviewing Theodore Greene's 1940 book *The Arts and the Art of Criticism* in *The Art Bulletin*, made a stab at a definition of technical criticism, arguing that a critic "informed in the materials and techniques of a given art" can point to "artistic success in terms of certain definite artistic intentions that are functions of the medium and its relevant techniques."³⁵⁹ (As a kind of aesthetic criticism, technical criticism treated art or poetry "as a fine art, shut up in its own world, subject to its own rules and values," but its "standard of judgment" was limited to the artist's technical proficiency or craftsmanship. It shared the "traditional basis" of judicial criticism, but lacked its moralism.) I would argue that Greenberg's decision to focus on art rather than literature had to do, in part, with his lack of success as a poet and his belief in the value of technical criticism.³⁶⁰ Greenberg was clearly interested in art—there is a progression in his early essays from less to more engagement (the essay that *Partisan* turned down was on painting). It was also more practical to write a weekly column on art than literature. Whatever the reason, his fusion of cultural criticism and technical criticism over the course of the next eight years accomplished two things: it served to diminish the "generalist" aspect of Greenberg's

³⁵⁹ "He can point, as any critic informed in the materials and techniques of a given art can point, to artistic success in terms of certain definite artistic intentions that are functions of the medium and its relevant techniques. Professor Greene is dealing here with what may be called technical criticism, but technical criticism used with discretion and imagination, with norms on the level of the artist's characteristic problem and his resources as defined by the medium itself." Irwin Edman, "Review of *The Arts and the Art of Criticism* by Theodore Meyer Greene," *The Art Bulletin* 22, no. 4 (December 1940): 275, doi:10.2307/3046719.

³⁶⁰ By the time he began to write longer, more theoretical essays in the late 40s, he had had what he would later refer to as "a belly-full of reviewing" by which he meant a kind of "technical criticism." See Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3: Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1995), 195.

cultural criticism, but it also gave technical criticism a particular emphasis, or, to put it more strongly, a goal or a “working hypothesis.”

Although it’s true that Greenberg set out to “find what he was looking for,” he didn’t have a preconceived idea of what that would be; he wasn’t looking for the next “ism” to fit into the modernist narrative. For Greenberg, at this moment, there was no “modernist narrative”—at least not one that he had articulated. Contrary to what Clark argues, Greenberg did not consider “modernism” and “avant-garde” to be interchangeable terms in 1939. Rather, he associated “modernism” with a cultural shift that was manifest in both art and literature, and his “working hypothesis” about the future derived from two closely connected attributes of contemporary cultural production: the interdependence of form and content that the editors of *Partisan* and *Kenyon* espoused and the focus on medium that was central to Hans Hofmann’s understanding of cubism.³⁶¹ And, just as “modernism” and “avant-garde” were not synonymous, neither were “criticism” and “modernism,” although there’s no question that the advent of modernist literature and art changed the relationship between criticism and the arts and would ultimately change the nature of criticism.

Greenberg’s sole use of the term “modernist art” in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” suggests that it referred to a particular group of established artists and poets. Although he doesn’t imply that modernism is no longer in force (at least not in any direct sense), he distinguishes it from “the avant-garde itself”: “Picasso’s shows still draw crowds, and T. S.

³⁶¹ As Hofmann wrote in 1921, “[T]he difference between the arts arises because of the difference in nature of the mediums of expression and by the emphasis induced by the nature of each medium. Each means of expression has its own order of being, its own units.” See Hans Hofmann, *Search for the Real* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1967), 57.

Eliot is taught in the universities; the dealers in modernist art are still in business, and the publishers still publish some ‘difficult’ poetry. But the avant-garde itself, already sensing danger, is becoming more timid every day that passes.”³⁶² If Greenberg understood modernism to mean something like what Bourdieu refers to as the “consecrated avant-garde,” he was not alone. Clifton Fadiman, for instance, argued in 1933 that, because there was no “new crop of writers” who could be considered “modern” or “modernist,” it could be that “modernism, rigidly conceived, was a phenomenon of the post-War period, made up of the leavings of the pre-War esthetic schools upon which were superimposed the tensions, the disbalances, the nervous revolts of the post-War artist.”³⁶³

Greenberg would quote Arnold on the critic’s “justness of spirit” nearly a decade after he published “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” which sounds like an Arnoldian version of Bourne’s contemporaneous criticism: “To ascertain the master-current in the literature of the epoch, and to distinguish this from all minor currents, is one of the critic’s highest functions; in discharging it he shows how far he possesses the most indispensable quality of his office—justness of spirit.” But this “justness of spirit,” Greenberg adds, “leads, in this rather corrupt and declining age, to an attitude which in the eyes of the age itself must seem hostile. Once distinguished, the master-current, whether in art or literature, must seem an aberration—to point out which requires a quirkiness not at all resembling justness of spirit. Detachment, which is the indispensable preliminary to justness, seems on the contrary eccentricity, and eccentricity means isolation, and isolation means despair.”³⁶⁴ *Partisan* had taught Greenberg about critical agency—that judgment had cultural value—but the path that

³⁶² Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 38.

³⁶³ Fadiman, “Stray Thoughts on Literary Modernism,” 28.

³⁶⁴ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*, 192.

Partisan would take in the 40s (which had very little to do with Greenberg’s idea of how to “stir up good art”) was evident by the time he began writing for *The Nation*. Unlike Ransom, Greenberg wasn’t out to professionalize much less “found” criticism; in the absence of socialism, he was looking to the convergence of culture and criticism “for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now.”³⁶⁵

For Greenberg, in 1939, what was at stake was the “survival of culture in general.” Like Greenberg, the *Partisan* editors were convinced of the vital role that criticism played in the construction of culture, but, in the absence of an active avant-garde, they would become increasingly preoccupied with preserving the social role of the intellectual. In rejecting a modernist framework—or, more specifically, a Greenbergian framework—for Greenberg’s early criticism, I have tried to understand it within its own critical context. The preservation of abstract art was not an end in itself. Abstraction’s importance—and validity—was linked to the avant-garde, which, as the “only living culture,” had to be sustained. Similarly, the little magazine’s agency was not a critical prescription; it was a cultural imperative. As the enthusiastic response to “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” by cultural and literary critics (James Burnham, Van Wyck Brooks, Louise Bogan, Delmore Schwartz, and Harold Rosenberg) attests, Greenberg’s essay had a significant impact on the critical discourse in which *Partisan* participated. But, if art discourse occupied a different site and Greenbergian modernism wasn’t the critical paradigm that governed it, the question is: what was?

³⁶⁵ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 49.

Chapter 4

Art Discourse Between the Wars

What I have tried to argue with regard to Greenberg's early writings is that there was a critical discourse into which they were introduced, but it wasn't the one that his practice was instrumental in fostering. Meaning that it wasn't what we'd now refer to as "art discourse." This is why no one batted an eye when Greenberg switched from "literary critic" to "art critic" when he began writing for *The Nation*. (Intellectual-critics, I've argued, practiced social or cultural criticism starting in the first decades of the twentieth century, but, because literature was the "nerve center" of culture, at least from a critical standpoint, literary criticism was sometimes identified with cultural criticism.) He had proven himself as a "critic" with the publication—and, more crucially, the reception—of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," a credential without which Margaret Marshall would not have "offered him a review" in even the vaguest of terms (although, according to Greenberg, she "admitted she hadn't read any of my stuff").³⁶⁶ Qualified as a "generalist cultural critic" (insofar as he had published a couple of essays in a little magazine with a good reputation), he took "all of culture and society as [his] province" rather than restricting himself to a specialized field.³⁶⁷ Greenberg would become known as an art critic as he gradually stopped writing about literature (and the critical landscape began to change), but this was a self-imposed restriction or, simply, a choice.

If I haven't said much about art criticism up until this point, it's because it didn't participate in a *critical* discourse—at least not in the sense that I've been using this term—until after World War II. Before the war, American art discourse not only had a different "object," it had a different function. The leftism that Rahv and Phillips opposed—and

³⁶⁶ Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928-1943*, 228.

³⁶⁷ Jumonville, *Critical Crossings*, 3.

against which they defined their own practice—was a position staked out within a critical field, but there was no such field for art criticism until the 50s. Which is not to say that there was no art criticism (or that there were no debates among art critics), only that it differed as a practice from literary and cultural criticism and, largely for this reason, no critical position dominated the field (perhaps it would be more accurate to say that there was no struggle for hegemony within that field). Ransom’s belief that literary criticism needed its “own charter of rights” notwithstanding, the new criticism had to *appropriate* its position. Because there was so little resistance to it—New Humanism had been under attack since the teens, Marxism, suffering from internal debates, hadn’t emerged as a clearly articulated position, and no one rose to the defense of literary scholarship—this was a particularly bloodless affair, but it nevertheless involved a displacement.

The essays that Greenberg published in little magazines like *Partisan* and *Horizon* were cultural criticism and I’ve argued that his *Nation* reviews were a kind of hybrid cultural-technical criticism. But if this writing didn’t count as “art criticism,” what did? According to some artists and critics, art criticism in the 20s and 30s was not actually criticism. We’ve seen this before. Writing the year before Edmund Wilson published “The Critic Who Does Not Exist,” Thomas Craven complained about the “poor journalism” that passed for art criticism, echoing—or anticipating—Wilson’s lament about the “immense amount of literary journalism” that was being published in lieu of literary criticism:

The body of art criticism in America is composed mainly of the reports of exhibitions in the newspapers and magazines, and the ponderous volumes on aesthetics emanating from the universities and the offices of doctors and lawyers who have been infected—after they have grown wealthy—with the

itch for collecting. In the larger sense of the word, this material is not criticism at all; it is, on the one hand, simply poor journalism, impressive to the layman, perhaps, because unintelligible; on the other, it is a species of psychological speculation not to be matched in any other department of literature.³⁶⁸

Craven's comment might betray his characteristic spleen, but that doesn't mean there isn't some truth to it.

Like Craven, Ralph Pearson, who published a three-part series titled "The Failure of the Art Critics" several years later, was convinced that "so-called art criticism in this country is not criticism; it is journalism and little if anything more," but he was more specific about what this writing lacked: those calling themselves art critics did not know "pictorial form in the modern sense" and were, therefore, "incapable of discussing it with validity or distinguishing between the different schools."³⁶⁹ As Pearson explained, those who understood "this meaning" included Roger Fry, R. H. Wilenski, and Albert Barnes, "who probably understands [it] as thoroughly as is possible to a layman." He also noted that his own book, *Experiencing Pictures* (1932), was "devoted mainly to this explanation."³⁷⁰ Of the "leading art critics" whose writing Pearson proceeded to dissect, Craven was the only one who qualified as a critic (at least provisionally). Whatever we might make of Pearson's analysis, there's no gainsaying the fact that writers like Edward Alden Jewell, Elizabeth Luther Cary, Royal Cortissoz, Margaret Breuning, Henry McBride, and C. J. Bulliet published in large-circulation newspapers and were often referred to as "journalist-critics"—

³⁶⁸ Craven, "The Criticism of Painting in America," 446-47.

³⁶⁹ Ralph M. Pearson, "The Failure of the Art Critics," *The Forum* XCIV, no. 5 (November 1935): 311; 313 Pearson was an artist who had been trained at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. See "Oral History Interview with Ronald H. Pearson," <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-ronald-h-pearson-11953>.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 313.

or that their criticism did not deal with “pictorial form.” (Those affiliated with the American Abstract Artists group would challenge critics on this issue even more vociferously several years later; I take this up in chapter 5.) Pearson didn’t mention those who wrote for the art press because American art magazines concentrated on “news” or “news and opinion” in the 30s.

According to Pearson, criticism should be “more than the expression of personal likes and dislikes,” it should be analytical “of all or at least the main phases of the work” and, in order to be analytical, the critic must work from “some standard of values” that it was the critic’s duty to explain. To emphasize this last point he quotes the English literary critic I. A. Richards:

To habilitate the critic, to defend accepted standards against Tolstoyan attacks, to narrow the interval between these standards and popular taste, to protect the arts from the crude moralities of Puritans and perverts, a general theory of value which will not leave the statement, “This is good, that bad” either vague or arbitrary, must be provided.³⁷¹

Art critics of the interwar period based their judgments as to whether “This is good, that bad” on the “standards of the past” (traditionalist critics) or worked from “some standard of values” that usually had a less rigidly conceived “traditional basis” (technical or aesthetic critics).³⁷² Cultural critics would have agreed that criticism was not about “likes and dislikes”

³⁷¹ Ibid., 311.

³⁷² Pearson engaged in some circular reasoning in determining who was qualified to practice art criticism. He appears to have concluded (albeit in the most oblique way possible) that only artists were qualified to practice it, arguing that the “standard of value” upon which analysis was based (not “some standard of value,” but “*the* standard of value”) had “only such planks” that could be agreed upon as “self-evident truths by those equipped to judge.” In other words, only those for whom those truths were self-evident (those with “direct experience,” i.e. artists) were equipped to judge. The two “self-evident truths” were that there were six different types of artists (a classificatory scheme that he borrowed from R. H. Wilenski) and that “every work of pictorial art except the complete abstraction has both content and form or design and that all criticism should cover both fields.” As Pearson argues, “[I]gnorance of pictorial form may not disqualify a writer from being an excellent journalist but... it definitely does

and that it needed to be analytical. They would certainly have agreed with Richards's call for "a general theory of value," although that theory wasn't limited to determining whether "This is good, that bad." But if art critics weren't really writing criticism, as Pearson and Craven claimed, art was also not the "object" of their discourse.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault writes that the task of analyzing discourses "consists of not—of no longer—treating [them] as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak."³⁷³ It could be argued that the object of which American art discourse spoke prior to the 50s was aesthetics or taste rather than art. As Frank Crowninshield, one of the publishers of *ARTnews*, wrote in 1942 on the occasion of the magazine's fortieth anniversary, "[C]hanges in American taste are usually as rapid as they are unpredictable. But, whatever those alterations have been, *ARTnews* has not only mirrored them accurately and sympathetically, but has aided, valiantly and without let-up, in stimulating, directing, and giving them their final form."³⁷⁴ Contemporary readers might infer from this that Crowninshield was alluding to the critical reception of then-current art practices. They would only be partly right, however, since *ARTnews* had "covered" contemporary art without offering any critical analysis at all until the late 30s. Similarly, Peyton Boswell, Jr., the editor of *The Art Digest*, had written a year earlier that the

disqualify him from being an art critic." He was certainly not alone in this view. The artists associated with the American Abstract Artists group would come to a similar conclusion several years later when they subjected many of the same critics to the same kind of scrutiny. *Ibid.*, 312; 314; Ralph M. Pearson, *Experiencing Pictures: Through Analysis of Ancient and Modern Works and Through Practice of the Procedures Which Make Those Works Effective* (New York: Brewer, Warren and Putnam, 1932), 198.

³⁷³ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 49.

³⁷⁴ H. G. Dwight and Alfred Frankfurter, *Art Parade: Seeing the Past Forty Years Through Art News and the Frick Collection* (New York: The Art Foundation, Inc., 1942), 13.

“primary function” of art critics was “to establish for their public a standard of aesthetic values, as measured by their own knowledge and critical sensitivity.”³⁷⁵ Like Leavis, both of these observers were concerned about the consumers of culture.

Crowninshield’s statement evokes George Saintsbury’s definition of literary criticism: “the reasoned exercise of Literary Taste—the attempt, by examination of literature, to find out what it is that makes literature pleasant, and therefore good.”³⁷⁶ Boswell’s claim might be compared to Harriet Monroe’s assertion that, rather than examining the work “in relation to the larger movement of ideas and social movements,” as Bourne had suggested, critics needed to “estimate values” by “a strictly aesthetic standard.”³⁷⁷ These views date back to the first decades of the century. Indeed, Gertrude Buck’s diagram of the positions that made up the field of critical practices in the 1910s provides a template for mapping the field of art critical practices of the interwar period.

Tradition

Before the late 40s, most art critics practiced the kind of impressionistic or appreciative criticism that literary critics had begun to critique as early as the turn of the century, or a narrowly conceived form of technical aesthetic criticism, based on academic standards in the case of the most traditional critics. H. Wayne Morgan writes that, for Kenyon Cox, who began writing unsigned exhibition reviews for the *New York Evening Post* in the late nineteenth century, “Technical merit basically fixed an artist’s place.”³⁷⁸ Cox and other

³⁷⁵ Peyton Boswell, Jr., “On Critical Kindness,” *The Art Digest* XV, no. 2 (October 15, 1940): 3.

³⁷⁶ Buck, *The Social Criticism of Literature*, 13.

³⁷⁷ Monroe, “Aesthetic and Social Criticism,” 41.

³⁷⁸ H. Wayne Morgan, *Keepers of Culture: The Art-Thought of Kenyon Cox, Royal Cortissoz, and Frank Jewett Mather, Jr.* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1989), 42. Cox, a painter

“traditionalist” critics like Royal Cortissoz and Frank Jewett Mather, Jr. (both of whom started publishing art criticism around 1900) were less interested in the vicissitudes of the public’s taste than they were in anchoring that taste through their defense of tradition, which was more closely linked to taste than to the artwork itself.³⁷⁹ Tradition, wrote Cortissoz in 1927, was a “striving toward perfection that filters down from generation to generation. It germinates creative ideas. Also it subtly inculcates a feeling for restraint and measure. It discloses ideals of sound proportion. It stabilizes judgment and purifies taste.”³⁸⁰

For the traditionalists, passing judgment on an artwork (the locution is intentional here) involved measuring it against a standard (of beauty) derived from works produced in the (distant) past—a description that resonates with the “traditional basis” of Buck’s “deductive” or “judicial” critic, who judged literature “solely by its conformity with accepted models or canons.” Buck was probably referring to the New Humanists, with whom Mather was close. He was friends with Paul Elmer More and taught with Irving Babbitt at Williams College in the 1890s (he also dedicated his 1927 book, *Modern Painting*, to Babbitt). Although he agreed with the “broad aims and indictments” of the New Humanists, Mather found their condemnation of modern trends excessive and thought science and technology, “the bugbears of New Humanism,” were “logical and inevitable developments in history.”³⁸¹ But Mather noted that Babbitt “taught me that enjoyment of art

himself, also contributed to *Scribners*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Harper’s Monthly* as well as *The Nation*.

³⁷⁹ Mather, who would end up in the academy, served as the *Post’s* art editor from 1905 to 1906 and again from 1910 to 1911; he also wrote occasionally for *The Nation*. Cortissoz was the art critic for the *New York Tribune* from the late 1890s until the mid-40s. See *ibid.*, 64; 99; 109.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

is a responsible act in life, that its tendency is a function of the work of art and as such a proper subject of criticism.”³⁸²

The primary focus for these critics was the audience or “art lover,” by which they meant the “thoughtful” or “sensitive” person. Mather, underscoring the idea of generational succession that Cortissoz had stressed in his meditation on tradition, wrote in 1935:

The central figure in esthetics is really the art lover. In the realm of beauty everything proceeds from him and ultimately returns to him. For the artist is only the art lover become creative, while the work of art finds its chief reason for being in the art lover’s experience of beauty. Anything like continuity of appreciation, taste as a social and historical factor, depends on the unflinching succession of generation after generation of sensitive and discriminating art lovers.³⁸³

The idea that art must communicate with its audience drove the traditionalists’ call for representational art. Cézanne, according to Cox, “could not learn to paint as others did, and spent his life in the hopeless attempt to create a new art of painting for himself.

Fumblingly and partially he can express himself to the few—he will never have anything for the many.”³⁸⁴ While the audience was assumed to be the “art lover,” it was also assumed that anyone could be an “art lover.” Morgan characterizes Cortissoz as “the voice of the intelligent but nonexpert Everyman who cared about art and the culture it symbolized.”³⁸⁵

Mather and Cortissoz, who wrote a book titled *Art and Common Sense*, agreed that,

³⁸² Ibid., 114–15.

³⁸³ Mather, *Concerning Beauty*, 218.

³⁸⁴ Morgan, *Keepers of Culture*, 54.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 63.

“connoisseurship, catholic taste, and common sense were the true bases of art appreciation and criticism.”³⁸⁶

Of course, there were critics who supported modern art practices in the early twentieth century (Sadakichi Hartmann, Charles Caffin, Frederick James Gregg, and Forbes Watson, among others), the most prominent of whom was Henry McBride, who wrote for the *New York Sun*.³⁸⁷ McBride was equally concerned about the public (and its taste), but, as he wrote, “it is the people who decide”; the critic could do nothing more than present his case. “‘Being right,’ is lovely,” he wrote, “but it is not a condition that even a critic arrives at unaided. His chief business when confronted by a new problem is to think it out as best he may and then entrust it fearlessly to the public that in the end is the true arbiter of values.”³⁸⁸ What he aimed for was “frankness rather than infallibility.”³⁸⁹ For McBride, too, the focus was on the public.

While there was certainly something at stake for the traditionalist critics and they would not have denied that art had a social function, this function was connected to a strong reading of Arnoldian disinterestedness and the instinct that prompted criticism “to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world.” “Art has a social function,”

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

³⁸⁷ His predecessors at the *Sun*, Charles Fitzgerald, Gregg, and James Gibbons Huneker, were all supporters of modern art to varying degrees, who stood for a “common principle approved by the editors and publishers. That principle involved regular, enthusiastic coverage of the arts with the aim of understanding, rather than immediately rejecting, whatever was new or strange,” although Fitzgerald, for one, understood that “influencing the taste of a generation, a vast educational undertaking, was a slow, cumulative process.” John Loughery, “The *New York Sun* and Modern Art in America: Charles Fitzgerald, Frederick James Gregg, James Gibbons Huneker, Henry McBride,” *Arts Magazine* 59, no. 4 (December 1984): 77. See also Henry McBride, *The Flow of Art: Essays and Criticisms of Henry McBride* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1975), 24.

³⁸⁸ McBride, *The Flow of Art*, 12.

³⁸⁹ Quoted in Peninah R. Y. Petruck, *American Art Criticism, 1910-1939* (New York: Garland Pub, 1981), 100-101.

Cox wrote in response to the Armory Show, “In all the great periods of art it has spoken to the people in a language that they understood and expressed what they would have it express.”³⁹⁰ The goal of these critics was to promote art’s appreciation and to raise the nation’s level of taste; culture was not, in their view, “a condition on which society as a whole depended.”³⁹¹ For Mather, whose understanding resonates with Monroe’s belief that publication of the work did more for the poet than contemporaneous (or indeed any) criticism, the critic’s concern was “not with the work of art in the making but with the appreciation of the work of art when made. He serves the artist best simply by furthering and extending appreciation of the artist’s work. In this endeavor the true triumphs of criticism have been won.”³⁹² (It might be more accurate to characterize the traditionalist as a cross between a judicial critic and an appreciative critic.)

Classicists (or academicists) like Cox were uninterested in change, but Cortisoz and Mather would not have denied that it was necessary.³⁹³ As Eliot wrote in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “[I]f the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, ‘tradition’ should positively be discouraged.”³⁹⁴ But the poet who was aware of

³⁹⁰ Quoted in Morgan, *Keepers of Culture*, 45.

³⁹¹ It should be noted that this goal was not restricted to traditionalist critics. As one observer wrote about Forbes Watson’s non-traditionalist criticism, “By interpreting for Americans the aesthetic elements in a work of art extricated from the gimmickry of fashion and the strictures of tradition and removed from extraneous issues of morality and status, Watson sought to elevate their appreciation.” See Lenore Clark, *Forbes Watson: Independent Revolutionary* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2001), 17.

³⁹² Mather, *Concerning Beauty*, 229.

³⁹³ “Change was welcome,” Morgan wrote about Cortisoz, “but there were no sharp breaks in tradition; and the artist could not abandon some agreed-upon sense of nature and retain an audience.” See Morgan, *Keepers of Culture*, 69.

³⁹⁴ T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1998), 28.

his “responsibilities” was aware that he “must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past.” New work, according to Eliot, must “conform” and be “individual” at the same time: if it conformed too strictly to past standards it “would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art.” The development—“refinement perhaps”—that resulted from this newness was not, however, “any improvement,” which meant that art could not be said to evolve or progress.³⁹⁵ Tradition involved what Eliot called “the historical sense,” a “perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence,” which compelled the writer to “write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.” This sense—of the “timeless as well as the temporal together”—is what made the writer “traditional.”³⁹⁶ (Eliot’s critical practice might have made him the “critic to be reckoned with” for the *Partisan* critics, but they did not share his views on the “simultaneous order” of tradition.³⁹⁷)

Referring to Cortissoz, Morgan writes that, “Criticism needed rules and guidelines that gave it authority based on perception, analysis, and suggestion, all of which established standards of judging good from bad... The critic could thus be an agent for excellence.”³⁹⁸ This might sound like the agency that Greenberg ascribed to the little magazine, but his

³⁹⁵ “He must be quite aware of the obvious fact,” Eliot writes, “that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same.” *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁹⁷ In 1950 Greenberg wrote, “To my notion T. S. Eliot is the greatest of all literary critics.” He was not at all convinced by Eliot’s views on the “decline of culture,” writing in a long review of Eliot’s *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* that the “prospects of culture, now as well as in the hypothetical future” demanded “a re-examination of the assumptions that ideologues of ‘tradition,’ like Eliot, proceed on.” See Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3*, 66; 131.

³⁹⁸ Morgan, *Keepers of Culture*, 66.

“working hypothesis” had nothing to do with establishing “critical standards,” a term Greenberg never used, or the authority conferred by “rules and guidelines.”³⁹⁹ For technical critics (who were not traditionalists but whose aesthetic criticism had a “traditional basis”), judging “good from bad” was a matter of evaluating the artist’s formal or technical aptitude based on the standards established according to these rules and guidelines. Judgment might involve comparisons with other works by the same artist but not the work of contemporaries. Evaluated independently (on their own terms), artworks succeeded or failed individually, which meant that one could not be “more advanced” than another. Establishing standards was different, then, from “placing” or ranking artists in accordance with a “hierarchy of values.” This was not Bourne’s contemporaneous criticism, but, rather, a kind of “local judgment,” since the scope of the discussion often didn’t move beyond the confines of the work under review.

A key difference between cultural critics and art critics has to do with the role played by standards and judgment in their criticism. Rejecting the notion that, as Allen Tate put it, “we cannot judge the literature of our time because we don’t know if the future will approve of it” (alluding, of course, to Babbitt’s “ratification by the verdict of posterity”), the *Partisan* and *Kenyon* critics called for contemporaneous criticism (albeit in different ways). For traditionalist critics, on the other hand, judging “good from bad” involved deciding the qualitative merits of a work based on its conformity with established standards or norms. Not only did cultural critics and art critics differ on what the term “judgment” meant; they weren’t judging the same thing. What Greenberg was arguing for in “Avant-Garde and

³⁹⁹ In later years, Greenberg would write about the need to maintain art’s “standards of excellence.” See chapter 7.

Kitsch” was a way to decide the “validity” of abstract art that didn’t involve “a standard, a criterion, a code of laws or principles” (since, by definition, there was no standard against which avant-garde art could be measured).⁴⁰⁰ Cultural critics didn’t disregard standards, but something more than “high standards” or “standards of excellence” was required to establish the work’s cultural or social value.

In distinguishing between the issues that were at stake for Leavis and Greenberg I cited Greenberg’s claim that the “necessity” of the avant-garde’s methods lay in the fact that “by no other means” was it “possible to create art and literature of a high order.” Leavis focused on the “decline of standards” and the lack of a discriminating public. It’s worth noticing, too, that when Rahv speculated about the “withering away of literature,” he attributed it to “a rapid decline of standards in all spheres of the intellect and of the imagination.” Greenberg didn’t connect the “timidity” of the avant-garde to this decline and rejected the notion that “good writing” might simply be out there waiting for “a magazine with high standards and an open-minded policy” to come along. In other words, high standards weren’t enough. More important, standards changed—and needed to change. As he wrote in the final paragraphs of “Laocoön,”

My own experience of art has forced me to accept most of the standards of taste from which abstract art has derived, but I do not maintain that they are the only valid standards through eternity. I find them simply the most valid ones at this given moment. I have no doubt that they will be replaced in the future by other standards, which will be perhaps more inclusive than any possible now. And even now they do not exclude all other possible criteria.⁴⁰¹

⁴⁰⁰ Wernaer, “The New Constructive Criticism,” 421.

⁴⁰¹ Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoön,” 296.

This was a shift in the language—if not the argument—of this essay.⁴⁰² Since it's the first mention of standards, it comes a bit out of left field, and Greenberg's attempt to integrate this passage into the historical argument he's just made isn't altogether convincing. The validity of abstract art had to be tied to the "disciplines and processes" of art, as Greenberg had argued in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," precisely because the "standards of taste" from which abstract art had derived were not the "only valid standards through eternity."

The point I'm making here is that "judgment" in the deductive criticism of the traditionalists and the aesthetic criticism of technical critics was linked to something called "standards," which were linked to the "restraining sense of tradition," as Babbitt put it. These standards were assumed to derive from the judgments of the "keen-sighted few" that had been "ratified by the verdict of posterity." A constant, perhaps *the* constant, in Greenberg's criticism was his focus on historical change as opposed to the "simultaneity" of tradition (in "Modernist Painting" he began to link the two—and to speak of "standards of quality"—but history still took precedence, even if he had a different understanding of what "history" entailed by that time).

At the risk of making the same mistake that the "postmodernists" did in their readings of Greenberg's early writings, I want to cite a definition of (cultural) criticism that Harold Rosenberg offered nearly twenty-five years after "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" was published in order to clarify the distinction I'm making (I'm citing it because I believe that Rosenberg's definition hadn't changed since the 30s). "[The critic's] work involves making a judgment regarding the tendency of our culture as a whole," Rosenberg said in a

⁴⁰² This shift might also account for the essay's popularity with "only painters & aesthetes," as he told Lazarus. See Greenberg, *The Harold Letters, 1928-1943*, 223.

discussion that took place at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1963, “You start to make choices on this basis. I believe every good critic is basically a critic of society. He is for one kind of art rather than another for the sake of society. The work of art creates value. It doesn’t only submit itself to value; it creates it.”⁴⁰³ There is an echo here of Rahv and Phillips’s claim that the Marxian critic must “encourage some currents of revolutionary literature rather than others” (and of Greenberg’s “taking sides”), but this statement also jibes with Bourne’s belief that poetry was “a sound and important activity of contemporary American life” rather than a “refined dessert” or a “private hobby.” What was at stake for Greenberg, as I argued in the previous chapter, was the “survival of culture in general,” which is what led him to employ a “hierarchy of values”—not “accepted standards”—to “place” or rank artists in advocating for the avant-garde.⁴⁰⁴ I would argue that aesthetic critics and traditionalists were concerned with “the culture which the individual may envisage as an ideal to set himself to acquire,” as T. S. Eliot put it, while cultural critics were concerned about “the culture that a whole society may develop and transmit.”⁴⁰⁵

Art as Art

While cultural critics and art critics differed on the meaning of the term “judgment,” it was missing altogether from the discussion of artworks (contemporary or otherwise) by art historians in the 30s—as it was from discussions of literature by literary historians. “Perhaps

⁴⁰³ Harold Rosenberg, “Harold Rosenberg on Criticism,” *Artforum* II, no. 8 (February 1964): 29.

⁴⁰⁴ Here I would point, for example, to Greenberg’s response to the awarding of the 1948 Bollingen Prize to Ezra Pound. He writes: “I do not quarrel with the Fellows’ aesthetic verdict, but I question its primacy in the affair at hand, a primacy that hints at an absolute acceptance of the autonomy not only of art but of every separate field of human activity. Does no hierarchy of value obtain among them?” See Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*, 304.

⁴⁰⁵ Eliot, “Notes Towards a Definition of Culture,” 145.

there are some who hold that an apology should be offered for discussing criticism in a university,” the Italian art historian and critic Lionello Venturi wrote in *Art Criticism Now*, “And I am fully aware that to-day criticism is scorned by ‘scientific-minded’ scholars on the grounds of its subjectivity.” Echoing Ransom, he maintained that, “Art-criticism is our only means of understanding a work of art as art. And because the history of art aims at the understanding of a work of art as art, the final step in the history of art must be and is art-criticism.”⁴⁰⁶ His debt to Ransom (and to the *Kenyon* critics more generally) might have remained implicit but for the fact that he went on to quote Cleanth Brooks’s contribution to the “Literature and the Professors” symposium: “The uncritical pursuit of ‘facts,’ the piling up of verified knowledge, the gathering of historical data—these things, however laudable in themselves, are essentially sidelines. If the profession lacks an interest in literature as literature, they may become blind alleys.”⁴⁰⁷ (Brooks is describing Buck’s “scientific” criticism.) But Venturi was almost alone in his advocacy.

It’s necessary to say “almost” because Venturi also cited a recent editorial published in *Parnassus* by Lester Longman, who argued that there was an urgent need “for connoisseurs to turn their talents to contemporary criticism.” Expanding on the critique of positivism, Longman also lamented the lack of judgment, arguing, “There is no excuse for the historian who refuses to examine the field of esthetics and to confront the problems of value which so intrigue both the artist and the public. There is a surfeit of specialists who know all the ramifications of the problem of Giorgione, but stand mute before the problems of the artist today, who remain inarticulate when asked to judge a contemporary

⁴⁰⁶ Lionello Venturi, *Art Criticism Now* (Torino: Aragno, 2010), ix.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

painter... The need of the day is rather for breadth of interpretation than intense exploitation of detail.”⁴⁰⁸ But neither Longman nor Venturi called for “professionals” to “take charge of the critical activity,” as Ransom had (I would argue that this is because they were interested in examining “the field of esthetics” rather than imposing the dominant definition of the artist, which was how Ransom understood his quest to “found criticism”); nor were they prepared to lead the charge for the “need of the day.” Among other things, they lacked a platform (Longman might have taken further advantage of his position, but *Parnassus* ceased publication in May 1941) and a constituency.⁴⁰⁹

Just as art history suppressed critical judgment through its “intense exploitation of detail,” both traditionalists and journalist-critics, lacking a “working hypothesis” or any desire for a “discussion of a larger scope,” abjured critical judgment for purportedly universal (or subjective) judgments of taste, separating “good from bad” (local judgment). Judgment, then, was not connected to a critical discourse but to various kinds of technical criticism, or connoisseurship (which was certainly a kind of discourse, even a critical discourse, but it was a different order of discourse from the one that I have been discussing). If being “an agent for excellence” and “judging good from bad” were the objectives of criticism—and if judgment was tantamount to describing “without conscience” one’s reactions to the work as Greenberg had written about Mellquist—then it would seem

⁴⁰⁸ Lester D. Longman, “On the Uses of Art History,” *Parnassus* 12, no. 8 (December 1940): 5, doi:10.2307/772212. Longman followed this up with an editorial titled “The Art Critic” in which he asked rhetorically, “[C]an anyone who is intimate with the circumstances of contemporary American art presume that... the support of art criticism in the university is less imperative than support of the production of objects of graphic and plastic arts?” See Lester D. Longman, “The Art Critic,” *Parnassus* 13, no. 2 (February 1941): 54, doi:10.2307/771995.

⁴⁰⁹ “C. A. A. Policy Altered. *Parnassus* Abolished,” *Parnassus* 13, no. 5 (May 1941): 162–63, doi:10.2307/772087. For a discussion of Longman’s tenure at *Parnassus*, see Howard Singerman, “Art Journal at Fifty | Art Journal,” accessed May 20, 2015, <http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=54>.

that there was nothing between the “sober business of fact” with which art history was concerned and the “intoxicated act of criticism,” as Mizener had put it.

Venturi, as I’ve noted, is the author of the only history of art criticism that has ever been published (an English translation of *History of Art Criticism* was published in 1936).⁴¹⁰ Widely admired in the U.S., he was a disciple of Benedetto Croce, the Italian literary critic and aesthetician, and, although he was a champion of modern art and lamented the reactionary criticism of the interwar period because it “endorsed principles which could not be applied to contemporary art,” he rejected abstraction, especially cubism, because it “rejected sensation.”⁴¹¹ The “reaction in criticism” that had happened between 1920 and 1940, he argued in *Art Criticism Now*, was “mainly against impressionists and against all painters who setting out from impressionism originated a style of their own... neo-impressionists, fauves, expressionists.”⁴¹² More broadly, the reaction was directed “against the function of sensation in art,” and had, in effect, caused modern art to run aground—or, as Venturi put it, “The best living painters are to-day old men who work according to the principles determined before 1914.”⁴¹³ Although he didn’t equate them, he paired modern aesthetics and modern art, insisting that, “a relationship [could] be established between the experience of a modern critic and the understanding of the history of aesthetics.”⁴¹⁴ His belief that art criticism was the “only means of understanding a work of art as art” might have been a departure from the views of the traditionalist critics—as was his belief that “one of the most important achievements of modern aesthetics is the criticism and rejection of

⁴¹⁰ Venturi and Marriott, *History of Art Criticism*.

⁴¹¹ Venturi, *Art Criticism Now*, 5; 13.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

the concept of beauty”—but his Crocean approach shaped his understanding of “art as art.”⁴¹⁵

I mention Venturi not only because he had a large following in the U.S., but also because his critical approach, while it differed from that of the American critics, was inextricably linked to taste. If the traditionalists’ concern was the spectator’s level of taste, Venturi’s was the painter’s, since, for him, taste was “the sum of the elements constituting a painting” (art was “the result, the synthesis itself”). “[A] wise critic,” Venturi wrote, “will no longer believe in eternal, pure beauty as the standard for judging the absolute quality of a work of art, as distinguished from the relative qualities which are determined by a given period or place.” This standard for judging the “absolute quality” of a work was, of course, the one that the traditionalist critics espoused, but the question remains whether there was anything to be gained from a relativism that was tied to a rather absolute criterion: “both the history of aesthetics and experience with works of art,” Venturi argued, “teach us that without sensation there cannot be works of art.”⁴¹⁶

Complaining that what was lacking in “almost all” the articles and books on art history was “the consciousness of the artistic result or quality of the work of art,” Venturi explains that art historians avoided this question because they were blinded by the “scientific method,” and “artistic quality” was not a “fact.” He continues:

The understanding of an artistic quality presupposes an artistic judgment, and an artistic judgment presupposes a concept of, and a feeling for, art. Because a concept of art is given only in the philosophy of art or aesthetics, scholars digress from philosophy; because the feeling for art can be better found in a layman than in a scholar, scholars evade the feeling of art. This is

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 12.

why they neglect seeing that the understanding of a work of art is based on both art and taste.⁴¹⁷

According to Venturi, neither art historians nor critics reached that “synthesis of art and taste which leads to the understanding of a work of art.”⁴¹⁸

Understandably, I think, John Alford, who reviewed Venturi’s book for *The Art Bulletin*, concluded that, “one may remain in uncertainty as to whether at a particular moment he professes to be discussing art or taste,” since Venturi’s rejection of developments after 1914 often appeared to be an endorsement of “principles which could not be applied to contemporary art,” to quote Venturi’s own critique of the “reaction.”⁴¹⁹ A two-year debate about Venturi’s book, which revolved around the issue of taste, ensued in the pages of *Art Bulletin*. With the publication of “Art and Taste” in the December 1944 issue Venturi got the last word. In that essay he laid out his argument for the relationship between art and taste in detail. “[T]he identification of the taste of the painter with his mode of working,” Venturi wrote, “means that taste is relative, and relative to the artistic personality of the painter.” While the “wise critic” might not believe in “eternal, pure beauty,” the critic must nevertheless find a “standard of judgment which is absolute, against the continuous changes of taste.” He would not find it, Venturi argued, in an object but, rather, in “the soul of the artist.”⁴²⁰ The only standard for the criticism of painting was “the reconstruction of the artistic personality of the painter,” and, if the painter succeeded in bringing “his creative imagination beyond intellectual rules, moral standards, or economic

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 62–63.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁴¹⁹ John Alford, “Review of Art Criticism Now by Lionello Venturi,” *The Art Bulletin* 24, no. 4 (December 1942): 404, doi:10.2307/3046851.

⁴²⁰ This was Harriet Monroe’s view as well. See Monroe, “Aesthetic and Social Criticism,” 41.

interests,” the product would be a work of art. Judging this quality (this was what Venturi meant by “artistic quality”) was the only “objective basis for critical appraisal,” that is, “the only one which can be supported by modern aesthetics.”⁴²¹

While Venturi might have been sympathetic to Ransom’s critique of positivism, his perception of what it meant to “understand a work of art as art” was radically different from the New Critics’ understanding of literature as literature, which is no surprise given that it was linked to the “philosophy of art.”⁴²² For the art criticism of this period, there was no equivalent for what Ransom had been arguing for: a criticism of *art as art* that was not based on aesthetics (or the synthesis of art and taste).

The Art Press

In the 30s and 40s, many if not most art critics could be described as journalist-critics, since they were reviewers (in Margaret Marshall and Mary McCarthy’s sense) who wrote for large-circulation newspapers. Cortisoz went to work for the *New York Tribune* as a

⁴²¹ Lionello Venturi, “Art and Taste,” *The Art Bulletin* 26, no. 4 (December 1944): 272, doi:10.2307/3046967.

⁴²² In 1939 Felix Gatz founded the American Society for Aesthetics and two years later Dagobert Runes founded the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Although ostensibly an attempt to establish a discipline that would function independently rather than as a division of philosophy, the society’s founders seem to have been ambivalent from the start about its relationship to its parent discipline. However, Runes had a clear understanding of the direction they needed to take. He envisioned a large national organization of aestheticians “with many hundreds of voting members and thousands of associate and corresponding members,” but this could only happen, he wrote, if aestheticians “step off the metaphysical platform and join hands with the teacher[s] of the arts and the creative artists.” Otherwise, they would remain “a corner group in the Philosophical Association.” The journal would deal with “fundamental principles and problems of aesthetics and art criticism,” he wrote in 1943, providing an opportunity for communication between “aestheticians, art critics, art educators, museum workers” and other interested parties. Although Venturi was an associate editor of the journal in its early years, it never gained broad support among practitioners outside the field of philosophy. Indeed, as the journal and the society became increasingly dominated by philosophers, members “gradually ceased asking whether aesthetics [was] a discipline independent of philosophy.” See Lydia Goehr, “The Institutionalization of a Discipline: A Retrospective of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and the American Society for Aesthetics, 1939-1992,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 99-121, doi:10.2307/431376.

reporter on October 1, 1891 and was the paper's literary editor from 1897 to 1913; when the paper began to expand its art coverage just before the turn of the century, he began to write art criticism and went on to serve as the paper's principal art critic until he retired in the mid-40s.⁴²³ McBride wrote for the *Sun* from 1913 until the paper merged with the *World Telegram* in 1950, when he was hired (at the age of 83) to write for *ARTnews*.

In "What is a Good Review?" Joseph Wood Krutch argued that the best review wasn't trying to be something like an "independent essay" or "aesthetic discourse" and that the "ambitious reviewer" shouldn't try to "demonstrate his capacities" by attempting to produce something "more than a review." The best review, in other words, was one that knew its place. The reviewer, no matter how adroit, had to accept the limitations of the form (within the context of the daily or weekly press) or risk overreaching. McBride, for example, who saw himself "as an impressionist, not as an analyst," didn't build an argument for cubism but instead tried to cajole his readers: "The whole thing with cubism, as it is with every other art form, is simply whether you like it or you don't like it. If you don't like it, don't try to persuade your neighbor who does of the error of his way, for you will simply get disliked for your pains and convince him that you are the old foggy that you are. The person who doesn't like the big general art movement of the day is an old foggy."⁴²⁴

⁴²³ Morgan, *Keepers of Culture*, 64; 99. Cox, a painter himself, wrote unsigned exhibition reviews starting in the late nineteenth century for the *New York Evening Post*, but also contributed to *Scribners*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Harper's Monthly* as well as *The Nation*. Mather, who would end up in the academy, served as the *Post's* art editor from 1905 to 1906 and again from 1910 to 1911; he also wrote occasionally for *The Nation*. *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴²⁴ John Loughery, "The New York Sun and Modern Art in America: Charles Fitzgerald, Frederick James Gregg, James Gibbons Huneker, Henry McBride," *Arts Magazine* 59, no. 4 (December 1984): 81; McBride, *The Flow of Art*, 52. As one observer put it, McBride "belonged to a generation that realized that his audience could best be instructed or converted if they were entertained" and his criticism "had just that blend of wit and observation that gave life to his pieces. One reason for this was that he introduced a personal note: a touch of dialogue or a snippet of gossip... He had an appreciative

McBride's role was to judge "good from bad" based on his subjective experience, to state his impression or opinion (often in the form of an anecdote), and to allow readers to make up their own minds. "Art is felt, not understood," he wrote, "All the talk and loud shouts in the world won't cause you to like a picture that you are convinced you loathe."⁴²⁵

Another reason for art criticism's journalistic character is that, with the notable exception of the Stieglitz publications, there were almost no little magazines that dealt with art or included art criticism during this period.⁴²⁶ (*Camera Notes* and *Camera Work*—and, to a certain extent, *291*—contained critical writing, but it was focused almost exclusively on photography.⁴²⁷) William Troy, writing in 1930, pointed out that art practice had received very little attention in the little magazines of the teens and 20s. "Most of the little magazines in this country, notably the *Little Review*," he writes, "had placed their emphasis solely on literary experimentation, without considering the nature or value of the experience available for the artist in America of the period." Citing the sole exception, he went on to

audience who did not care for jargon; that was to come later. His views were those of a sophisticated New Yorker at home in the houses of the well-off." "Henry McBride: A New York Critic," *Apollo*, March 1978, 159.

⁴²⁵ McBride, *The Flow of Art*, 56.

⁴²⁶ Before the First World War, *The Nation*, self-described as "a weekly journal devoted to politics, literature, science, drama, music, art, and finance," published a regular column on art (a good portion of these articles dealt with archaeological excavations). Mather published on a variety of topics—Goya, Vermeer, Luca della Robbia, Cézanne—between about 1906 and 1917, when he began his wartime service. The magazine began publishing fewer articles on art during the war and, by the 1920s, only included a handful each year (most of them unsigned). For a brief period in the mid-30s Anita Brenner, who wrote for *The Arts* in the 20s, published regularly, and Walter Pach and Louis Lozowick (who was on the editorial board of *New Masses*) contributed an occasional piece. In 1938 Paul Rosenfeld, a journalist who was better known as a music critic, began writing for the art column and Douglas Haskell became a fairly regular contributor on architecture (there were at least as many articles published on architecture during the 30s as on art); Jerome Mellquist also published periodically. While Mellquist wrote on artists like John Marin and Arthur Dove, Rosenfeld often wrote on historical topics. In the early 40s, when Greenberg began writing for the magazine, it had a drama critic (Joseph Wood Krutch), a literary editor (Margaret Marshall), and frequently ran a music column called "Records," but it had no regular contributor on art other than Rosenfeld, who published about six times a year.

⁴²⁷ The first issue of *291* included an article calling for a "scientific" criticism that differed from Buck's.

argue that, “This was a problem for criticism that was not adequately undertaken before a group of young creative thinkers in New York inaugurated the *Seven Arts* in 1917... It was the hatching-ground of a whole school of American cultural criticism, whose influence has not yet been fully appraised.”⁴²⁸ The problem, of course, is that, because of its stance on the war, *The Seven Arts* folded after only a year.⁴²⁹

The Dial, as Peninah Petruck points out, “was devoted to the explication and defense of modern literature,” but “support of experimentalism in art was not a top priority.”⁴³⁰ Nonetheless, when McBride was hired to contribute a monthly column in 1920, the editors stated in their preface to his first submission that the aim was “to advance the cause of less traditional types of art”—or as McBride himself wrote in 1959, “[I]f practically everybody now knows the correct things to say about Picasso and Matisse, I attribute it largely to *The Dial’s* continual pounding on the desk for its protégées.”⁴³¹ As a booster for (rather than a critic of) European modernism, McBride was the perfect delegate for this undertaking, since, as he once wrote—echoing Louis D. Rubin Jr.’s claim that *The Dial* attempted to bridge the gap “between the specialist in the arts and the general reader”—the chief responsibility of the critic was to “help familiarize the public with new art forms.”⁴³²

⁴²⁸ Troy, “The Story of the Little Magazines,” 480.

⁴²⁹ See James Oppenheim, “The Story of the Seven Arts,” *American Mercury* XX (June 1930): 156–64.

⁴³⁰ Petruck, *American Art Criticism, 1910-1939*, 96.

⁴³¹ Henry McBride, “Those Were the Days,” in *The Dial and the Dial Collection*, ed. Worcester Art Museum (Worcester, MA: Worcester Art Museum, 1959), 4. Commenting on an exhibition titled “*The Dial and The Dial Collection*,” organized by the Worcester Museum in 1959, however, Josephine Herbst writes, “[O]ne realizes the rather timid concession the *Dial* editors were willing to make to the more ‘advanced’ modes of the day. Some paintings, such as the later Picasso, make a commentary by their very absence.” (Herbst had previously noted that, “In this room, devoted to Picasso, whether one looks at a later *Pierrot* or the *Boy of the Rose Period*, one sees nothing of the Cubist Picasso which *The Dial* deliberately eschewed.”) Josephine Herbst, “*The Dial* and Modern Art,” *Arts Yearbook* 6 (1962): 43–44.

⁴³² Quoted in Petruck, *American Art Criticism, 1910-1939*, 100.

Finally, art criticism often did not rise above the level of journalism before the 1940s because magazines like *The Art News* and *The Art Digest* focused on “news” or “news and opinion.” The distinction between reviewers and critics that had been pointed out by the *Nation* critics in the mid-30s was even more pronounced for art discourse because of the paucity of criticism that was being published. In the late 1930s, the American art press consisted of four national magazines: *The Art News*, successor to *Hyde’s Weekly Art News*, an “art newspaper” that was founded in 1902 (it was titled *American Art News* from 1904 to 1923, and *The Art News* from 1923 to 1941); *Art in America*, which was a scholarly journal that was launched in 1913; *Magazine of Art*, formerly *The American Magazine of Art*, a monthly magazine founded by the American Federation of Arts in 1916; and *The Art Digest*, which began publication in 1926.⁴³³

American Art News was a 4-page broadsheet that contained short news items. An editorial published in the November 5, 1904 issue reads, in part:

The purpose of the *American Art News*, successor to *Hyde’s Weekly Art News*, founded two years ago, is to present the art news of the day tersely and without prejudice. Independent in ownership and direction, allied to no

⁴³³ I am not counting *The International Studio*, the American edition of *The Studio* (founded by Charles Holme in 1893), which began publication in 1897. An ad published in the February 1897 issue of *The Decorator and Furnisher* noted that the magazine would be identical to the English edition except for a supplement devoted exclusively to American art. [*The Decorator and Furnisher*, vol. 29, no. 5 (February 1897): 158] As Anthony Burton writes in *The Art Press*, the magazine’s “international circulation was set back by the First World War, and thereafter, under Holme’s son Geoffrey, it was developed in less adventurous ways until the 1960’s, when it was converted into a modern art magazine.” Trevor Fawcett et al., eds., *The Art Press: Two Centuries of Art Magazines: Essays Published for the Art Libraries Society on the Occasion of the International Conference on Art Periodicals and the Exhibition, the Art Press at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London*, Art Documents ; No. 1 (London: Art Book, 1976), 9. *Hyde’s Weekly Art News* became *American Art News* in 1904 and was succeeded by *The Art News*, “An International Pictorial Newspaper of Art,” in 1923. According to Alfred Frankfurter, *Hyde’s Weekly Art News* was “the only art periodical then to be published in America” when it was launched as a one-page broadside printed on newsprint stock and measuring about seventeen inches by thirteen inches in 1902. See Dwight and Frankfurter, *Art Parade: Seeing the Past Forty Years Through Art News and the Frick Collection*, 18.

one school or art movement, it is published solely to furnish the news of the art field. Its aim, as in the past, is to supply interesting information for all who care for art, whether as collectors, artists or dealers... It is not intended to make the paper a journal of technical criticism, nor will it be an organ of any school or clique. It will contain a record of all exhibitions of importance, the news of the studios, the dealers' galleries, the art schools and the art auction rooms at home and abroad.⁴³⁴

This credo remained largely intact until 1941, when The Art Foundation, a non-profit educational corporation formed by “a group of distinguished art-lovers and scholars,” purchased the newspaper.⁴³⁵ In addition to a name change—from *The Art News* to *ARTnews*—it was changed from a weekly to a semi-monthly publication “adopting more a magazine format than before.”⁴³⁶ By this time, it had grown to about 40 pages and the inclusion of “reviews” (many were still closer to reportage) in a section that was called “The Passing Shows” indicates that the magazine’s stance on technical criticism was beginning to change.

In the early 30s, however, *The Art News* still resembled a broadsheet (it measured 16 ½” x 12 ½”), although it had acquired a cover in 1928. The majority of the articles, some of which included a dateline, were unsigned (many issues didn’t include a single signed article), and, when the name of the author was included, it was a byline. The texts bore headlines like “Maurice Sterne’s Art Revealed in Notable Exhibit; Retrospective Show at the Museum of Modern Art Gives Survey of Artist’s Work Over a Long Period,”

⁴³⁴ “Unsigned Editorial,” *American Art News* 3, no. 52 (November 5, 1904): 2.

⁴³⁵ Frankfurter, *Art Parade: Seeing the Past Forty Years Through Art News and the Frick Collection*, 114.

⁴³⁶ The intention, Alfred Frankfurter explained a decade later in an article published on the magazine’s fiftieth anniversary, was “to make over a traditionally professional and trade art journal into one intended to serve the wider public, wider interests and wider needs of the American civilization wherein art was gradually developing from an esoteric and social diversion to a national expression.” See Alfred Frankfurter, “50 Years of *Art News*,” *ARTnews* 51, no. 4 (August 1952): 116.

and were not only formatted like newspaper articles but were journalistic reports on exhibitions or artworks. Longer articles might include a reference to other artists' practices along the following lines:

We are close enough in point of time to realize how signally the world failed to catch the trumpet tones of Cezanne [sic] when he was still alive and trapesing [sic] through the valleys of Aix carrying his precious burdens about as if they were so much kindling; while, here in America, we still have to explain away our failure to give Eilshemius a timely salute, instead of which he gave us such a very splendid and unexpected legacy.⁴³⁷

Brief discussions of the work were sometimes included, although they, too, were descriptive or reportorial:

The instinct for plastic form has most certainly affected, to a large extent, [Sterne's] method of outlining pictorial ideas. It has given his work a certain ruggedness of line and severity of accent that it might not otherwise have acquired... he captured a fine blend of the romanticism which is so much a part of his pictorial makeup, the neo-classic sculpturesque formalism of line and form, and the wholly modernistic delight in angles and rhythm that keep such compositions as the two examples from the Phillips Memorial Collection so alive and musical.⁴³⁸

A section called "Exhibitions in New York" offered half a dozen reviews of gallery shows, but both the feature articles and the shorter pieces, including the reviews, might be described as news items.

By the mid-30s, things were beginning to change. The masthead was moved from the middle of the magazine to page 4; more signed articles, the titles of which were becoming a little less like headlines ("A Centennial of Homer Watercolors"), began to appear; and there were more reproductions. Moreover, some of the articles departed from

⁴³⁷ Ralph Flint, "Maurice Sterne's Art Revealed in Notable Exhibit; Retrospective Show at the Museum of Modern Art Gives Survey of Artist's Work Over Long Period," *The Art News XXXI*, no. 21 (February 18, 1933): 3.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

the purely journalistic. The January 18, 1936 issue included an article with the title “Whitney Reopens With First Portion of Biennial Show.” Beginning with some comments on the installation and lighting of the show, Dorothy Dannenberg’s review quickly settles into a more thoughtful discussion. Compared to the breeziness of McBride’s anecdotal journalism, Dannenberg’s writing is crisp, professional, authoritative. Familiar with the work of several artists in the show and some recent exhibitions of contemporary art, she also has more than a passing acquaintance with art historical references (she also contributed on occasion to *Parnassus*). Statements regarding the formal strength or weakness of the work (“the organization of forms, the relation of the two figures to each other, is weak”) or its success or failure (“‘Swimmer,’ striving for wit rather than strength of form, is more nearly successful”)—whether further elaborated on or not—alternate with assessments of the work’s decorative quality (“the grainy quality of the block from which the figures are carved serves as a decorative adjunct to the design”) or expressiveness (“the thick, menacing coils of the snakelike rope, the lolling head and the outstretched, resigned hands of the murdered man are horribly, brutally expressive”). Dannenberg might not have offered much in the way of historical contextualization other than her observation that one of the works in the show “brings the spectator face to face with the ‘Propaganda versus Art’ question which is so agitating contemporary art circles,” but her technical criticism includes more in the way of analysis than most of the writing that appeared in the magazine during this period.⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁹ Dorothy Dannenberg, “Whitney Reopens with First Portion of Biennial Show,” *The Art News* XXXIV, no. 16 (January 18, 1936): 2; 4.

In a statement included in the January 25, 1936 issue, E. K. Frankel, who had taken over as publisher when her husband died in October of the previous year, announced the appointment of Alfred M. Frankfurter as contributing editor, noting that Dr. Frankfurter's "experience gained from an international activity in art research will give to *The Art News*, guidance of a quality which will henceforth set the standard of the magazine." In addition to some cosmetic changes, a new "Letters" department was established. "Edited primarily for its readers, the great and ever growing group of Americans interested in art," Frankel wrote, "*The Art News* will continue its unique position as an international art weekly. Our reward will lie with the approval of our readers."⁴⁴⁰ In the years leading up to the magazine's takeover by The Art Foundation, more changes were instituted: the magazine added a table of contents and began to feature "London Notes" and "Paris Notes"; a section called "Art Throughout America" was added and "New York Exhibitions" was changed to "New Exhibitions of the Week." A dozen or more reviews (and 8 to 10 shorter notices) were now signed with the author's initials and began to include tentative evaluations: "[N]o matter what part of the globe [Van Dongen's] figures come from, they all have liquid eyes framed with heavy lashes, tapering fingers and tapering feet. Set against a background streaked with liquid paint, they all look like painted dolls in a painted world. There is plenty of bravura in this artist's dashing strokes and flamboyant colors, and too little profundity."⁴⁴¹ By 1941, Frankfurter would boast that, "[I]t has been an axiom of *ARTnews* to publish reviews—written originally and exclusively for us by reviewers trained for their field—of every

⁴⁴⁰ Frankel, "Progress and Policy: A Statement," 5.

⁴⁴¹ M. D., "New Exhibitions of the Week," *The Art News* XXXV, no. 31, Section II (May 1, 1937): 14.

exhibition (excepting only those announced too late before our going to press) *while it is still current.*"⁴⁴²

The Art Digest, a 34-page semi-monthly in the early 40s, billed itself as "The News Magazine of Art." Modeled on *The Literary Digest*, the magazine offered a digest of the newspaper coverage of museum and gallery exhibitions in addition to news items (the cover included a subtitle: "News and Opinion of the Art World"). Starting with the January 1, 1931 issue, the cover included the statement "Seven Times the Circulation of Any Weekly or Semi-Monthly American Art Periodical" (in 1936, the magazine listed its "sworn circulation" as 11,133).⁴⁴³ The section "New York Criticism" featured a somewhat convoluted explanation of the excerpts it contained: "For a N.Y. art critic to be quoted in *The Art Digest*, is calculated to lift the critic out of a regional morass. However, to get quoted in this department, he has to say something constructive, destructive, interesting or inspirational. To exclude the perfunctory things the New York critic sometimes says, just to 'represent' the artist or the gallery, is to do a kindness to critic, artist and gallery."⁴⁴⁴ In 1936 this section was replaced by "The Fortnight in New York," which provided a digest of gallery reviews "as reported by Paul Bird." Helen Boswell took over the section, now called "Fifty-Seventh Street in Review," in 1941, calling herself an "art narrator" and incorporating impressionistic commentary into the digested newspaper reviews. By 1946, after having been suspended for a time, the section was brought back and original reviews were contributed by the staff of the *Digest*.

⁴⁴² Alfred Frankfurter, "Vernissage," *ARTnews* XL, no. 13 (October 15, 1941): 6.

⁴⁴³ The circulation of the *The Art News* had fallen to 1,400 in late 1935. See Frankfurter, "50 Years of Art News," 116.

⁴⁴⁴ "New York Criticism," *The Art Digest* 10, no. 1 (November 1, 1935): 18.

Art in America, a quarterly journal founded in 1913, did not include a statement about its purpose or mission in the early issues, but an unsigned write-up in the January 30, 1913 issue of *The Nation* noted that, “It will be devoted chiefly to objects of art of Mediaeval and Renaissance periods owned in America... Its make-up is somewhat scrappy as yet, but if it continues to procure first publication of so many fine works as grace this number, it will be indispensable for all art libraries and serious students.”⁴⁴⁵ By the 30s, the journal was beginning to shift its focus to early American art and, in 1939, it dropped the phrase “and elsewhere,” which had appeared underneath the title since 1922. In the Autumn 1953 issue, Burton Cumming, the Director of the American Federation of Arts, expressed enthusiasm for the “New *Art in America* for 1954,” writing that the magazine would now “be devoted to American art of both the past and the present” and that “people are eager for information and critical appraisal.”⁴⁴⁶ With a substantially expanded editorial board that included, among others, Lloyd Goodrich, James Thrall Soby, and Dorothy C. Miller—which would “guarantee the reader a broad coverage”—the magazine began to include articles on contemporary art.⁴⁴⁷

Long before *Art in America* turned its attention to American art, *The Arts* had made it a central focus. Founded in 1920 by Hamilton Easter Field, the magazine was taken over two years later by Forbes Watson, who would publish the magazine under the auspices of The Arts Publishing Corporation, which was underwritten by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. The magazine was especially interested in publishing artists.

⁴⁴⁵ *The Nation* 96, no. 2483 (January 30, 1913): 114–15.

⁴⁴⁶ Burton Cumming, “Announcing the New *Art in America* for 1954,” *Art in America* 41, no. 4 (Autumn 1953): 4.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

“Whenever it is possible, articles will be secured by artists. Those who are engaged in creating pictures, sculpture and so forth, are not always, as everybody knows, the most impartial critics. But the most impartial critic is seldom the most stimulating critic, and a special interest and character are often found in the words of the craftsman about his own craft.”⁴⁴⁸ The editorial independence that Watson enjoyed was the result of Whitney’s steadfast support and lack of interference. “More than once,” Lloyd Goodrich recalled, “dealers withdrew advertising because of Watson’s frank comments.”⁴⁴⁹ Whitney backed the magazine until 1930, when she withdrew her support to establish the Whitney Museum Foundation (it folded in 1931).

Watson, who had just been named Technical Director of the Public Works of Art Project, started writing for the *The American Magazine of Art* in 1934 (the year the magazine took over *Creative Art*) and became an associate editor later that year. The magazine began to include exhibition reviews (written by E. M. Benson, another associate editor) in 1936 and, in 1939, Howard Devree, the critic for the *New York Times*, started contributing a New York Letter. Although Watson was named contributing editor in the summer of 1941 (he began writing editorials in 1940), he left the magazine the following March. Manny Farber began a short-lived section called “57th Street and Thereabouts” in the fall of 1942. After the magazine named a new editor in October 1942, the reviews section was discontinued and a new roster of writers (including Lincoln Kirstein) began to contribute.

⁴⁴⁸ Quoted in Lloyd Goodrich, “The Arts’ Magazine: 1920-31,” *American Art Journal* 5, no. 1 (May 1973): 82, doi:10.2307/1593945.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

Art Criticism in the 30s

It is not quite accurate to say that art discourse did not operate within—or constitute—a critical field prior to the 50s. However, owing to the fact that it involved a different order of discourse, the field that existed in the interwar period was both structurally and substantively different from the one that emerged after the war. Venturi's adherence to the principles of Croce's aesthetics allowed him to navigate between art history's positivism and criticism's "subjectivity"—a charge that was not entirely misplaced, as even a cursory glance at the criticism that appeared in the art press in the 20s and 30s reveals. On the other hand, this was not where art critics (as opposed to journalist-critics) published. Before the founding of magazines like *Partisan* and *Kenyon*, I've argued, literary criticism was published in the quality magazines, the "journals of opinion," and the little magazines launched in the 20s that included criticism (*The Hound & Horn* and *The Dial*). Most of these magazines published art criticism as well. To the extent that it existed before the 30s—I've quoted Robie Macauley's claim (and Edmund Wilson's affirmation of it) that "there was very little American criticism of any value before the 1930s"—critical discourse occupied this site.⁴⁵⁰ Thomas Craven's is the name we associate with the art criticism of the 30s precisely because he was not writing the kind of impressionistic or technical criticism that was published by journalist-critics but, rather, critical essays on art for, among other publications, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The Dial*, and *The American Mercury*.⁴⁵¹

Having tried to become a painter (in Paris) and a poet (in Greenwich Village) in the years preceding the First World War, Craven began writing book reviews for *The Dial* in

⁴⁵⁰ McCauley, *The Little Magazine in America*, 73.

⁴⁵¹ Craven also wrote on a free-lance basis for *The New York American* and *The Herald Tribune*.

the early 20s. By the middle of the decade, however, he had migrated to *The American Mercury*, where his increasingly acerbic tone would not have been out of place (by this time he was writing critical essays). But how did Craven's practice differ from that of other prolific and well-known critics of the time like Watson, who wrote primarily for art magazines, and McBride (or Cortissoz), who wrote for the popular press? While Cortissoz had been publishing art criticism for fifteen years when the Armory show opened, Watson and McBride began writing within a few months of this important art world event. Both were opposed to the academy (or, more specifically, to the hegemony of the National Academy of Design), but they differed in the kind of art they championed, taking up positions on either side of a nationalist/internationalist divide: Watson became a lifelong supporter of American artists in general (and the ashcan school in particular) while McBride aligned himself with the European avant-garde and the Stieglitz circle. Although they supported "modern art" and were committed to helping "familiarize the public with new art forms," as McBride had put it, they shared the traditionalists' belief that criticism should "facilitate and heighten appreciation."⁴⁵²

McBride was the more impressionistic or "subjective" of the two.⁴⁵³ Writing in a 1930 monograph on Matisse, he maintained that he had "always suspected that the writing upon art was unnecessarily complicated." "The final word on Matisse," he wrote, "and the final word in regard to all other artists, is always addressed to the world at large, not to

⁴⁵² Lenore Clark notes that, "So indiscriminately was the term 'modern' applied to the spectrum of contemporary art and theories antipathetic to academism that it came to have only general meaning as a descriptor." See Clark, *Forbes Watson*, 30.

⁴⁵³ As Cook Glassgold put it, "whereas Henry McBride was closer to Stieglitz in his 'excited inclination' toward the international avant-garde, Watson 'was more the objective, dispassionate judge.'" Quoted in *ibid.*, 71.

specialists, and for that reason it is desirable that the ‘final word’ be written in the exceedingly plain language that the world understands.” But even “plain language” should not be used to explicate: “I have never been a great believer in explaining art. I think art that can be thoroughly understood is practically useless.”⁴⁵⁴ Lacing his text with anecdotes about his trips to the artist’s studio, McBride deployed the same rhetorical device that he had used in his “defense” of Cubism (“the person who doesn’t like the big general art movement of the day is an old foggy”) while sidestepping the technical discussion that he himself claimed was needed:

I have already said that Matisse is a painter above everything else, meaning if you don’t ‘get’ the painting, you are not apt to ‘get’ anything from the work, but in spite of my unwillingness to grow technical, I must add a word about his mastery of composition... Matisse makes it extraordinary. Both he and Picasso get power out of the modern air and weld their productions into a forceful inevitability that I believe is unprecedented in the annals of art. Matisse gives a great deal of thought to this end of his work. To hear him talk you would imagine it to be the chief end of his work, but it is when he drops from the scholasticism of the schools into pure music, as he does... in most of the figure paintings illustrated in this book, that he becomes very great in composition.⁴⁵⁵

McBride states his conclusions (such as they are) rather than arguing them, acting as an advocate for the artist rather than an explicator of his work. Daniel Catton Rich writes that, by his own account, McBride aimed to “touch upon the highlights of the New York season” and to “give his readers an echo of the talk and opinions that generate when individuals who have access behind the scenes meet.”⁴⁵⁶ Although McBride was clearly not without opinions or judgments, his texts are filled with passages in which he appears to be on the verge of saying something “technical” about the work under review only to veer off

⁴⁵⁴ Henry McBride, *Matisse* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1930), 7; 10.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁵⁶ Daniel Catton Rich, “The Art Criticism of Henry McBride,” in McBride, *The Flow of Art*, 23.

into another behind-the-scenes anecdote. Arguing that McBride's *Dial* columns were more "structured" than his *Sun* articles, Rich nevertheless concludes that he was "first and last a journalist, what the French call a *feuilletoniste*. And he needed the work of art, painting, drawing, print or sculpture as a springboard."⁴⁵⁷

Having written a couple of articles for *International Studio*, Watson joined the staff of the *New York Evening Post* in October 1912. As Lenore Clark argues, "Like most other art critics of the day, his credentials were less a matter of systematic education than informally accrued knowledge. Family wealth and position had enabled him to develop a spacious but discerning love of art, and over the years he had cultivated a formidable connoisseurship."⁴⁵⁸ But his connoisseurship was colored by the context in which his writing was published: the *Post*, like its weekly supplement, *The Nation*, backed the progressive agenda and Watson's critical approach was strongly influenced—if not definitively shaped—by his experience at the newspaper. Indeed, when he took over as editor of *The Arts* in 1923, he began his first editorial by applauding the magazine's progressive position: "From the first the scope of the magazine has been liberal and it will continue to be liberal." In a further rejection of the forces of conservatism, Watson claimed that, while it did "not intend to wave the flag," the magazine would "stand with the American artist against timidity and snobbery."⁴⁵⁹ *The Arts*, he maintained in a statement whose defiance only

⁴⁵⁷ "There is often a striking difference between the freshly observed pages in the *Sun* and the more formal treatment of the same artists in *The Dial*. The *Sun* pages have a vivacious touch which the more structured articles in *The Dial* lack." See Rich, "The Art Criticism of Henry McBride," *ibid.*, 24-25.

⁴⁵⁸ This was true of McBride as well. Clark, *Forbes Watson*, 16.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

underscored its defensiveness, was “not afraid to enjoy American work just because it is American.”⁴⁶⁰

In the 20s, the positions occupied by the various periodicals that published criticism were vaguely political, with the most conservative aligned with the academy (*The American Magazine of Art*) and the most progressive aligned with the European avant-garde (*The Dial*). Other publications, including *The Art Digest* (whose editor championed the traditionalist critics and which gave space in each issue to the Art Division of the General Federation of Woman’s Clubs and the Artist’s Professional League); *The Arts* (liberal in its support of contemporary art but conservative in its rejection of Europe); and *Creative Art* (with McBride as editor for two years, it was less conservative than *The American Magazine of Art*, which incorporated it in 1934), plotted other positions within the field.⁴⁶¹ (Because *The Art News* eschewed technical criticism at this point, it cannot be said to have operated within the field at all.) By the 30s, the axis along which these positions were aligned began to shift. As Matthew Baigell argues, “[G]radually (and then very quickly in 1930-32) those who preferred traditional to modern art began strongly to identify traditional with American and modern with European in their minds. What once had been more of a contest of styles (traditional vs. modern) transformed itself along nationalistic lines (American vs. European).”⁴⁶²

Describing Watson as a kind of “mugwump progressive in art matters as well as those political,” Clark argues that he rejected both “slavish adherence to tradition and

⁴⁶⁰ Goodrich, “‘The Arts’ Magazine,” 80.

⁴⁶¹ In January 1930 the editors announced that, “TAD is now the official organ of the American Artists Professional League.” “Announcement,” *The Art Digest* IV, no. 7 (January 1, 1930): 1.

⁴⁶² Matthew Baigell, “The Beginnings of ‘The American Wave’ and the Depression,” *Art Journal* 27, no. 4 (Summer 1968): 388, doi:10.2307/775138.

uncritical embracement of the new,” since he was as suspicious of what he took to be reflexive obedience to the School of Paris as he was of the anti-democratic apparatus that was sustained by the National Academy. But, lest the reader be tempted to ask whether he might not be taking things too seriously, Watson ultimately claimed that the magazine’s function was “to offer art simply for enjoyment, not for educational purposes nor for any other ulterior motive than just for fun.” Nonetheless, while McBride affected indifference as to whether his readers “got” Matisse’s painting, Watson’s more combative writing style amounted to a rhetorical attempt to grab the reader by the lapels. He concluded his editorial by pledging to publish material representing different points of view, “and if sparks fly from the discussion so much the better.”⁴⁶³

Watson was an avid and sometimes contentious editorial writer, but his criticism, too, might be said to have had a strong editorial cast. Ostensibly, his mission was simply to “to gain for the serious artist a wider and more sympathetic audience,” as he put it, but he was more of a crusader than either the traditionalists or McBride (Lloyd Goodrich wrote that he was an “activist in action and in writing”).⁴⁶⁴ He valued artistic independence and originality above all, rejecting what he called “deliberate ‘modernism’” (imitation of Paris), and it’s clear that what drove his critical and editorial agenda were his conviction that American artists needed to emancipate themselves from Paris and his belief in the potential (and need) for the improvement of American taste (of course the two were not unrelated: by recognizing the originality of contemporary American artists, the public

⁴⁶³ Clark, *Forbes Watson*, 55. Because of his “sardonic, independent, combative” style, Clark notes, some called him the “H. L. Mencken of art criticism.” *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁶⁴ Quoted in Clark, *Forbes Watson*, 71; Forbes Watson, quoted in Petruck, *American Art Criticism, 1910-1939*, 138.

would reinforce the break with Europe). “It exasperated him,” Clark writes, “that so many American modernists groveled blindly at the feet of Matisse and Picasso in ‘servile imitation of Paris.’ Unabashedly chauvinistic, he challenged the commonly held notion that America lagged behind France and ‘that American art might perish if *le dernier cri* in the art quarters of Paris, Berlin, etc. was not instantly adopted by our young artists.’”⁴⁶⁵ His aversion to the “isms” probably impelled him to avoid the term “modernism,” but he more or less equated “modern art” with anti-academicism. “The mark of the real artist,” he argued, “was the ability to see the world with his own eyes and express what he saw in his own way. That made of every real artist ‘a modern of his time.’ Every great artist who broke from tradition was a ‘modern.’” As he wrote in an appreciation of one of the artists who, for him, was a quintessential “modern,” Robert Henri “fought for freedom and he gave to his students the courage to conquer officialdom.”⁴⁶⁶

Watson’s criticism was equal parts editorial and aesthetic criticism, not in the sense that Harriet Monroe had used this term (Watson would have been less inclined to characterize the work’s “aesthetic adequacy” as the “triumphant expression of the vision in the artist’s soul”), but in Buck’s sense: it involved “explaining the effects produced by the [artwork] on the [spectator], and evaluating these effects by reference to established aesthetic laws.”⁴⁶⁷ The critics who wrote for the news magazines—*The Art News* and *The Art Digest*—were technical critics (if they can be said to have been critics at all before the 40s), whereas the critics who wrote for the popular press and the art magazines of the 20s and 30s (*The Arts*, *The American Magazine of Art*, *Creative Art*) practiced various kinds

⁴⁶⁵ Clark, *Forbes Watson*, 36.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁶⁷ Monroe, “Aesthetic and Social Criticism,” 41; Buck, *The Social Criticism of Literature*, 11.

of impressionistic, appreciative or aesthetic criticism whose function was advocacy of one kind or another. The editorial intent of *The Arts* was not to engage with “art as art” (in the sense that Ransom argued for criticism of “literature as literature”) but to “break down the barrier between artists and the public by vitalizing and personalizing art.”⁴⁶⁸ Like McBride (and unlike the technical critics), Watson rarely discussed individual artworks and, while he described *The Arts* as “scholarly,” there were, Clark notes, “no iconological or attribution studies, no highly technical analyses, and the material was not abstruse.” By the late teens, Watson’s style had already become distinctive: “urbane yet accessible, cultivated but anti-intellectual.”⁴⁶⁹

Clark describes Watson variously as a “connoisseur-critic” and, more ponderously, an “art critic-cum-fighting journalist,” but what’s crucial to note in both cases is the difference between these hyphenations and the one I’ve used for the critics who started out at about the same time, the “intellectual-critics.”⁴⁷⁰ Watson might have occupied the same end of the political spectrum as Bourne and Brooks (though their positions were hardly identical), but he couldn’t have been farther away on the critical spectrum. What’s clear is that he and McBride were not interested in Bourne’s “contemporaneous criticism” nor were they participants in the critical discourse in which the social and, later, the cultural critics were involved. In the end, what these critics offered was exposure, advocacy, and, perhaps in Watson’s case, a particular kind of connoisseurship.

The “independent social criticism” that the young intellectuals sought to initiate was developing around the time McBride and Watson began writing (one of the publications

⁴⁶⁸ Clark, *Forbes Watson*, 62.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 79; 98.

with which it is most closely associated, *The New Republic*, was founded a few months after McBride was hired by the *Sun*) and by the late 30s the discourses related to the individual arts would be distinct from the critical discourse that was associated with social and cultural criticism. Literary discourse was dominated by the academy when Ransom launched *Kenyon* (and was more accurately described as literary history than literary criticism) while art discourse was dominated by the aesthetic criticism of the art press and the impressionistic or appreciative criticism of the popular press. But in the first two decades of the century, the boundaries between the popular press, the art press, and the critical press were somewhat permeable, a fact that is underscored by the range of publications to which critics like Watson and McBride contributed. McBride's writing ran the gamut, since he wrote for the popular press (the *Sun*), the art press (he was editor of *Creative Art* for two years and also contributed to *The Arts*), and the little magazines (his *Dial* column ran for nine years). Watson did not contribute (even in the limited way that McBride did) to the critical press, but he, too, moved between the art press and the popular press (besides writing for *The New York Evening Post*, he was the art critic of *The New York World* for three years while he was editing *The Arts*). And, although most of the writing that Craven would mine for two of his major book-length studies (*Men of Art* and *Modern Art: the Men, the Movements, the Meaning*) was published in the critical press, he also wrote on a free-lance basis for the popular press (*The New York American* and *The Herald Tribune*). By the 30s, the critics who wrote for *Partisan* might have published in other little magazines or the journals of opinion (as both Rahv and Phillips did in the interim between the original magazine's demise and its relaunch), but they would not have

published in the art press or the popular press—nor would McBride have been able to publish in the little magazines that were founded in the 30s.

Craven was not interested in “breaking down the barrier between artists and the public by vitalizing and personalizing art,” since he would develop a critical agenda that was, in a word, more ideological. Rather than an attempt to heighten appreciation, his initial goal was to engage critically with artworks. As Ralph Pearson acknowledged in “The Failure of the Art Critics,” Craven was “more than a journalist,” he was “actually a critic.”⁴⁷¹ (Although Craven rarely wrote about individual works of art after the early 20s—an attribute he shared with McBride and Watson—Pearson based his characterization on the fact that Craven made “forthright appraisals of all aspects of the picture including form.”)⁴⁷² Craven, of course, had himself dismissed the “reports of exhibitions in the newspapers and magazines,” arguing that they were “not criticism at all.”⁴⁷³ What distinguished Craven’s writing is that, unlike the journalist-critics, he established a *critical position*—however fanatical it may have become. His critical framework, as it evolved in the 30s, was challenged by writers spanning the entire critical spectrum (from journalist-critics to academics), who considered it to be highly problematic if not untenable. And yet, Craven was recognized *as a critic*, which was, presumably, the reason for the widespread dissent. How, then, was this difference understood?

For Venturi, art had a single, guiding principle (“without sensation there cannot be works of art”). Craven, on the other hand, considered the arts to be “united in a common

⁴⁷¹ Pearson, “The Failure of the Art Critics III,” 57.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

⁴⁷³ Craven, “The Criticism of Painting in America,” 446–47.

purpose”: “the integration and communication of experiences.”⁴⁷⁴ Art didn’t possess a particular attribute or quality; it had a specific function. And the need for art to “root itself in life experience,” Wayne Roosa argues, inevitably led to “some form of realism.”⁴⁷⁵ But, although Craven believed that art must be connected to (and communicate) actual—specific, concrete, real—life experiences, this did not mean that there was no room for abstraction. “[T]he word realism,” Craven wrote, “bears no relation to photography; it refers to an abstraction of substantial qualities from actual experience and not to literal representation; it is based upon an imaginative conception of life, creating a new order of things.”⁴⁷⁶ More than “a mere impression of nature,” this new order was “nature disciplined and humanized,” and, having undergone this transformation, art “considered as a reality” entered “the realm of the spirit.”⁴⁷⁷ The goal of Craven’s realist, as Roosa puts it, “was to find a style between straight naturalism and radical abstraction that united art and life.”⁴⁷⁸

Roosa traces the sources of the realist theory that shaped Craven’s position (although “theory” is a term Craven himself would probably have rejected in later years) to a handful of thinkers ranging from Hippolyte Taine to John Dewey. His “environmentalism” was adapted from Taine’s theory of culture and art (and Frederick

⁴⁷⁴ Thomas Craven, *Modern Art* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1934), 220.

⁴⁷⁵ Wayne Lloyd Roosa, “American Art Theory and Criticism During the 1930s: Thomas Craven, George L. K. Morris, Stuart Davis” (Ph.D., Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, 1989), 125, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.uh.edu/pqdtglobal/docview/303736214/abstract/4BC72C42C47144C5PQ/1?accountid=7107>.

⁴⁷⁶ Thomas Craven, *Men of Art* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), 65-66. Craven had laid out this position as early as 1923 in the first piece of criticism that he published. “Now the word realism, in this connexion and throughout the review, is employed with rigorous care: the term bears no relation to photographic naturalism; it refers to a unified abstraction of experience and not to literal representation; it is based upon an imaginative conception of life, creating a new reality by means of new combinations, and strengthening the emotional appeal of two-dimensional art by the addition of solidity and depth.” Thomas Craven, “The Progress of Painting (part one),” *The Dial* vol. LXXIV (April 1923): 359.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴⁷⁸ Roosa, “American Art Theory and Criticism during the 1930s,” 126.

Jackson Turner's application of it to American history). Emphasizing three determinants in the evolution of artistic style—"race, milieu, and epoch"—Taine argued that art's meaning was linked to the artist's social, intellectual and historical context.⁴⁷⁹ Another writer whose influence Craven acknowledged was Havelock Ellis, whom he often quoted on the conventionality of "our mental habits," since, as Craven wrote, "we are permitted to see and construct only through and by the corpus of those conventions."⁴⁸⁰ In the 30s, as his writing became increasingly chauvinistic, Dewey would become the most important figure for Craven, since he "saw Dewey's pragmatic way of thinking as uniquely American."⁴⁸¹ As he argued in "Our Art Becomes American," published in 1935, "American thinking, as exemplified in the writings of such men as William James and John Dewey, is clearly at war with the logical structures of classic European thinking."⁴⁸² (Craven's reading of these writers was not only ideological in the extreme but profoundly misguided.) Whereas the "synthesis of art and taste" that Venturi believed was the key to understanding a work of art was a variant of Croce's aesthetic theory, Craven synthesized his critical framework out of an amalgam of theoretical and philosophical ideas that, in the end, didn't quite cohere in any theoretical sense.

According to Roosa, "It was through the influence of Ellis that Craven bridged the gap between Taine's 'behaviorist view on a large scale' and the individual psychological workings of specific artists on a personal scale."⁴⁸³ Although the artist was clearly shaped by larger social and historical forces, realism was the expression of "local psychologies, each

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁸⁰ Thomas Craven, *Men of Art* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), 501.

⁴⁸¹ Roosa, "American Art Theory and Criticism during the 1930s," 156.

⁴⁸² Craven, "Our Art Becomes American," 438. This is not at all "clear" in their writings.

⁴⁸³ Roosa, "American Art Theory and Criticism during the 1930s," 136.

dominated by powerful but locally conditioned personalities.”⁴⁸⁴ The “interesting personality” was composed of elements that derived from two sources: “the character and intensity of experience, and the processes of integration.” With the successful artist, Craven wrote, “the realities of the environment actually work upon his spirit, forcing him to modify traditional processes and to create a new and personal instrument of expression.”⁴⁸⁵

Personality, then, contributed as much as environment, and Craven would speak of these two factors as art’s “teleological base.”⁴⁸⁶ By the mid-30s, these factors had become as important to him as the work itself: “I am interested in art as an activity proceeding from and affecting the lives of men and women. I am, therefore, as much concerned with environment and the experience of the artist as with the created object—the two are inseparable.”⁴⁸⁷

But when Craven began writing in the early 20s, experience and environment were subordinate to a single, overriding concern: “[Roger] Fry shows that every picture worth a moment’s consideration,” Craven wrote in a 1921 review of *Vision and Design*, “is built upon design, and with this truth in mind his argument drives straight to the unanswerable conclusion, namely, that the meaning of art lies in its forms.”⁴⁸⁸ An unabashed champion of Fry at this juncture, Craven hints at the direction his own criticism would take when he adds that, despite his emphasis on form, Fry had not joined “the ‘purity’ cult of the abstractionists,” but had admitted “in his retrospective remarks” that art could not be

⁴⁸⁴ Thomas Craven, *Modern Art: The Men, the Movements, the Meaning* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1934), 353.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 357.

⁴⁸⁶ Roosa, “American Art Theory and Criticism during the 1930s,” 130.

⁴⁸⁷ Craven, *Modern Art: The Men, the Movements, the Meaning*, 369.

⁴⁸⁸ Thomas Craven, “Mr. Roger Fry and the Artistic Vision,” *The Dial* LXXI (July 1921): 102.

“completely separated from representation of some sort.” For Craven, abstract form was an “artistic contradiction” because “the material selected by the painter for pictorial treatment” was “clothed with inherited and habitual associations.” If the artist’s job was to “create a structure in which the original attributes [were] given a new meaning,” it was up to the critic to “point out that a work of art is achieved when representation is submerged; when the new meaning is made profound and moving by formal order.”⁴⁸⁹ Art was always grounded in—and “represented”—an actual, real life experience even when the source was “submerged.”

Two years later, Craven traced the history of modernism’s development in a two-part essay titled “The Progress of Painting,” which was one of the first pieces of criticism he published. For Craven, modernism “made its first appearance” as “a revolt against the formless productions of the Impressionists”—productions that he believed had brought about painting’s decline.⁴⁹⁰ Solidly in the *disegno* camp, Craven rejected Impressionism categorically, arguing that, “Form in painting and sculpture is presented by sequences in line and mass, by drawing; and an art which neglects this factor is chaotic and meaningless.” But Impressionism’s formal deficiencies went hand in hand with a lack of attention to other crucial issues, as Craven’s list of the “profound problems of painting” that it neglected attests: “the selection of dispersed facts of experience, and their incorporation as units of structure into a complex and limited form where all the parts tend to sequential relationship; the everlasting human need for finding kinship and meaning in the details of the external world; the concrete manifestation of imaginative power—these were discarded

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁰ Thomas Craven, “The Progress of Painting II,” *The Dial* LXXIV (June 1923): 581.

for a playful mechanics.”⁴⁹¹ It was Cézanne who finally halted painting’s decline, but Craven’s hopes for its redemption went far beyond what this artist attempted or achieved.

Cézanne’s influence on contemporary art was “incalculable,” not because of the doors he had opened, but, rather, because he “awakened the modern mind to the significance of the far past, to a conception of real form, solid, thick, material, and plastic.” According to Craven, Cézanne’s goal was nothing short of “reality,” a “full, rich, tri-dimensional world in whose mass and depth we might encounter subjective experiences comparable in force with the experiences of practical life.”⁴⁹² Cubism was not simply a “modification” of Cézanne’s technique, but was also aligned with “classic ideals”; it was even “in some respects” a “rebirth of those ideals.” Nevertheless, Craven stated as fact what was actually his most fervent wish: “Cubism has proved to be a transitional measure, a bridge... leading from the unfinished painting of Cézanne to the art of to-morrow, an art which will be, I hope, as lofty and complete as the masterpieces of the Renaissance, and much more intense in reality.”⁴⁹³ Convinced that the modern mind should look backwards to the “far past,” Craven was hopeful that the “art of to-morrow” would once again reflect the “reality”—i.e. “pure form” as it was delineated by Masaccio and Michelangelo—that the classics had forged. (It’s perhaps worth noting that, like the traditionalists, Craven would insist that he did not advocate “a return to classical art,” that, “No matter how much an artist may admire and understand the forms of Rubens and Rembrandt, he cannot make original pictures by imitating, rehashing, or disguising those forms.”⁴⁹⁴)

⁴⁹¹ Thomas Craven, “The Progress of Painting I,” *The Dial* LXXIV (April 1923): 365.

⁴⁹² Craven, “The Progress of Painting II,” 583.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 584.

⁴⁹⁴ Craven, *Men of Art*, 460; Craven, “Our Art Becomes American,” 432.

Like Greenberg, Craven had a “working hypothesis” about art’s future development that was grounded in a particular understanding of its past. Arguably, he started out with a critical framework that was reasoned even if it wasn’t quite reasonable, one that was recognized as a viable position by the critical press—and, therefore, as criticism. (Whatever its theoretical merits, his construction of such a framework represents a clear departure from both McBride’s *feuilletonism* and Watson’s “cultivated but anti-intellectual” journalism.) While Craven’s critical trajectory is well known, it bears rehearsing here, since the change that his position underwent would ultimately change the nature of his criticism.

By December 1925, when he published “Men of Art: American Style,” in *The American Mercury*, Craven had become ambivalent about Cézanne. He acknowledged that Cézanne was a painter “pure and simple,” that there was “no literature in his canvases, no anecdote, no sentimentality—only masses of ‘organized form,’” but he went on to say that Cézanne was “neurasthenic and illiberal, thin-skinned, obtuse in matters calling for the exercise of ordinary judgment, and pietistically shrinking in his contacts with life—qualities scarcely compatible with greatness, in art or anything else. Compared with Rembrandt he was a sullen recluse; with Leonardo da Vinci, a dunce.”¹⁹⁵ By the time he adapted this essay for his 1931 book *Men of Art*, Craven had completed his shift in focus from the work to the artist, but he started and ended with painting in this essay, concluding that Cézanne was

¹⁹⁵ Craven, “Men of Art: American Style,” 426.

the “best of his time” in the “superficies of his craft,” and that the “inert character of his figures” was “the result of incomplete conception rather than poor painting.”⁴⁹⁶

Craven’s ambivalence was as much about Cézanne’s imitators as it was about the artist himself, since the U.S. had become “pestilent with bastard Cézannes” and, shortly afterwards, had suffered the “transcendental insurrection known as Cubism,” which had dehumanized painting by reducing nature “to its nearest geometrical equivalent” and making design “an end not a means.” As the focus of his writing began to shift, Craven acknowledged that all art required “a certain amount of selection,” but the purpose of that selection was usually “to set down one’s experience in forms objectively valuable.” And when art was “removed from experience and intelligible meaning, the deluded painter begins to read arbitrary and subjective values into his work.”⁴⁹⁷ The problem with contemporary painting, particularly in the U.S., was that it had “lost its spiritual office.”⁴⁹⁸ If the American painter faced an “appalling sterility,” it was because the new movement was “already old and savorless,” since modern European art was only a “question of technique”

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid. Although Craven admitted, in the end, that Cézanne was “the solitary glory of Post-Impressionism, or Modernism,” this is where his discussion starts in *Men of Art*: “It was but rarely that Cézanne mastered his instrument, and his failures may be attributed to his mental, not his manual awkwardness, and to his limited intelligence. Not by training, temperament or experience was he capable of complete knowledge of the things he attempted to present in all their fullness. His art, in words used by Delacroix to describe another painter ‘is the complete expression of an incomplete mind.’ A large part of his groping labors went into technical processes. An Impressionist, or at least half an Impressionist, he endeavored to ‘realize his sensation,’ as he put it, by knowledge acquired on the post in a single instance. The contour which, whether it exists in nature or not must exist in art since the extension of a form is limited and the boundary must be indicated by one device or another, escaped him. He painted almost entirely in patches, and his color divisions, too small and fragmentary to function as distinct parts of design, exhibit the planes of objects instead of their mass. His method led him, in spite of himself, into distortions... That the distortions were the unavoidable consequences of his limitations and not effects consciously striven for as his followers would seem to believe, is confirmed by his own confessions of failure—and by his work.” Craven, *Men of Art*, 486–7.

⁴⁹⁷ Craven, “Men of Art: American Style,” 427.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 428.

and had “ceased to function as a medium for communicating with intelligence and power the experiences of mankind.”⁴⁹⁹ As a result, he wrote, “[I]t ought to be plain to the Americans that they cannot create a viable native art by copying Frenchmen.”⁵⁰⁰ Perhaps it was inevitable that his belief that art could not be separated from representation “of some sort” would come into conflict with the “conception of real form” with which he credited Cézanne, but his antipathy toward Europe—and France in particular—deepened as the twenties wore on.

Craven’s interest in the artists who came to be called the American Scene painters dates back to the teens, when he and Thomas Hart Benton were roommates in Greenwich Village. Writing about Benton’s work in the mid-20s, he argued that, “Benton has no faith in the popular fetish, ‘organization for its own sake,’ but has concentrated his energies on the epic spirit of a civilization that is organically his own. The trouble with most of the self-styled new art is simply that technical issues have overridden all aesthetic meaning; in Benton’s pictures the technical barriers have been torn down, and as a consequence we have an explicit and massive rendering of a phase of American life now rapidly passing into history.”⁵⁰¹ By the 30s, Benton would be one of only five artists whose work Craven would condone, or, as he put it in “Our Art Becomes American,” “[B]y all sensible reference to historical practice, they are on the right track—the only track that can produce art.”⁵⁰²

Craven would continue to repeat this as well as his refrain about the “monopoly held by the

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 429.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 432.

⁵⁰¹ Thomas Craven, “An American Painter,” *The Nation* 120, no. 3105 (January 7, 1925): 22.

⁵⁰² Craven, “Our Art Becomes American,” 430.

French on affairs of the spirit,” as he put it in “The Curse of French Culture,” throughout the 30s.⁵⁰³

Craven, who grew up in Salina, Kansas, saw the Midwest as the site of the “American Renaissance” that many believed was due at any moment. Opposed to the unbridled individualism that they associated with European art, proponents of this renaissance saw art as a “tool of moral, spiritual and cultural uplift, a thing bringing beauty and goodness into each American’s house.”⁵⁰⁴ *The American Magazine of Art and Art Digest* supported the idea of a national art style and their editors were convinced that it would not emerge if Americans continued to emulate European artists. As one writer put it, “With the crash in 1929, everyone began to look around to see if there were any realities left in the world. The rubbish from Europe was found to be rubbish.”⁵⁰⁵ Watson, as I’ve mentioned, was vehemently opposed to what he called “deliberate modernism,” writing in the last issue of *The Arts* that the Parisian art dealers had turned modern art into “a kind of international dressmaker-painting, spattering it with the spirit of their own cynicism.” And an organization called An American Group was formed to fight the “French art racket.” Craven was hardly alone, then, in his appraisal of French art. As Matthew Baigell argues, a “definite wave of hatred” for modern French art had appeared by 1930.⁵⁰⁶ This nationalistic fervor was linked to a more widespread nostalgia for an idealized past.

The critics associated with *New Masses* and *Partisan Review* responded to their economic and political context by turning to Marxism, but opposition to capitalism was not

⁵⁰³ Thomas Craven, “The Curse of French Culture,” *The Forum*, July 1929, 57.

⁵⁰⁴ Baigell, “The Beginnings of ‘The American Wave’ and the Depression,” 390; 389.

⁵⁰⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 391.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

the exclusive province of those on the left in the 30s. On the right, artists and critics called for the restoration of traditional values (often associated with particular regions of the country) as the key to countering the ravages of industrialization. I alluded, briefly, to the group of poets in Nashville who were associated with a little magazine called *The Fugitive* and had organized the Southern Agrarian movement. This group, which included Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Allen Tate, among others, opposed urbanization and the industrialization of agriculture and called for a return to small-scale agrarianism. The so-called “Twelve Southerners” challenged the “ideology of progress made by science” and produced a manifesto titled “I’ll Take My Stand” in 1930 in which they “condemned capitalism as threatening Southern identity and advocated a return to traditional Southern cultural values and practices, exempting slavery.”⁵⁰⁷ Craven was not affiliated with this group, but this was the kind of “experience” that he believed artists should represent.

Craven, I would argue, did not start out as an ideologue—or at least he didn’t set out to be one. Rather, he developed a critical position based on a particular understanding of the history of modernism (and its future potential), which was “betrayed” by the American artists who insisted on following Europe rather than valuing their own experience. Craven’s “public” was initially the same as Brooks and Bourne’s, since he was publishing in the same magazines (*The Dial* and *The New Republic*), but by the late 20s, he had abandoned the little magazines and the journals of opinion for more conservative or populist publications (*The Forum*, *Scribner’s*, *Harper’s Monthly*, *The American Mercury*). (It’s no surprise that *Men of Art* was chosen as the Book-of-the-Month in April 1931.) Craven’s was not a

⁵⁰⁷ John Olszowka et al., *America in the Thirties* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 66.

position staked out within a field of critical practices because, by the time he had fully formulated his position on American art (that is, by the time it had hardened into dogma), it didn't cohere enough *as criticism* for others to take up a position against it. *Men of Art* was greeted with applause by some reviewers (granted, it was often wary), but most of those who reviewed his second book, *Modern Art*, either questioned the validity of his argument or refused to recognize its critical viability.

Philip McMahon wrote in his review of *Men of Art* that, "the notable articles devoted to art criticism" that Craven had contributed to *The Dial*, *The Nation*, and *The New Republic* had "led many readers to suspect that here was one of the strongest critical intelligences working in America." (Although he referred specifically to Craven's 1927 essay "Have Painters Minds?," which was published in *The American Mercury*, McMahon left this publication off his list—perhaps because Craven's *Mercury* articles would *not* have led readers to "suspect that here was one of the strongest critical intelligences working in American.") Quoting one passage of the book at length, McMahon also concurred with Craven's conclusion that, "art deals with problems of the spirit, with faiths and convictions."⁵⁰⁸ The author of another review, which appeared in *The American Magazine of Art*, had a different take, declining to acknowledge Craven's critical acumen or even the originality of his views: "On the whole it is a stimulating piece of writing, the frankly personal viewpoint of an uninstructed layman, but one who has given serious thought and

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 41. The full passage reads: "The genuine painter is not a machine to reflect commonplace events or to exploit physical appetites, and finds no more inspiration in soups and cigarettes than the poet or musician finds in popular merchandise. What the average man feels in his heart—his faith in his better self, his love for humanity, his vague consciousness of a more orderly world—what he experiences dimly in a mass of contradictory emotions is presented by the artists with greater clarity, with completeness, assurance and power. In a word, art deals with problems of the spirit, with faiths and convictions."

study to the subject and is not afraid to think for himself. To find that he is not the first to think such thoughts, or the only one thinking them today, would undoubtedly shock Mr. Craven.”⁵⁰⁹ However, in spite of the fact that this writer was less opposed to the viewpoint being propounded (“much that he says is profoundly true”), Craven’s argument was undermined by the list of “prejudices” that he offered in the introduction to the book: “These prejudices color his criticism and diminish its value.”⁵¹⁰ Craven’s biases might have been valid, but their articulation wasn’t sufficient *as criticism*.

McMahon was not only less sanguine about *Modern Art* when it came out three years later, but also reversed himself on Craven’s “critical intelligence.” The later book was “a social and possibly a psychological document rather than an illuminating discussion” of the movements it treated. “To indict the main figures and their accomplishments in modern art,” he argued, “to rail at them, searching for every available weapon to show how morally corrupt and even dishonest they are, judged by the ethical platitudes of Main Street, can hardly be considered serious criticism of things aesthetic.”⁵¹¹ *Modern Art* might be “a stimulating and an amusing book,” McMahon concluded, but “anybody who wants to find out about its professed subject-matter will have to go elsewhere.”⁵¹² This time, the reviewer for *The American Magazine of Art* was also less convinced: “[T]he story of modern art reads very differently from the way Craven prefers to interpret it,” writes E. M. Benson, “His version is an insidious distortion of the facts as we know them... It is hard to understand on what critical basis Craven has collected and proportioned the material for

⁵⁰⁹ M., “Review of Men of Art by Thomas Craven,” 514.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 515.

⁵¹¹ A. Philip McMahon, “Review of Modern Art by Thomas Craven,” *Parnassus* 6, no. 5 (October 1934): 26, doi:10.2307/770877.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*

his book.”⁵¹³ Benson was even more vehement in his critique of the book’s critical pretensions than McMahon:

Merciless and unscrupulous in his hates, Craven has used every weapon to blacken the reputation of those artists he does not understand, or does not wish to understand. All sorts of cheap and irrelevant gossip provide erotic interludes. Rarely is there any structural analysis of a man’s work; and when this is attempted, as in the case of Cézanne (whose work he calls ‘meagre and unfulfilled’), his writing loses its fire and his critical objectiveness is belied by the insobriety of his final judgments. It is regrettable that so erratic and glib a pen, that such untrustworthy eloquence has been let loose in the field of art criticism, which is so badly in need of depersonalized judgments and large-visioned analysis. I doubt if a more superficial, more dogmatic, or more misleading book on modern art has ever been published.⁵¹⁴

By the early 30s, Craven’s “theory” had more or less collapsed under the weight of the prejudices enumerated in *Men of Art*: “My pet abominations are artists who have to go abroad to find time to paint and who think there’s nothing at home worth painting; critics who have just discovered modernism; artists ditto; Americans who ape the British; the Paramount Theatre, its architecture, its art gallery, and for the most part its offerings; and I have a prejudice against women who paint.”⁵¹⁵ The list goes on. Refusing to acknowledge the work of all but a handful of artists, Craven abandoned his critical position for an aesthetico-political one. Once he had left behind the formal logic that subtended his early criticism (which was the only critical logic it ever really had), he ended up with something closer to the subjective judgments of the journalist-critics. Lewis Mumford, who did not have to wait for the appearance of the second book to come to a conclusion about Craven’s writing, makes precisely this point in his review of *Men of Art*, arguing that Craven had

⁵¹³ E. M. Benson, “Review of Modern Art by Thomas Craven,” *The American Magazine of Art* 27, no. 8 (August 1934): 446; 448.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 449.

⁵¹⁵ Quoted in L. M., “Rev. of Men of Art by Thomas Craven,” 514.

“contributed little except biographical and autobiographical anecdotes and undigested major premises to his new analysis of modern art.”⁵¹⁶ Indeed, he treated Craven’s analysis not as criticism but as something like proto-criticism—with “a little discipline and self-analysis” Craven’s thesis might have been “developed into very salutary criticism”—and called attention to a specific weakness in his “philosophy.” Craven “reduces the notion of ‘experience’ to the simple, observable contents of daily life,” he writes, and, as a result, “regards with animosity and suspicion experience on other levels; the contents of dreams, the projection of subjective states, the interpretation of experiences that are neither open to the eye nor reducible to words, he dismisses as unimportant.”⁵¹⁷ Craven had not only emptied Dewey’s theory of its substance, but he no longer seemed to believe that “realism” might “create a new order of things,” since his sole objective was to preserve the old order.

If art’s “purpose,” for Craven, was “the integration and communication of experience,” its success or failure depended on its capacity to convey that experience, and he understood these terms in a very subjective way. Although his critical position was questioned—and ultimately dismissed—by critics writing for the art press and the academic press (those writing for the popular press, which became Craven’s “public” in the 30s, tended to be more sympathetic), his peers in the critical press did not take up the challenge. Craven remains the critic of record of the 30s because he was the only one who formulated and defended a critical position—and, for this reason, his position did not function within a field of differential practices. Craven’s position, in other words, *constituted* the field (which means, of course, that there really wasn’t one, since a critical

⁵¹⁶ Lewis Mumford, “The Art Galleries,” *The New Yorker*, May 26, 1934, 61.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

field, by definition, requires more than one position). An actual field would not develop until the art press began to change in the early 50s.

Chapter 5

Intellectual-Critics and Journalist-Critics

By the end of the 30s, *The Art News* had begun to publish reviews, many of which were still closer to reportage. Whatever influence Craven had wielded earlier in the decade had waned. With the launch of *Kenyon*, literary criticism would begin to undergo a profound change and the distinction between “journalists” and “critics” would become more pronounced as the new criticism became New Criticism. I’ve mentioned that *Partisan’s* focus would shift in the 40s and I want to explore that shift in this chapter. I will also consider the technical criticism that was developing in the art press and will compare this writing to the criticism that was published in the journals of opinion and the little magazines.

The Age of Criticism

In 1941, the poet Randall Jarrell argued that, “A commercial magazine or newspaper is a rather elaborate device for inducing people to read advertisements. Most present-day poetry criticism consists of reviews in such magazines and newspapers.”⁵¹⁸ These reviews were a “subspecies of advertising” or “free publicity,” but the writing that deserved the name “criticism” was “usually printed in non-commercial magazines and often published by non-commercial publishers.”⁵¹⁹ This criticism was not only qualitatively different from the reviews; it also appealed to a different public. Hardly able to contain his enthusiasm, Jarrell wrote, “I do not believe there has been another age in which so much extraordinarily good criticism of poetry has been written” even as he acknowledged that this was “*hard* criticism, of unusual depth and complication, written—one might almost say—by

⁵¹⁸ Randall Jarrell, *No Other Book: Selected Essays*, ed. Brad Leithauser (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 139.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 140; 143.

critics for critics.”⁵²⁰ Reviews published in the popular press weren’t even considered “journalism” anymore, now they were merely “publicity.”

The critic (and former *Poetry* editor) Morton Dauwen Zabel saw the year 1939 as a kind of turning point in American criticism, stating that, “It would be reckless to announce and absurd to suppose that a golden day has arrived in American criticism, but the year 1939 and the decade it brings to a close may be taken as marking a moment of exceptional alertness and tension in the critical thinking of the country.”⁵²¹ The literary situation, as Rahv had pointed out, was “far from happy” compared to the “high enthusiasm among writers fifteen years ago” and Zabel saw the “sharpening of the critical temper” as compensatory.⁵²² Like Jarrell, he distinguished between the critic and the reviewer (or journalist), who, writing “under every disadvantage of time and space limitations, and usually under the paralyzing influence of his advertising manager,” stood, at that moment, “in no great honor.” Literary journalism, as a result, furnished “little but bulletins and announcements of new publications.”⁵²³ Those who represented a “higher level of critical authority” contributed to the “two or three reputable ‘journals of opinion’ still extant in

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 143-44.

⁵²¹ Zabel, “The Condition of American Criticism,” 417.

⁵²² Ibid. As Greenberg would put it a couple of years later, “When the impulse that came from the first awakening of avant-garde consciousness in America and from French modernist literature gave out, socialist revivalism was able partly to replace it, but with that gone, nothing is left, nothing at all, nor even art for art’s sake and contempt for society in general. There is no longer the struggle to control new material; only experiment in a vacuum, renovated exteriors, exhibitionism and careerism, with underneath it all an essential and boring conformism.” Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1986), 102.

⁵²³ Zabel, “The Condition of American Criticism,” 422.

America” (*The Nation* and *The New Republic*) or the critical journals, the best of which, in his view, was *Southern Review* with *Kenyon* and *Partisan* tied for second place.⁵²⁴

Fearing that the obstacles might be too great for critics who published in “non-commercial magazines,” Jarrell had advocated for their support: “*Encouraging* means buying or publishing their books, running magazines for them, giving them fellowships, hiring them in universities: it is a mercenary word.”⁵²⁵ A decade later, however, his perspective had changed dramatically. In “The Age of Criticism,” published in *Partisan* in 1952, he lamented the surfeit of criticism, which now seemed poised to subordinate literature. The problem wasn’t that there was too much criticism; rather, there was too much “of the kind that is more attractive to critics and to lovers of criticism than it is to poets and fiction-writers and to lovers of poetry and fiction.”⁵²⁶ Criticism, which had once been called upon to mediate between the public and the writer, was now in danger of alienating both, prompting Jarrell to ask the question that was implicit in the defense of criticism that Arnold had mounted in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time”: “Criticism *does* exist, doesn’t it, for the sake of the plays and stories and poems it criticizes?”⁵²⁷

By the early 50s, the term “literary criticism” would be associated almost exclusively with New Criticism and *Kenyon* would become a victim of its own success as its oppositional stance dissolved and it became the model for a host of new literary magazines (*Antioch Review*, *Hudson Review*, etc.). Writing in the late 40s, Louis D. Rubin, Jr.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 427.

⁵²⁵ Jarrell, *No Other Book*, 145.

⁵²⁶ Randall Jarrell, “The Age of Criticism,” *Partisan Review* XIX, no. 2 (April 1952): 186.

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

observed, “It was the acceptance and widespread adoption... of the New Criticism not as a *theory* of poetry but as a *method* for reading that was important. For in joining and converting the academy, it ceased to exist in opposition to the academy, and like any force that overcomes all resistance, it lost its urgency and combativeness.”⁵²⁸ Even more crucial than its position within the academy was the effect that its acceptance was having on criticism itself. Anticipating Jarrell’s objection, William Barrett noticed in 1949 that American criticism had begun “to seek what looks like a new autonomy” and asked whether “the critic, proud of his new discipline and seeking to cut out clearly his own province within literature, has also begun to cut himself off a little from literature.”⁵²⁹ Allen Tate concurred, arguing in the same issue of *Kenyon* that, “When insights into the meanings of a work become methodology, when the picture apologizes to the frame, we get what has been called autotelic criticism.”⁵³⁰

The “age of criticism” saw the revival of the little magazine, which wasn’t so little anymore: “Four times a year,” Jarrell continued, “[serious readers] read or try to read or wish they had read large magazines called literary quarterlies. Each of these contains several poems and a piece of fiction—sometimes two pieces; the rest is criticism.” Criticism, which had begun by “humbly and anomalously existing for the work of art,” had become “almost what the work of art exists for.”⁵³¹ This was the trajectory that the new discipline of literary criticism would follow over the course of the decade as the new criticism became

⁵²⁸ Louis D. Rubin Jr., “On the Cutting Edge,” *The Kenyon Review*, New Series, 12, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 152.

⁵²⁹ William Barrett, “A Present Tendency in American Criticism,” *The Kenyon Review* 11, no. 1 (Winter 1949): 1.

⁵³⁰ Allen Tate, “A Note on Autotelism,” *The Kenyon Review* 11, no. 1 (Winter 1949): 14.

⁵³¹ Jarrell, “The Age of Criticism,” 186; 200.

increasingly identified with the academy—and the little magazine with the literary quarterly—but what about the cultural criticism that *Partisan* had championed? “[A]n age of criticism,” Jarrell concluded, “is not an age of writing, nor an age of reading; it is an age of criticism. People still read, still write—and well; but for many of them it is the act of criticism which has become the representative or Archetypal act of the intellectual.”⁵³² Which raises the question of how cultural criticism was involved in this shift and what kind of impact it had on the critical field.

Intellectual-Critics

As the question of the proletariat’s lot was eclipsed by the outbreak of the war, the *Partisan* critics became preoccupied with a problem that was much closer to home: the social role—and survival—of the intellectual. In the 40s, the stakes for criticism outside the academy would be bound up with the question of what it meant to be an intellectual and what the intellectual’s role might now be. Having linked the magazine’s purpose, if not its existence, to its position vis-à-vis the proletariat (however symbolic), the *Partisan* editors suffered a kind of identity crisis after the war broke out. At first, they continued to repeat the claim that this was not their war, but as talk of revolution started to fade they began to wonder what might become of them. With literary critics beginning to make inroads in the academy, it was unclear whether cultural critics would maintain their sphere of influence—if indeed they can be said to have had such a sphere.

Rahv’s editorials of the late 30s anticipated a more widespread interrogation of the intellectual’s responsibility. Posing the treason-of-the-intellectuals question in a particularly

⁵³² Ibid., 187.

tendentious way, the poet Archibald MacLeish published a long “declaration” titled “The Irresponsibles” in May, 1940, asking why scholars and writers in the U.S., having witnessed the “destruction of writing and of scholarship in great areas of Europe” and the “murder of men whose crime was scholarship and writing,” had failed to “oppose those forces while they could—while there was still time and still place to oppose them with the arms of scholarship and writing?”⁵³³ The crux of the problem, he argued, was that intellectual responsibility had been “divided in our time and by division destroyed,” that “the men of intellectual duty, those who should have been responsible for action” had divided themselves into two “cults,” neither of which accepted “responsibility for the common culture or for its defense.” Formerly, the scholar and the writer had been united in the man of letters whose learning was “a profession practiced for the common good,” but the wholeness of this figure had been replaced by the “divided function, the isolated irresponsibility” of the scholar and the writer.⁵³⁴ Possessed of a kind of disinterested interest, the man of letters, as MacLeish imagined him, was something like the engaged intellectual that Sartre would call for at the end of the war (albeit with very different politics).⁵³⁵

According to MacLeish, the professionals on both sides of the divide were hindered by their solipsism: the scholar, indifferent to values, emulated the scientist’s objectivity and detachment while the thinking of the writer, like that of the painter, was

⁵³³ MacLeish, “The Irresponsibles,” 618.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, 621.

⁵³⁵ “In his introductory appeal [in *Les Temps Modernes*] Sartre asked French writers to engage themselves politically. ‘I hold Flaubert and Goncourt responsible for the repression that followed the Commune because they did not write one line to prevent it. One might say that it was not their business. But was the Calas trial Voltaire’s business? Dreyfus’ condemnation Zola’s? The administration of the Congo, Gide’s? Each of these authors, in a special circumstance of his life, measured his responsibility as a writer. The Occupation taught us ours.’” Ronald Aronson, “Sartre and the Radical Intellectual’s Role,” *Science and Society* 39, no. 4 (Winter 1975): 437.

“without responsibility to anything but truth of feeling.”⁵³⁶ MacLeish’s own thinking was remarkably blinkered as he clearly took pains not to mention critics of any kind. Whether or not he considered them to be “men of intellectual duty,” he appears to have rejected the possibility that it could have been the critic, or, to take up the formulation I adopted for the “young intellectuals,” the intellectual-critic, who might have accepted responsibility for defense of the common culture.⁵³⁷ His omission cuts both ways: critics were not condemned for their lack of responsibility but nor was the nature of that responsibility, as MacLeish understood it, made clear.

None of those who responded to the article, the majority of whom agreed with MacLeish, questioned the division that he argued for or the identity of the “men of intellectual duty.” Indeed, Joseph Freeman, former editor of *New Masses* and a founding editor of *Partisan*, was the only respondent who refused to beg the question, declaring that, “Writers have been anything but irresponsible about the vital issues of our age.” MacLeish’s indictment didn’t have anything to do with the writer’s responsibility, Freeman wrote, but with “his [the writer’s] incapacity to prevent the moral consequences of a civilization’s decay.”⁵³⁸

Partisan’s rejoinder to this diatribe came in the form of a two-part analysis of the public positions that MacLeish had held as the first Librarian of Congress by Zabel, who quoted an earlier article in which MacLeish, echoing Mann, had written that the series of failures—of the spirit, the imagination, desire—that had caused the current crisis were

⁵³⁶ MacLeish, “The Irresponsibles,” 622.

⁵³⁷ I prefer this term to “New York Intellectual” because the latter refers to a group of “literary radicals,” as James Gilbert put it, rather than critics.

⁵³⁸ Joseph Freeman, “On ‘The Irresponsibles,’” *The Nation*, June 1, 1940, 681.

failures “from which only poetry can deliver us.” It was the poet who could bring “the mind of this nation one step nearer to an understanding of its will, and one step nearer to an imagination of the world in which it can believe and which, believing, it can bring about.”⁵³⁹ Although MacLeish didn’t specify how the poet might achieve this, it was evidently what he meant by the deployment of “the arms of scholarship and writing.” As Zabel was quick to point out, MacLeish was looking for a hero—and had found one in himself.⁵⁴⁰ But the larger question of the intellectual’s responsibility had clearly struck a chord, as the general response to this piece attested. (In a letter to the editors of *Partisan*, James Rorty asked to add to Zabel’s remarks “before the paralytically successful Irresponsible coordinates us all.”⁵⁴¹) While the success of MacLeish’s piece likely hinged on its lack of specificity, those who considered themselves intellectuals, including critics, were left to grapple with its implications.

The *Partisan* editors were clearly not indifferent to the intellectual-critic’s “responsibility for the common culture,” although it’s possible that they would have disagreed with MacLeish about what the “common culture” was. Indeed, this was the question that William Phillips sought to address in “The Intellectuals’ Tradition,” which

⁵³⁹ Morton Dauwen Zabel, “The Poet on Capitol Hill (Part I),” *Partisan Review* VIII, no. 1 (February 1941): 5–6.

⁵⁴⁰ “Those who, like myself, assert that the threat to democratic civilization in this country is the threat of fascism means that the culture of the Republic is threatened by the existence in the United States of the kind of situation which has produced fascism elsewhere, and that that situation in the United States has already given indications, human and other, of developing in the known direction... It is this issue, as I see it, which is presented to American libraries, for it is upon American libraries that the burden of this education must fall. It cannot fall upon [the schools... the newspapers... the magazines... the book publishers... the radio... the screen]. But this burden CAN be entrusted to the libraries... The libraries, in brief, are the only institutions in the United States capable of dealing with the contemporary crisis in American life in terms and under conditions which give promise of success.” Archibald MacLeish, quoted in *ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁴¹ James Rorty, “Footnote on MacLeish,” *Partisan Review* VIII, no. 2 (April 1941): 160.

was published the following year. In what might have appeared to be a dramatic departure from the *Partisan* line if Rahv hadn't prepared the ground for it, Phillips began with the claim that Marxist theory was "a kind of half-truth" since it "overstress[ed] the correspondences between the historical context and the work itself," which led to "endless theoretical maneuvers as its exponents attempted to hold on to the autonomous values of literature in the very act of denying them." While traditional criticism regarded the individual writer as the "unit of [modern art's] alienation" and Marxist criticism "fixed the meanings and mutations of art in the social pattern," Phillips argued that neither of these views could account for literature's "continual recoil from the practices and values of society toward some form of self-sufficiency." It would be more accurate, he wrote, "to locate the immediate sources of art in the intelligentsia, which, since the renaissance at least, has made up a distinct occupational grouping within society." In other words, the tendency of art and literature to identify the subject of the work with its medium owed less to the (individual) artist's alienation than to the (collective) intellectuals' occupational detachment. Modern art, he wrote, "could not have come into being except through the formation by the intelligentsia of a distinct group culture, thriving on its very anxiety over survival and its consciousness of being an elite. In no other way could it have been able to resist being absorbed by the norms of belief and behavior."⁵⁴²

In "Twilight of the Thirties," Rahv had cited the link Trotsky had made between the pre-revolutionary Russian symbolist schools and the "self-determination, in that period, of the intelligentsia, which proclaimed that 'it had its own value, regardless of its relation to

⁵⁴² William Phillips, "The Intellectuals' Tradition," *Partisan Review* VIII, no. 6 (December 1941): 481-82.

the people.” The “relative detachment” of the intellectual was necessary, Rahv argued, because most of the “modern literary tendencies” (romanticism, naturalism, symbolism, expressionism, surrealism, etc.) could not have “become articulate” without it.⁵⁴³ Rahv’s conclusion demonstrates how far *Partisan* had already traveled from its previous vanguardism: arguing that “any social examination” of modern literature required “an examination of the special role and changing status of the intelligentsia,” Rahv claimed that, “[I]t was not until the twentieth century that a separate intellectual class emerged conscious of itself as standing apart from society and as possessing special and superior interests and ideals.”⁵⁴⁴ Simply put, the alienated subject with which *Partisan* would now concern itself was not the proletariat but the intellectual-critic. (Although “examination of the special role and changing status of the intelligentsia” may not have been what William James had had in mind when he argued for the class consciousness of “Les Intellectuals.”)

Like Arnold, Phillips was arguing for the intellectual-critic’s priority, but his discussion had a different emphasis. Modern art could not have emerged without “such a unified and self-perpetuating group,” Phillips wrote, but the group’s continuity mattered as much as if not more than its self-sufficiency, since the intelligentsia provided the artist “with a sustaining tradition of convention and experiment, without which he could never hope to be more than a gifted eccentric.”⁵⁴⁵ Tracing the history of the intelligentsia in the U.S., however, Phillips perceived what he referred to as its “ambivalent psyche,” its tendency to be “torn between the urge toward some degree of autonomy and an equally strong

⁵⁴³ Rahv, “Twilight of the Thirties,” 11.

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 11–12 This description corresponds more or less to Gramsci’s definition of the “traditional” intellectual.

⁵⁴⁵ Phillips, “The Intellectuals’ Tradition,” 483.

tendency to self-effacement.” If it was axiomatic that “continuity [was] the condition for creative invention,” it was no wonder that it wasn’t “until the last two or three decades” that “any literary ‘schools,’ promoted by an active literary intelligentsia,” had made their appearance. The lack of a sustained (and sustaining) intellectual tradition in a context in which the intelligentsia’s “natural inclination” was “to merge with the popular mind” had prevented the “lasting intellectual differentiation” that had been “achieved in European art and thought.”⁵⁴⁶ In theory, if the survival of modern art—not just its origin—could be linked to that of the intelligentsia, then the intellectual’s (and, by extension, the little magazine’s) social role might be secured. If society was dependent on intellectuals for the “modern literary tendencies,” however, their claim to an independent, oppositional stance would be difficult to defend.

Picking up where Rahv had left off, Phillips took up the two strands of Rahv’s editorials of the 30s: the intelligentsia as the source of modern art, on one hand, and its “deep-seated need to accept as its own—if only periodically—the official voice of society” on the other.⁵⁴⁷ Rahv wanted to prevent intellectuals from capitulating to this “deep-seated need,” but Phillips was no longer sure, only two years later, that acceptance of the official voice represented a threat: “[W]hile their bent is entirely against any kind of social authority or discipline, nevertheless the intelligentsia, in their role of intellectual conservation and in their tightly knit traditions, perform for modern times a function that an institution like the church, for instance, had in the medieval period.”⁵⁴⁸ While Phillips

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 487; 489.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 482; 490.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., 483. Cf. Karl Mannheim: “From a sociological point of view the decisive fact of modern times, in contrast with the situation during the Middle Ages, is that [the] monopoly of the ecclesiastical

had held out hope for a “proletarian generation” of writers in the mid-30s, *Partisan’s* attention had always been focused more closely on culture than it had been on the proletariat. But now that the link between the intellectual and the proletariat was dissolving, the editors were clearly worried that the magazine’s vanguard status might be slipping away (although they might not have stopped to wonder whether it had been illusory to begin with). In any case, the shift in Phillips’s perspective points to a larger shift in the *Partisan* group’s definition of the term “intellectual.”

Jumonville offers three definitions of this term, the second of which he associates with the New York intellectuals since it includes “anyone who perpetually questions accepted truths, challenges orthodoxies, and adopts the stance of a dissenter.” There is certainly no better definition of the critics associated with *Partisan* in the 1930s. (The first definition, pertaining to “those whose jobs require them to deal with ideas,” is occupational.)⁵⁴⁹ But Phillips’s argument regarding the “intellectuals’ tradition” brings the *Partisan* circle closer to Jumonville’s third definition, which “portrays the intellectual as fulfilling a sacred function.” Instead of critiquing the status quo, the *Partisan* editors seemed to want a role in shaping it. “Here the intellectual is expected to exert a creative impulse,” Jumonville writes, “to synthesize and integrate diverse materials and apparently unrelated concepts into a new perspective, to step back and speak to larger, deeper, and more important values.”⁵⁵⁰ That the editors wanted to “exert a creative impulse” is certainly

interpretation of the world which was held by the priestly caste is broken, and in place of a closed and thoroughly organized stratum of intellectuals, a free intelligentsia has arisen.” Quoted in Jeremy Jennings and A. Kemp-Welch, *Intellectuals in Politics: From the Dreyfus Affair to the Rushdie Affair* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 10.

⁵⁴⁹ Jumonville, *Critical Crossings*, 10–11.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

apparent in a statement Phillips wrote about *Partisan* in the 40s: “For many of its readers who are scattered all over the country it has served as a focal point in their attempts to orient themselves in the world of modern art and politics. Thus the magazine has come to possess the significance and authority of a stable cultural institution.”⁵⁵¹

Rahv and Phillips, who had been so intent on defining the role of the critic and the function of Marxian criticism in the mid-30s, were in a difficult position as the decade came to a close. The problem wasn’t that *Partisan*’s vanguard status had been called into question; it was that this point was now moot both because the magazine was no longer anchored by its association with the proletariat and because its conflict with the Communist Party was now beside the point. And if, as Rahv and Phillips had argued in 1937, criticism’s “effectiveness” as a social judgment was “one of the measures of its validity,” perhaps it’s no wonder that they had begun to doubt their value as critics. While the (Marxian) critic might be “the ideologist of the literary movement,” the intellectual could be said to possess a social role that the critic clearly lacked, and, although they never would have used a label as cumbersome as “intellectual-critic,” the *Partisan* editors now sought to shift the emphasis from the second to the first of these terms. Whether MacLeish’s omission had any real effect is debatable, but it seems to have bolstered their need to claim their identity as intellectuals now that they could no longer point to their presumed vanguardism as proof of their value and necessity.⁵⁵²

⁵⁵¹ Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*, 188–89.

⁵⁵² As Gilbert writes of the magazine’s vanguardism, “[I]t was possible, perhaps, that with a profound social transformation the intellectual would take his true place in society. In the meantime he could ally himself with the most progressive force, the potential source of the revolution, the proletariat.” *Ibid.*, 92–93.

As the political landscape shifted, the magazine's foe changed. By the early 40s, the *Partisan* critics were no longer fighting leftism (they were critical of the policies and political position of the League of American Writers, but it wasn't the primary threat); now, they opposed the reactionary forces of the right, the "cultural counter-revolution" that had started with MacLeish's attack. They might not have had an active avant-garde to defend, but the now-consecrated avant-garde—Joyce, Proust, Eliot—found itself under attack. "Their school," wrote Dwight Macdonald in a 1941 article titled "Kulturbolschewismus is Here," "had done its work, fought and won its battles by the end of the twenties. But it is still the most advanced cultural tendency that exists, and in a reactionary period it has come to represent again relatively the same threat to official society as it did in the early decades of the century."⁵⁵³ But with America's entrance into the war, this fight, too, began to fade.

The *Partisan* editors' unified position was also beginning to fray along the fault line of the civilization/culture divide. James Gilbert, referring to "Trials of the Mind," argues that, "War, the Moscow Trials, and the failure of the revolutionary movement exposed the reality of the intellectual's role—to save civilization."⁵⁵⁴ Macdonald, who continued to oppose the war long after the other *Partisan* editors had changed their minds, remained committed to this task. As he wrote in "War and the Intellectuals: Act II," published just before the war broke out, "The great objection to the war program of the intellectuals is not so much that it will get us into a war... but that it is diverting us from the main task: to work with the masses for socialism, which alone can save our civilization."⁵⁵⁵ Although Greenberg

⁵⁵³ Dwight Macdonald, "Kulturboschewismus Is Here," *Partisan Review* VIII, no. 6 (December 1941): 451.

⁵⁵⁴ Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*, 206.

⁵⁵⁵ Macdonald, "War and the Intellectuals: Act Two," 10.

sided with Macdonald on the war, socialism's promise was linked, for him, to culture, which was opposed or "antithetical," to borrow Leavis's term, to "civilization." As he wrote in a letter to the editor of *The Nation* a few years later, "I may be a Socialist, but a work of art has its own ends, which it includes in itself and which have nothing to do with the fate of society."⁵⁵⁶ Remaining focused on criticism, he was also less interested in the prospect of "exerting a creative impulse." Because they equated culture's preservation with the intellectual's (or with the intellectual's social recognition), Rahv and Phillips would become increasingly preoccupied with their own welfare. The extent of their self-interestedness becomes evident if we compare two essays published within a few months of each other in 1944.

C. Wright Mills's "The Social Role of the Intellectual" appeared in the April issue of *Politics*, a new magazine launched by Macdonald in the wake of his split with *Partisan*; Arthur Koestler's "The Intelligentsia" was published in the Summer issue of *Partisan*.⁵⁵⁷ Although neither essay purported to represent the position of the magazine in which it was published (though there's no question that each of these magazines was a "form of criticism"), the divergence of the authors' views, as well as the scope of their discussions, is indicative of the disparity between Macdonald's increased politicization and the growing hermeticism of *Partisan*. As the title of his essay suggests, Mills emphasized the political and social function of what might be called "professional" intellectuals (members of the academy or those who worked for the "information industry"); by contrast, Koestler dealt with an intelligentsia that was, for all intents and purposes, self-appointed.

⁵⁵⁶ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*, 67.

⁵⁵⁷ Macdonald had resigned as editor in 1943 because *Partisan* had left the "thorny fields of politics" and become too "exclusively literary." Quoted in Janssen, *The Kenyon Review, 1939-1970*, 4.

Mills begins with the premise that it's necessary to consider the social position of intellectuals to understand intellectual life in the U.S. Although he never mentions MacLeish, he returns again and again to the issue of responsibility, arguing that, "In a world of big organizations the lines between powerful decisions and grass-root democratic controls become blurred" and "seemingly irresponsible actions by individuals at the top are encouraged"—the inference being that it wasn't intellectuals who were the agents of the "organized irresponsibility" that was "a leading feature of modern industrial societies everywhere."⁵⁵⁸ Focusing on self-censorship in the academy and the prescriptive editing of the mass magazines, Mills was concerned about the "real world" politics with which intellectuals were confronted. Mass-circulation publications, for example, didn't offer the "direct channel to readers" afforded to Tom Paine by the "world of pamphleteering," since they were a means of communication that was generally unavailable to "one who does not say already popular things." On the other hand, he might have been channeling Macdonald—and speaking to *Partisan*—when he wrote that, "The writer tends to believe that problems are *really* going to be solved in *his* medium, that of the word."⁵⁵⁹

Mills was acutely aware of the intellectual's need to remain autonomous, but warned that this shouldn't become an end in itself. Or as he put it, "Alienation must be used in the pursuit of truths, but there is no reason to make a political fetish out of it."⁵⁶⁰ While he was writing about the intellectual more generally, his article addressed (and was ultimately addressed to) the social scientist, who "often sanction[ed]" rather than "[spoke]

⁵⁵⁸ C. Wright Mills, *Power, Politics, and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 294; 295.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 296; 304.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 301.

out the truth against” the “illusions which uphold authority.” Mills understood that the social scientist had “little or no power to act politically” and his opportunities to “communicate in a politically effective manner” were very limited, but concluded that, “The effective way to plan the world’s future is to criticize the decisions of the present.”⁵⁶¹ Mills was convinced, therefore, that intellectuals needed to “question accepted truths, challenge orthodoxies, and adopt the stance of a dissenter”—that is, to “exert a *critical* impulse.”

Ostensibly, Koestler was arguing for the same thing as he stressed the continuing need for “independent thinking.” Published in *Partisan* on the heels of Mills’s essay, Koestler’s article was a meditation on the history and social role of the intelligentsia. Both Rahv and Phillips had asserted that the intellectual belonged to a “special social grouping” within the middle class, but they didn’t elaborate on the meaning of the term or its origin. Koestler resorted to the dictionary, where he found one definition of “intelligentsia” that he deemed too “optimistic” because he thought it was too indebted to the rhetoric of the Popular Front—“the class consisting of the educated portion of the population regarded as capable of forming public opinion”—and one that he approved of—“The part of the nation (esp. the Russian) that aspires to independent thinking.” He then proceeded to trace the social history of this group, starting with the Encyclopedists, who, as the “first modern intellectuals,” entered “the historical stage as the great debunkers and iconoclasts.”⁵⁶²

The intelligentsia first appeared as that “part of the nation which by its social situation not so much ‘aspires’ but is *driven* to independent thought, that is to a type of

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., 302; 303.

⁵⁶² Koestler, “The Intelligentsia,” 265.

group behaviour which debunks the existing hierarchy of values (from which it is excluded) and at the same time tries to replace it with new values of its own.”⁵⁶³ This group was characterized by frustration, but it was a very specific kind of frustration: the discontent of the “professional man, writer, artist, who rebel... because they have been given a margin large enough to develop their gifts, but too narrow to make them feel smug and accept the given order of things.” Like Benda, who blamed the intellectuals’ treason, in part, on the “impossibility of leading the life of a ‘clerk’ in the world of to-day” and the failure of the State to maintain “a class of men exempt from civic duties,” Koestler distinguished between the once-revolutionary “urban bourgeoisie” who were no longer interested in establishing new hierarchies of values but “in climbing to the top of the existing hierarchy” and the intelligentsia, which, he wrote, “becomes the Lumpen-Bourgeoisie in the age of its decay.”⁵⁶⁴ Without framing it this way, Koestler moves the discussion away from the group identity that was so crucial to Phillips’s understanding of the intelligentsia—the group culture “thriving on its very anxiety over survival and its consciousness of being an elite”—and towards the personal. Those who weren’t “snugly tucked into the social hierarchy,” Koestler writes, weren’t driven to independent thought: “the happy are rarely curious.”⁵⁶⁵

Quoting Franz Borkenau, Koestler argues that, whether it was speaking of the “necessity of political liberty, of the plight of the peasant or of the socialist future of society,” what the intelligentsia was really concerned about was its own plight, making explicit the motive underlying Phillips’s concentration on the intellectual’s indispensability to modern art’s founding (and continued development). Attributing the intelligentsia’s

⁵⁶³ Ibid., 266.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., 270.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 269.

primary affliction to the fact that “people grow under the burden of their responsibilities and shrink if the burden is taken away from them” (raising the question of why the intelligentsia should be given the “burden and bliss” of responsibility in certain periods but not in others), he asserts that, “Neurosis is inherent in the structure of intelligentsias.” Which leads to a belated response to the charge of “irresponsibility” that MacLeish had leveled four years before: “The intelligentsia of the Pink Decade was irresponsible,” Koestler writes, “because it was deprived of the privilege of responsibility.” The intelligentsia’s deterioration was “as much a symptom of disease as the corruption of the ruling class or the sleeping sickness of the proletariat.”⁵⁶⁶ Deprived of its responsibility, the intelligentsia couldn’t be entirely faulted for its failure.

But Koestler was interested in exposing another consequence of this deprivation. He makes no effort to conceal his assumption that the intelligentsia’s partnership with the proletariat was a pretense, writing that, without the “prop of an alliance with an ascending class,” the intelligentsia “must” turn against itself and “develop that hot-house atmosphere, that climate of intellectual masturbation and incest, which characterized it during the last decade.” Further, it must “develop that morbid attraction for the pseudo-intellectual hangers-on whose primary motive is not the ‘aspiration to independent thought’ but neurosis pure and simple.” The intelligentsia shouldn’t be faulted for its neurosis, since this trait was “not accidental, but functional”: “To think and behave independently puts one automatically into opposition against the majority whose thinking and behaviour is dependent on traditional patterns: and to belong to a minority is in itself a neurosis-forming situation.” Neurosis was essentially an occupational hazard: “Those who attack the

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid., 271; 273.

intelligentsia for its neurotic dispositions might as well attack the miners for their susceptibility to T.B. It is a professional disease and should be recognized as such, without scorn or shame.”⁵⁶⁷

The question of the historical role and definition of the intellectual had initially revolved around the issue of self-determination, but, having defended the normalcy of the intelligentsia’s neurotic self-involvement, Koestler concluded by reaffirming both the intellectual’s (self-)worth and *Partisan*’s stance on the war: “The collapse of the revolutionary movement has put the intelligentsia into a defensive position; the alternative for the next few years is no more ‘capitalism or revolution’ but to save *some* of the values of democracy and humanism or to lose them all; and to prevent this happening one has to cling more than ever to the ragged banner of ‘independent thinking.’”⁵⁶⁸ It’s hard not to hear an echo of the concluding lines of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” in these words, but, besides the references to “democracy” and “humanism,” the difference between this statement and Greenberg’s “Today we look to socialism simply for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now” is that Koestler’s focus is on the plight not of culture but of its “guardians.”

Commenting on this article in the same issue of *Partisan*, Phillips reiterated Koestler’s claim, arguing that, “the most advanced sections of the elite tend to be radical, dissident, and uncompromising” and that their “will to independence” had political meaning, since it constituted “an attack on the conditions that create and imprison the elite.” Moreover, if the will to independence was now “inseparable from the sheer effort to

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., 275–6. See also Clement Greenberg, “The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture” Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*, 160–170.

⁵⁶⁸ Koestler, “The Intelligentsia,” 277.

survive,” it was because “society is now finding it as profitable to rationalize the production of ideas as the production of commodities.”⁵⁶⁹ One could argue that autotelism was as much of an issue for *Partisan* (albeit in a different way) as it was for the new criticism.

The defensive crouch that the magazine went into in the 40s didn’t just affect its politics; it also affected its approach to criticism as the *Partisan* critics left aside the need to “fight those currents that are moving away from the aims of Marxism.” Not all intellectual-critics were convinced by the magazine’s shifting position, including Harold Rosenberg, who was perturbed (to put it mildly) by the course that *Partisan* would follow in the 40s. Publishing book reviews, poetry, and essays on literature in the magazine, Rosenberg had been an early—and frequent—contributor to *Partisan* in both its first and second incarnations, but he published very little in the 40s, undoubtedly because of his skepticism about its “will to independence.”

In the mid-30s Rosenberg had been an editor at *Art Front*, the journal of the Artists Union, where an internal rift among the editors mirrored the split between the *New Masses* and *Partisan*. Stuart Davis was *Art Front*’s first editor-in-chief, and defended abstract art as “the result of a revolutionary struggle relative to bourgeois academic solutions.” Clarence Weinstock, a board member who took over as editor in 1937 (thereby bringing the debate to an end), voiced the opposing argument: “painting cannot free art from subject matter until ‘subject matter itself is free, that is, when objects no longer need be seen in relationships that in turn enslave the artist and then us.’”⁵⁷⁰ Parallel to, or underlying, the dispute over abstraction was the question of the relationship between the artist or

⁵⁶⁹ William Phillips, “Mr. Eliot and Notions of Culture: A Discussion,” *Partisan Review* XI, no. 3 (Summer 1944): 309.

⁵⁷⁰ Gerald M. Monroe, “Art Front,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 13, no. 3 (1973): 15; 17.

intellectual and the journal's primarily working-class readers: "The Artists Union was a mass organization and the majority was relatively unsophisticated; many resented the scholarly tone of the magazine and considered it an indulgence of a clique of intellectuals." Rosenberg was anything but subtle in his opposition to Weinstock, dismissing most of the union's board members as "intellectually shallow and boring" and going so far as to warn readers in an April 1936 review of Dali's *Conquest of the Irrational* that it was not recommended for "those readers of *Art Front* who have complained of the obscurity of some of the articles in these volumes."⁵⁷¹ He would become just as vehement when his colleagues at *Partisan* appeared to be capitulating to the forces of capitalism.

By the late 40s, Rosenberg had begun to lose confidence in the intellectuals associated with the little magazines, whom he would later describe, in a more full-throated denunciation, as a "cult" that had "chosen as its fabulous profession to keep hunting the *Zeitgeist* in order to submit to its command."⁵⁷² It's therefore no surprise that his quarrel with *Partisan* came in the form of a critique of mass culture. Worried about mass culture's appeal to "sameness"—the lowest common denominator represented by "a kind of human dead center in which everyone is identical with everyone else"—he published "The Herd of Independent Minds: Has the Avant-Garde its own Mass Culture?" in *Commentary* magazine (where Greenberg was associate editor), arguing that, "In the democracy of mass culture, the proposition 'All men are alike' replaces the proposition, 'All men are equal.'"⁵⁷³

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁷² Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of The New* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 245.

⁵⁷³ Harold Rosenberg, *Discovering the Present: Three Decades in Art, Culture and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 16. This anticipates Warhol's "Everybody looks alike and acts alike, and we're getting more and more that way." Quoted in Nicholas Baume, Jonathan Flatley, and Pamela

Rosenberg was disturbed by the herd mentality among the “comprehenders,” as Bourne had called them, and was unconvinced by the way in which “critics influenced by Marxist terminology” (i.e. *Partisan* critics) had construed the alienation of the artist. Rather than recognizing the artist as “the only figure in this society who is able *not to be alienated*, because he works directly with the materials of his own experience and transforms them”—and who, as a result, Marx conceived of “as the model of the man of the future”—these critics understood the artist’s alienation as *their own* failure to “participate emotionally and intellectually in the fictions and conventions of mass culture” and viewed “this removal from popular hallucination and inertia” as “a form of pathos.”⁵⁷⁴ With its shift in focus over the past decade, *Partisan* had become so enamored of its own alienation that it no longer pretended to understand this phenomenon within a Marxian context but, according to Rosenberg, now lamented its own failure to participate in the capitalist fiction.

Distinguishing between the common *experience*, formulated by mass culture, and the common *situation*, which was shared by individuals, Rosenberg wrote that, for the producer of mass culture, “What is endured by one human being alone seems... unreal, or even an effect of madness. The ‘alienation’ of the artist, his characteristic neurosis, which we hear so much about today, is an essential axiom of mass-culture thinking: every departure from the common experience appears to be an abnormality requiring some form of explanation—medical, sociological, etc.”⁵⁷⁵ It wasn’t just the tendency to pathologize individual thinking or behavior that bothered him; it was that the “common experience”

Lee, *Sol Lewitt: Incomplete Open Cubes*, ed. Nicholas Baume (Hartford, CT: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 2001), 90.

⁵⁷⁴ Rosenberg, *Discovering the Present*, 16.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

seemed to be replacing culture itself. (Greenberg, whose perspective on this was much closer to Rosenberg's, employed Koestler's lexicon nonetheless: "What is more real at the moment is... the neurosis of alienation," he wrote in January 1948, "The alienation of Bohemia was only an anticipation in nineteenth-century Paris; it is in New York that it has been completely fulfilled."⁵⁷⁶)

Rosenberg expanded on Greenberg's claim regarding the preference for kitsch among those who couldn't command the leisure required to appreciate formal culture (whether they found themselves living under a communist or a capitalist regime), focusing on an issue that Walter Lippmann had seized on in the early 20s: "Mass-cultural statements are constantly *in the process of making themselves true* by causing people to experience their common lives in those terms... Thus we may take it for granted that the collective experience of the Russians resembles at any given moment the version of it presented by Soviet novels and movies to roughly the same degree that the common experience of Americans corresponds to the Hollywood, TV, or Sunday Supplement presentation of it."⁵⁷⁷ Greenberg's abiding interest in Brecht would certainly have made him receptive to Rosenberg's logic:

To penetrate through the common experience to the actual situation from which all suffer requires a creative act—that is to say, an act that directly grasps the life of people during, say, a war, that grasps the war from inside, so to speak, as a situation with a human being in it... For the work of art takes away from its audience its sense of knowing where it stands in relation to what has happened to it and suggests to the audience that its situation might be quite different than it has suspected.⁵⁷⁸

⁵⁷⁶ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*, 194.

⁵⁷⁷ Rosenberg, *Discovering the Present*, 17-18.

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

As Rosenberg explained, the fiction of the common experience had an ideological dimension: “The common situation is precisely what the common experience with its mass-culture texture conceals, *and is often intended to conceal.*” The problem, as far as criticism was concerned, wasn’t that the little magazine couldn’t provide an antidote to mass culture, but that it no longer offered an alternative: “From ‘significant’ novels, through ‘highbrow’ radio programs, to ‘little’ magazine articles and stories, a variety of mass-culture forms pits the mass culture of small groups against the mass culture of the masses. The result is not the creation of an artistic culture but of a pyramid of ‘masses’ of different sizes, each with expressions of its own common experience.”⁵⁷⁹ Committed to the cause of the masses and collectivity—the common situation—in the 30s, the little magazines had succumbed to a quietism that made the “mass culture of the small group” more insidious than the “mass culture of the masses,” since they now hid their mass-cultural treatment of vanguard writers in plain sight as it were. Simply attending to avant-garde writing wasn’t enough to exempt the little magazines from involvement in the production of mass culture: “[A] literary magazine, no matter how ‘little,’ does not escape being a mass-culture organ simply by interesting itself in [Kafka or Henry James], when in discussing them it reduces their work to formulas of common experience.” Rosenberg was as concerned about preserving the site (and later the practice) of criticism as he was about defending the “common situation” and the “creative act.”⁵⁸⁰ He stopped writing for some of these magazines (including *Partisan*) as he began to lose faith not only in the little magazine but in the literary field itself. While in the late 40s it might not have been possible to predict

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid., 18; 19-20.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid., 21.

where he'd end up, changes in the critical landscape would open up a site that Rosenberg is unlikely to have contemplated before.

Technical Criticism

“News is still the watchword of our editorial staff,” Frankfurter wrote in a 1941 editorial, “But to be ahead of the news, still more to be virtually making it months ahead, offers another very special satisfaction.” Frankfurter was particularly pleased that the magazine’s profile of George Grosz had been “half a year ahead” of two big shows that were taking place at MoMA and the Associated American Artists, and ended his editorial by exhorting readers to “Follow *ARTnews* for the trends of the future!”⁵⁸¹ How, we might ask, did Frankfurter’s preoccupation with the “trends of the future” differ from Greenberg’s “working hypothesis” regarding the “good art of the future”?

Before I address this question, I want to revisit the definition of technical criticism that I gave earlier. I quoted one observer’s claim that a critic “informed in the materials and techniques of a given art” measured artistic success “in terms of certain definite artistic intentions that are functions of the medium and its relevant techniques.”⁵⁸² (The focus on “medium” here differs from what Greenberg meant when he wrote, in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” that, “In turning his attention away from subject-matter or common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft.”⁵⁸³) To amplify a bit, the term, as I am using it here, refers to a kind of aesthetic criticism (i.e. criticism that treated art or poetry “as a fine art, shut up in its own world, subject to its own rules and values,” to

⁵⁸¹ Frankfurter, “Vernissage,” October 15, 1941, 6.

⁵⁸² Edman, “Review of *The Arts and the Art of Criticism* by Theodore Meyer Greene,” 275.

⁵⁸³ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 36.

borrow Harriet Monroe's formulation) whose standard of judgment is limited to an artist's technical proficiency or craftsmanship. Unlike impressionistic or appreciative criticism, technical criticism rendered a critical judgment based on "aesthetic standards." That judgment could involve comparisons with other works by the same artist (although Frankfurter discouraged even this) but not contemporaries' work. As Frankfurter wrote in the January 1950 issue of *ARTnews*:

We believe emphatically that subjective, qualitative concentration on individual works of art, or at the very most on single exhibitions, is the one way to work toward standards of excellence within our own contemporaneity. To stand up and be counted on the issue of an individual work of art is the one way to fight the lazy false generalities that are flung about as though they actually represented experience.⁵⁸⁴

Because they were evaluated individually, artworks succeeded or failed "on their own terms."⁵⁸⁵ Whereas, for Greenberg, the methods of the avant-garde offered the only possible means of creating "art and literature of a high order," Frankfurter was more interested in the (technical) quality of individual artworks.

Critics have offered a couple of different definitions of aesthetic criticism. For Monroe, the poem or picture would "stand by its aesthetic adequacy in the triumphant expression of the vision of the artist's soul."⁵⁸⁶ Gertrude Buck was more specific, writing that

⁵⁸⁴ Alfred Frankfurter, "Vernissage," *ARTnews* XLVIII, no. 9 (January 1950): 13. Frankfurter wasn't as concerned about comparisons of contemporaries' work (since he took it for granted that this was off limits), but was even opposed to the evaluation of an artist's work within the context of his or her oeuvre: "If art criticism in this country is to attain the maturity toward which our painting and architecture now seem definitely to be headed," he went on to say, "the path will be marked by critics beginning to discuss at length a single picture or a single sculpture, rather than seeking to appraise or label an entire career."

⁵⁸⁵ Although it took into account the "objective" character of the work (its "historical setting," its "psychological origin," and its illustration of "aesthetic law"), appreciative criticism lacked standards of judgment and remained, in the end, a more subjective form of criticism (the goal was to further the reader's or viewer's enjoyment or appreciation of the work).

⁵⁸⁶ Harriet Monroe, "Aesthetic and Social Criticism," *Poetry* 13, no. 1 (October 1918): 41. This would be Lionello Venturi's claim as well: the "absolute" standard of judgment that the critic must use would

it involved “explaining the effects produced by the play or poem on the reader, and evaluating these effects by reference to established aesthetic laws.”⁵⁸⁷ When she follows this up by distinguishing it from “deductive” (judicial) criticism because of deductive criticism’s subservience to what Babbitt referred to as the “restraining sense of tradition,” I take this to mean that judgment, for the aesthetic critic, was not based on rigid conformity with “accepted models or canons.” The distinction is slight: it might be useful to describe aesthetic criticism as “tradition-based” (since its standards derived from the art of the past) rather than “traditionalist” (which required a stricter conformity with the standards of the past). While Babbitt spoke of “absolute values,” an aesthetic critic would invoke “aesthetic values” or “aesthetic standards.”

About a year after Greenberg began writing for *The Nation*, he published a review of an exhibition of André Masson’s work at Bucholz gallery. Doris Brian devoted a little over 100 words to this show in the March 15-31, 1942 *ARTnews*. Brian writes that Masson’s paintings “combine extreme cruelty of subject and graceful beauty of line and tint without apparent incongruity. He is a superb draftsman, a master of pungent color. Animal battles and human frustrations occupy him. Look at the ferocious yet elegant *Divertissement espagnol*. Painted in butterfly colors, a butterfly is the bull, insects are the fighters, yet a Goya could not be more to the point. Each of the fifty items in the double exhibition opens a new facet of Masson’s imagination eloquently expressed by a skilled hand.”⁵⁸⁸ For technical critics, the aim was to provide a more or less impressionistic

be found in the “soul of the artist.” See Lionello Venturi, “Art and Taste,” *The Art Bulletin* 26, no. 4 (December 1944): 272, doi:10.2307/3046967.

⁵⁸⁷ Buck, *The Social Criticism of Literature*, 11.

⁵⁸⁸ Doris Brian, “Fantasists: Masson, Quirt, Margo,” *ARTnews* XLI, no. 2 (March 1-15, 1942): 29.

description of the work and to judge the artist's technical proficiency and handling of the subject matter: the artist draws well or poorly, is an expert or deficient colorist, has offered an "original conception" or a "typically surrealist adventure," as some of the other critics who reviewed this show wrote.⁵⁸⁹ But the most important point to make about this writing is that the text, focused on judgment of an individual work or what I've referred to as local judgment, rarely strays outside the frame of the object under review (except to offer a reference).

To come back to what I argued about the traditionalist critics, if the (surrealist) work conformed too strictly to past standards, it "would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art." In other words, the assumption that art (or, better, styles) changed—and needed to change—was at work here. But Brian focuses almost exclusively on the kind of virtuosity that, for Greenberg, led to the Alexandrianism that he had argued against in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." Goya had certainly painted his own "divertissement espagnol," but it's not clear how it "could not be more to the point" in this comparison. Unlike the traditionalists, Brian could accept surrealism as an established style, but the "traditional basis" of her technical criticism is evident in the attention she pays to technical skill and craftsmanship.⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁹ Edward Alden Jewell et al., "Our Box Score of the Critics," *ARTnews* XLI, no. 3 (March 15, 1942): 24.

⁵⁹⁰ Cortisoz, Morgan argues, found surrealism "distasteful because it emphasized uncertainties, ambivalences, and tensions in both individuals and societies. It seemed morbid and decadent, perhaps understandable given the times but hardly a viable substitute for traditional ideals that promoted harmony and unity." See H. Wayne Morgan, *Keepers of Culture: The Art-Thought of Kenyon Cox, Royal Cortisoz, and Frank Jewett Mather, Jr.* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1989), 85–86.

Then there's Greenberg, whose technical criticism is inflected with a "discussion of a larger scope," as Bourne put it. "Masson's failure," he begins, "is in the contemporary grand manner... One can glimpse through the badness of his painting how greatly Masson conceives; and so it is only by some physiological, tactile deficiency in himself that I can explain the collapse of his actual work; the raging sickness of color, the obtuseness with which he rattles together pigment, design, space—the *art nouveau*, the hard, machined insensitivity of line in his drawings, and their maladroit literary flourishes." For Greenberg, however, "judging good from bad" wasn't just a matter of technical ability, since there was something larger at stake: "Masson is a surrealist, but he has absorbed enough cubism, in spite of himself, never to lose sight of the direction in which the pictorial art of our times must go in order to be great. His endeavor to expand painting concentrates on the means, not the subject; color and line are to be detached and disassociated from their old habits of meaning, and made to express or suggest what is inconceivable to anything but the eye's imagination."⁹¹ Painting was going somewhere (and it must be in order to be great); Masson was "expanding" it; color and line had "old habits." His sights set on "what the good [art] of the future will be like," Greenberg didn't see the "badness" of Masson's painting in terms of individual pictures; rather, like Masson, he couldn't "lose sight of the direction in which the pictorial art of our times must go in order to be great." While technical critics incorporated judgment—even critical judgment—into their reviews, Greenberg's formalism provided a theoretical basis not only for "judging good from bad" but for his "working hypothesis."

⁹¹ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1*, 99. This unsigned review was Greenberg's second for the magazine.

Although contemporaneous criticism wasn't conceived in quite the same terms, Bourne was hopeful that it would motivate writers to "broaden their imaginative and intellectual horizons" in order to carry the "creative expression of the present towards a greater wisdom and clarity and ardor of life."⁵⁹² Concerned about being "ahead of the news" and the magazine's ability to predict the "trends of the future," Frankfurter wasn't interested in the direction in which pictorial art *must go*. Instead, as Crowninshield asserted, the magazine's primary interest was in "stimulating, directing, and giving final form" to the rapid changes in American taste.⁵⁹³ If technical critics were interested in the goodness or badness of individual pictures and being "agents for excellence," it was the cultural implications of Masson's formalist "expansion" of painting that preoccupied Greenberg. Having complained that Jerome Mellquist didn't place or evaluate the artwork but only described "his reactions" to it (or, as he described these "reactions" in another instance, "the subterfuges of impressionistic appreciation by which most writers on art try to evade the arduous responsibilities of analyzing it"), Greenberg would have been equally dismissive of this writing.⁵⁹⁴ But technical critics arguably offered more than some of the journalist-critics who wrote for the popular press.

The artists associated with the American Abstract Artists group registered their dissatisfaction with critics in a 1940 pamphlet, published in conjunction with their annual exhibition (in lieu of an exhibition catalog), titled "The Art Critics—!" (George L. K. Morris

⁵⁹² Bourne and Brooks, "The Retort Courteous," 343-44.

⁵⁹³ Dwight and Frankfurter, *Art Parade: Seeing the Past Forty Years Through Art News and the Frick Collection*, 13.

⁵⁹⁴ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1*, 94.

and Harry Holtzman were the principal contributors to it.⁵⁹⁵) On the pamphlet's cover, which was designed by Ad Reinhardt, three questions were posed—"How do they serve the public? What do they say? How much do they know?"—followed by an emphatic "Lets [sic] look at the record!" It wasn't simply that the critics had ignored the work of the artists who belonged to this group; rather, they had left abstraction out of the conversation altogether. "Unless the forms are based upon the arbitrary shapes of heads, trees, turnips, etcetera," the authors protested, "the experience seems not to exist at all for these gentlemen and they are left quite speechless so far as any constructive or analytical conceptions are concerned." The authors were quick to make their position on art criticism clear, however, stating that, "It should be clearly understood that we do not attempt to place the artist above criticism. The point is that any expression of mere personal opinion and prejudice, either for or against, has no place and right to existence on the pages of art criticism unless substantiated by an authentic conception of form relationships."⁵⁹⁶

This pamphlet, published the same year that *Kenyon's* "Literature and the Professors" symposium was held, was dealing with the other side of the same coin. While the *Kenyon* critics were battling the literary historian's "sober compilation of facts," the A.A.A. was confronting its antithesis—"the intoxicated act of criticism." As in the case of the *Kenyon* critics, it was the practitioners who understood the problem posed by the nature of the criticism that had earned it this reputation and, although it certainly wasn't the "hospitality" of the public (or the critics) that had them up in arms, the A.A.A., like

⁵⁹⁵ Melinda A. Lorenz, *George L. K. Morris: Artist and Critic* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982), 67.

⁵⁹⁶ American Abstract Artists, *The Art Critics--!*, 3-4.

Bourne, believed that “when the artist himself has turned critic” the work would receive something like an “absolutely contemporaneous criticism.”⁵⁹⁷ It wasn’t only painters and sculptors, they wrote, but musicians, writers and architects who were “challenged by the deplorable level of American criticism.” But if anyone was going to raise that level, “it must be those more directly involved—the artists themselves.”⁵⁹⁸ (Several of the artists associated with this group, including Reinhardt, Morris, and Balcombe Greene, were or would become critics.)

In the meantime, the A.A.A. had decided to take the most prominent critics—Cortissoz (*Herald Tribune*), Craven, Edward Alden Jewell (*New York Times*), Howard Devree (*New York Times*), Jerome Klein (*New York Post*), and Emily Genauer (*World-Telegram*)—to task for failing to deal critically (or at all) with abstraction. (McBride and R. M. Coates, who wrote for *The New Yorker*, got credit for their efforts, although the authors made no further comment on their criticism.) Quoting liberally from the critics’ columns, the A.A.A. repudiated the “endless and unsubstantiated personal opinions” of the “professional amateurs” who had mounted a “systematic campaign” against the “most advanced efforts in modern art.” Indeed, their “total lack of any conception of the form problem and the vital significance of its continued development” signaled “the failure of these self-appointed administrators of American art and traditions to accept their cultural responsibility.”⁵⁹⁹ The cultural implications of this failure were even more crucial, then, than the artists’ success or failure.

⁵⁹⁷ Bourne, “Traps for the Unwary,” 278–79.

⁵⁹⁸ American Abstract Artists, *The Art Critics--!*, 12.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

The A.A.A.'s assessment of the art press, which was preceded by the heading "Blank Pages," was equally severe:

The American art magazines are shallow and colorless to the point of negligibility. The *Art News* is the most dignified, but it attempts little that is beyond the range of the professional trade-journal. The *Art Digest* quotes mostly from the newspaper critics with corresponding results. *Parnassus* has for some time largely given up discussing non-objective exhibitions. *Time* and *Life* should not escape notice as the most potent champions of the American scene, with the expected attitude toward anything which conflicts with their chosen field.⁶⁰⁰

Because of his "control over the art pages of the *New York Times*," Jewell's pronouncements received the most attention and he was held up as the exemplar of the problem. He "never once approaches the problems of the artist from the viewpoint of his medium," the artists wrote, "No criticism is ever based upon a plastic conception."⁶⁰¹

Indeed, having answered the question posed in the title of a book he published the previous year—*Have We An American Art?*²—in the affirmative, Jewell went on to say:

There are those American artists who aren't convincingly and triumphantly American in their art because they know not how, or lack the courage to be; and there are those American artists who, unconvincingly but belligerently, oppose such status for their art because they believe it to be an inferior status. Those in the latter category espouse some specific foreign leadership, or they dress their Muse in the mode of what has come glibly to be called 'internationalism'—the most insidious and formidable of the heresies we have to combat.⁶⁰²

The A.A.A. artists were calling for a criticism of "art as art" not because of the work's neglect by scholars (who would not take a serious interest in criticism until the mid-50s) and certainly not because of the "hospitality" of the public, but because of its

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁰² Edward Alden Jewell and Merle Armitage, *Have We an American Art?* (New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green & company, 1939), 122-23.

misinterpretation by critics. Supporting their critique with numerous examples—Jewell: “Non-objective art appears in the main to be a matter of mathematics and geometry”; Devree: “Fifteen gouaches by Hans Arp provide mild amusement if nothing else”; Genauer: *White on White* may be “a grand joke on the part of the painter”—the pamphlet ended by asking, “Is it too much to ask that such vast organizations as the *New York Times* and *Herald-Tribune* should take into their employ at least one critic with a modest schooling behind him of recent plastic developments?”⁶⁰³ (Melinda Lorenz notes that although the “A.A.A. focused a great deal of attention on the abstract art community” during the 1940 season and MoMA even hosted a forum for the artists to air the grievances outlined in their pamphlet, none of the reviews of the exhibition mentioned it and, ultimately, it “brought negligible immediate results.”⁶⁰⁴)

The artists had, in fact, taken matters into their own hands. In the October 15, 1939 issue of *Art Digest* Stuart Davis analyzed a debate, which had taken place that summer in the pages of the *New York Times* and whose participants had included Hilla Rebay, Jewell, and Davis himself, in order to argue for abstraction’s social relevance. Abstract art, he wrote, “has a content of objective artistic truth, and is a social product and expression, with responsibility to society.” (*Art Digest* reported on this debate—or allowed Davis to—but didn’t enter into it.) Morris had been the art critic for *Partisan* for several years when the A.A.A.’s pamphlet appeared. Joining Fred Dupee and Dwight Macdonald, his former classmates and editors of *The Miscellany*, a publication they founded in college, Morris became one of the new editors of *Partisan* when it was relaunched in December

⁶⁰³ American Abstract Artists, *The Art Critics--!*, 7; 11; 10; 12.

⁶⁰⁴ MoMA listed Morris, Carl Holty, Paul Burlin, Stuart Davis, Adolph Gottlieb and James Johnson Sweeney as speakers at the forum. Lorenz, *George L. K. Morris: Artist and Critic*, 67.

1937. The *Partisan* editors' understanding of modernist poetry's "unity between form and subject-matter," as Riding and Graves had put it, jibed with Morris's call (in the A.A.A. pamphlet) for a critic who approached "the problems of the artist from the viewpoint of his medium." In the late 30s, Morris arguably came closer than any other art critic to Bourne's contemporaneous criticism, although his ability to "intervene" (in this case between the critics and the public) was limited by the publication of his writings in a little magazine.

The Abstract Tradition

Morris, who largely underwrote *Partisan's* publication for the next six years, initiated its "Art Chronicle" (the section heading was borrowed from Eliot's *Criterion*), a column he sometimes employed to critique the criticism (or lack thereof) published in the popular press. *Commenting on* art discourse in the context of a little magazine, he wasn't entirely *engaged in* it—and it's unlikely that his attempts to address its deficiencies would have been possible otherwise. It wasn't—or wasn't only—that the popular and art presses wouldn't tolerate speech that challenged the status quo, it was that the critical discourse within which modernist art and poetry could be identified as such was excluded from these sites.

One of Morris's first contributions to *Partisan*, published in January 1938, was a review of a Hans Arp retrospective that had been held at A.E. Gallatin's Museum of Living Art the previous November. After chiding the New York critics for neglecting the show, Morris focuses on two aspects of Arp's work that the other writers would have ignored even if they had been paying attention: the space "cleared" by the artist for his contemporaries and the quality of the work. "The fine Miró *Compositions* of 1933 would have been impossible without the researches of Arp," Morris wrote, "Picasso, Léger, Braque (who

had earlier influenced Arp in turn) and countless younger painters and sculptors, incorporate his work into their consciousness.”⁶⁰⁵ Morris not only discussed Arp’s work within the context of other contemporary practices but connected his formal “researches” to the work’s “quality.” “In [Arp’s] reliefs of 1930-35,” he continued, “the accent and the aesthetic system have become fully realized. He has laid the foundation and can turn anew to the intensification of quality.” Unlike the traditionalists, for whom aesthetics was equated with the “realm of beauty,” Morris focuses on Arp’s “aesthetic system.” But Miró’s wasn’t the only work that would have been impossible without his predecessors’ investigations; Morris was likely thinking of his own paintings when he wrote that, “It has been through his renewed emphasis on form, shape, and (particularly) position of shape, that Arp has cleared an approach for his contemporaries.”⁶⁰⁶

Wayne Roosa notes that Gallatin, an avid collector of modern art and a major influence on Morris’s critical and theoretical development, introduced Morris to the writings of Clive Bell and Roger Fry in 1927 (around the time that Craven was leaving Fry behind).⁶⁰⁷ Whatever its origins, Morris’s formalism involved a different way of interpreting—and judging—the work of contemporary artists than the one that was offered by critics writing for the popular press. In a 1931 essay on Léger, Morris argues that to understand any modern artist, “one must see him, not as an isolated sport like Blake or

⁶⁰⁵ George L. K. Morris, “Art Chronicle: Hans Arp,” *Partisan Review* IV, no. 2 (January 1938): 32.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁷ Roosa, “American Art Theory and Criticism during the 1930s,” 225. Lorenz did not make this claim, writing that Gallatin’s “writing and attitudes must have encouraged Morris to study the formalist critics Roger Fry and Clive Bell more thoroughly.” Lorenz, *George L. K. Morris: Artist and Critic*, 7. Morris also studied with Jan Matulka and Vaclav Vytlačil, who had both been students of Hans Hofmann. Roosa, “American Art Theory and Criticism during the 1930s,” 226–7. Morris and Craven were certainly not alone in their interest in Fry, but they were the most prominent of the practicing critics who were.

Goya, but in relation to what he has built upon, and to what phase of his own civilization he is attempting to give expression.”⁶⁰⁸ Morris traces Léger’s roots back through Cubism to Cézanne, Courbet, and, ultimately, Poussin, who “created a system of organization which was tighter and more controlled than any other since the Primitives.” Courbet, the “great radical of the ’Sixties,” led the “counter-Impressionistic movement,” as it was he alone who “understood that the strength of painting as an art lies, not in what the objects represent but in an appeal which is purely plastic.”⁶⁰⁹ For Morris, Léger was the quintessential twentieth-century artist because it was “upon some conception of volume” that “all the great plastic arts have been founded, the Renaissance among them” and, with Léger, “we are brought face to face with the unadulterated plastic conception.”⁶¹⁰ The only element that passed “directly through the eye to the emotions” was color and, therefore, “every other quality in art” was tactile—that is, “every undiluted sensation except color” was “reflected *through the fingers* to the brain.” And, finally, anything that was neither tactile nor “concerned with color”—Morris doesn’t use the word “optical”—was a “meaning-over,” by which he meant anything that was “concerned with forces outside the canvas” (e.g. “what the objects represent, and the attending emotions which they conjure up”).⁶¹¹

Roosa was referring to the historical arc traced in this article when he argued that Morris’s formalist aesthetic “combined a rich knowledge of European art and theory with his deep respect for architecture, classical Greek art, the Italian Renaissance, and primitive art,” and it was out of this combination that Morris defined what he referred to as the

⁶⁰⁸ George L. K. Morris, “On Fernand Léger and Others,” *The Miscellany* 1, no. 6 (March 1931): 1.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

“Abstract Tradition.” Morris wrote about this tradition in a short-lived little magazine called *Plastique*, which he co-edited in the late 30s with Arp, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Cesar Domela, and Gallatin. In an editorial published in the first issue, Morris wrote that in response to the bourgeoisie’s penchant for realism—its “preconceived notion of ‘what art ought to be’”—which had led to painting’s irrelevance in the nineteenth century (“finally it became a question of whether it was worth while having an art at all”), artists had been “retracing the long way backward, in the search for a place to plant their feet,—something genuine that they can call a starting-point.”⁶¹² In Morris’s cyclical view of art history, “decline” was equated with “subject matter”: “In great works of the past,” he wrote, “there has always been a dual achievement,—the plastic, or structural, on the one hand, and the literary (or subject) on the other. The first is customarily stronger at the beginning of an art-cycle, the second more dominant as the civilization expanded; until finally the balance would be upset, the tradition would topple from the weight of its subject-emphasis, and sooner or later the new era would start the cycle over again.” At the moment, painters and sculptors were continuing the “simplification” and, entering “the realm of pure aesthetics,” which meant they “looked toward the art of the past with fresh eyes; strangely enough, when the veil of subject-matter had been pierced and discarded, the works of all periods began to speak through a universal abstract tongue.” The magazine, Morris explained, would discuss this abstract tradition, reproducing the work of those who were “vitalizing it today in its new-found purest forms.”⁶¹³

⁶¹² George L. K. Morris, “On the Abstract Tradition,” *Plastique* 1 (Spring 1937): 13.

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*, 14.

While Morris's view of Léger would begin to shift as he discovered the work of artists like Arp, Mondrian, and the constructivists, among others, he often repeated something in later years that he wrote in that early essay: "Léger seeks for life in his organization; the way the structure is built up, the swift contrast of form, and tone, and color, these make of each painting a living organism, so that this [sic] pictures live in themselves, not through what they represent; they are alive as a plant, or a leaf, is alive in itself."⁶¹⁴ Léger himself used a more inorganic metaphor, but he placed a similar emphasis on the artwork's "life": "We must get beyond all forms of painting determined by intention," Morris writes quoting Léger, "Nowadays a work of art must bear comparison with manufactured objects; the artistic picture is false and out-moded; only that picture which is an object can stand the comparison and live."⁶¹⁵ Morris was looking backward rather than forward: in his monist conception, the "life" of an artwork (one that qualified as an "unadulterated plastic conception" at any rate) was a reflection of its link to an abstract tradition.

Morris might have been the first to discuss the artwork's "quality" in the pages of *Partisan*, but it's important to consider what he meant by the term. Despite his emphasis on "plastic developments," Morris's criticism shared some characteristics with the traditionalists, since it was based on his own notion of tradition and was not entirely devoid of a reliance on taste. As Roosa points out, "His family background had trained him in a

⁶¹⁴ Morris, "On Fernand Léger and Others," 12. Moving closer to Léger's object-oriented conception, Morris would write in 1943 that, "A new beauty emerges as architecture substitutes sensitive proportion and functional honesty for out-moded gim-crack. Good abstract paintings present a comparable unity. They present fragments of our disordered world—not things reproducing the world but objects with an independent existence." See Lincoln Kirstein and George L. K. Morris, "Life or Death for Abstract Art?," *Magazine of Art* 36, no. 3 (March 1943): 119.

⁶¹⁵ Morris, "On Fernand Léger and Others," 13.

genteel tradition of good taste and refinement that was attracted to an aesthetic that stressed harmonious simplicity. Childhood study of art, music and literature, as well as several trips to Europe, left Morris with a strong impression of what constituted quality. Throughout his mature art criticism, ‘taste’ played an important role, sometimes in an uncritical manner, but most often in a conscious manner in which he was able to define the aesthetic criteria of his taste.”⁶¹⁶ Morris tried to grapple with this issue in a footnote glossing his claim that, “color and tone-values bring one continually closer to the artist’s personality.” He writes:

The relation of ‘quality’ to form and structure may be easily misconstrued from an article such as this. A work of art may of course answer the requirements that I am emphasizing of construction and taste and still be comparatively negligible in its expressive range, as the structural fabric projects something of the artist which is beyond the scope of analysis. Similarly, one cannot determine beyond a certain point just why a fine vintage-wine is *better* than an inferior beverage; yet although there may be many who prefer coca-cola, somehow or other a rare Burgundy seems to retain its distinguished quality.⁶¹⁷

Quality wasn’t related to “judging good from bad” but rather “better from worse”; it was a term that was connected to the hierarchical placement or ranking of artists (or works). And “better and worse” were closely connected to taste for Morris: the sentence that follows his footnote reads, “The more highly developed a work of art, the more exacting become the demands on taste.” Morris often referred to the “falling off” in quality of an artist’s work, understanding this decline as a matter of fact—or taste (“As in the case of his Cubist associates the works of Gris begin to fall off in quality after about 1923”).⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁶ Roosa, “American Art Theory and Criticism during the 1930s,” 229–30.

⁶¹⁷ George L. K. Morris, “On the Mechanics of Abstract Painting,” *Partisan Review* VIII, no. 5 (1941): 412.

⁶¹⁸ George L. K. Morris, “Art Versus Method,” *Partisan Review* VI, no. 2 (Winter 1939): 79. Lorenz writes, “As with Fry and Bell, there was a prescriptive function in Morris’s attitude which posited

As a critic, Morris was something like the mirror image of Venturi (and diametrically opposed to Craven) in the sense that he believed that contemporary art practice had a founding moment that could—and should—ground it for the foreseeable future. For Morris, it was not Impressionism but the cubist tradition that, having “cleared a path for later artists,” was, as Lorenz put it, “really in its infancy and could look to a long future development.”⁶¹⁹ Morris strongly opposed representational work in all of its contemporary guises, writing that the A.A.A. had seen “how the artists of the world had gone completely awry with their elaborate campaigns to conquer the visible world (Impressionism), the unconscious world (Surrealism), the political world (Propagandism), the complex texture of a new locality (American Scene)” and therefore represented the “sole organization in America” that was “dedicated to the hewing out of an authentic and appropriate cultural expression.”⁶²⁰ He was sympathetic to the work of artists who stayed within the bounds of what he might have called “Cubist researches” (which, for him, included Arp and Miró), but he would develop a critical blind spot in the 40s for work, including that of the Abstract Expressionists, that departed too radically from this lineage. (Artist-critics certainly run the risk of developing a critical framework that serves to validate their own practices, and Morris was not immune to this risk.) In the end, like Venturi, he increasingly “endorsed principles which could not be applied to contemporary art” as he became more resistant to practices that diverged from the geometric abstraction that characterized the work of many of the artists associated with the A.A.A. (he was particularly

personal taste as objective dogma without adequately defining either the criteria for quality or quality itself.” Lorenz, *George L. K. Morris: Artist and Critic*, 20.

⁶¹⁹ Lorenz, *George L. K. Morris: Artist and Critic*, 60.

⁶²⁰ Morris, “Art Chronicle: Some Personal Letters to American Artists Recently Exhibiting in New York,” 37–38.

averse to Expressionism and Surrealism). Morris's criticism might be better described as a formalist aesthetic while Greenberg's was based on a formalist theory.

Morris stopped writing for *Partisan* in December 1943, which was around the time that Greenberg began to write more exclusively about art. At that moment, the two critics shared an affinity for some of the same artists (due, in large part, to their formalism as well as their view that, as Greenberg once put it, "there is nothing left in nature for plastic art to explore").⁶²¹ In his early forays into the practice of technical criticism, Greenberg wrote primarily about the work of Europeans—Miró, Kandinsky, Léger, Klee, Masson—but, reviewing four exhibitions of abstract art in 1942, he found the sixth annual exhibition of the A.A.A. to be the most promising. Because many of the artists were young, he argued, the exhibition "could tell us most about the probable future of abstract art in this country," and, more crucially, "Upon this future a lot depends."⁶²²

Unlike Morris, Greenberg rarely used the term "quality" in his early criticism; he was, however, concerned about the critic's (but not the public's) taste, writing, about a poetry anthology edited by Oscar Williams, "I like his taste, I like his prejudices."⁶²³ Even when he disagreed with another critic's claims, he was often willing to accept them if the critic argued for them. While he might have had objections to some of the assertions made by Sidney Janis in the latter's *American Primitive Painters of the 20th Century*—which, Greenberg wrote, was "a record in a way of the operations of his taste, which is

⁶²¹ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1*, 203.

⁶²² *Ibid.*, 103.

⁶²³ *Ibid.*, 74.

spontaneous, cultivated, and of a catholicity that must mean an immense delight in painting for its own sake”—there was “a good reason” behind “every one of his choices.”⁶²⁴

Like Venturi, Greenberg was interested in the artist’s or writer’s taste as well, but he was as worried about good taste as he was about bad: “We all recognize the dangers of fashion, of not being able to surmount it,” he wrote sounding a lot like Bourne, “but little is said about the no lesser dangers of not being able to surmount good taste. This is an age of good taste in literature, and what displeases me in so much of the competent work of our younger poets is the timidity that good taste enforces.”⁶²⁵ But, he added, “By taste I do not mean the *discipline* of poetry; in going beyond taste the poet does not go beyond discipline, but extends it to new areas, incorporates new regions into the domain of poetry... The poet writes in a new way only because he has to, not because he wants to.”⁶²⁶ Greenberg’s rejection of the “determination to write as one must rather than as one would” was the corollary to this warning about taste. “Nothing characterizes the unimportant poet today,” he argued, “as much as his willingness to stay inside his professional role.”⁶²⁷ And art was just as vulnerable to this threat. “American art, like American literature,” he wrote in a review of the Whitney Annual in January 1944, “seems to be in retreat at the moment... As usual, everybody shows a high level of competence, everybody is learned in the excellences of the past, but a community of excitement and ambition and a real richness of color are missing.”⁶²⁸

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 94.

⁶²⁵ Ibid., 95–96.

⁶²⁶ Ibid., 96.

⁶²⁷ Ibid., 124.

⁶²⁸ Ibid., 171–72.

Whereas critics like Jewell and Craven were intent on identifying (or circumscribing) an American art, the critics who wrote for *The Nation* and *Partisan* were more concerned about whether—and how—American artists had learned the lessons of their modernist predecessors. No longer holding out hope for the artists associated with the A.A.A., Greenberg had begun to stress the importance of another group of younger artists by the mid-40s, Pollock in particular, who, as he put it, had “gone through the influences of Miró, Picasso, Mexican paintings, and what not” and “come out the other side... painting mostly with his own brush.”⁶²⁹ James Johnson Sweeney, writing in the catalog of a show Greenberg reviewed the following year (and echoing Greenberg’s qualms about good taste), wrote that, “[Y]oung painters, particularly Americans, tend to be too careful of opinion. Too often the dish is allowed to chill in the serving. What we need is more young men who paint from their inner impulsion without an ear to what the critic or spectator may feel—painters who will risk spoiling a canvas to say something in their own way. Pollock is one.”⁶³⁰ Greenberg ended his review by stating that, “[T]he future of American painting depends on what [Motherwell], Baziotes, Pollock, and only a comparatively few others do from now on” while Motherwell himself wrote concurrently that Pollock represented “one of the younger generation’s chances. There are not three other young American of whom this could be said.”⁶³¹

Encouraged, perhaps, by recent developments in painting and sculpture (he had also written enthusiastically about David Smith’s work a few months before) in spite of the

⁶²⁹ Ibid., 166.

⁶³⁰ Quoted in Edward Alden Jewell, “Briefer Mention,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1943, 6X.

⁶³¹ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1*, 241; Robert Motherwell, “Painters’ Objects,” *Partisan Review* XI, no. 1 (Winter 1944): 97.

“disheartening” Whitney Annual, Greenberg began to shift his focus, writing fewer book reviews and more exhibition reviews for *The Nation*. By the end of the decade, I would argue, art discourse was beginning to resemble a critical discourse, and a critical field was beginning to emerge. Several factors would contribute to this shift. While Greenberg was developing a critical practice that would help bring about a “change in the order of discourse,” changes to both the editorial staff and the structure of *ARTnews* were laying the foundation for its transformation from a news magazine into an art magazine. This shift dovetailed with a decline in art journalism as the large-circulation newspapers began to drop their art pages (in New York at any rate). At the same time, the artists themselves had begun to articulate a common set of concerns and, not surprisingly, launched a number of little magazines. And, finally but most crucially, as a struggle over the “dominant definition” of the artist began to develop among those who were beginning to stake out various critical positions, a new site—what we now know as the “art magazine”—emerged from the site that had previously been occupied by the art press. Meaning that the critical field—a discursive field constituted by relational and differential critical positions—both produced and was produced by the replacement of the “news magazine” by the “art magazine.”

I want to end this chapter by considering a pair of essays that Greenberg published in *Partisan* in 1948, the second of which presaged the change in the order of discourse that I will trace in the following two chapters. In the first essay, “The Decline of Cubism,” Greenberg had declared the “exhaustion on the part of those”—Picasso, Braque, Arp, Miró, Giacometti, Schwitters—“who in the first three decades of the century created what is

now known as modern art.”⁶³² Acknowledging that Cubism was the “only vital style of our time” and the only style “capable of supporting a tradition which will survive into the future and form new artists,” he was nonetheless convinced that, “The masters of cubism, formed by the insights of a more progressive age, had advanced too far, and when history began going backwards they had to retreat, in confusion, from positions that were more exposed because they were more advanced” and, as a result, the cubist heritage had entered the “final stage of its decline” in Europe.⁶³³

Greenberg didn’t argue that Cubism had evolved entirely from earlier practices, linking it instead to a range of historical factors:

Cubism originated not only from the art that preceded it, but also from a complex of attitudes that embodied the optimism, boldness, and self-confidence of the highest stage of industrial capitalism, of a period in which the scientific outlook had at last won a confirmation that only some literary men quarreled with seriously, and in which society seemed to have demonstrated its complete capacity to solve its most serious internal as well as environmental problems. Cubism, by its rejection of illusionist effects in painting or sculpture and its insistence on the physical nature of the two-dimensional picture plane—which it made prominent again in a way quite different from that in which Oriental, medieval, or barbaric art did—expressed the positivist or empirical state of mind with its refusal to refer to anything outside the concrete experience of the particular discipline, field, or medium in which one worked; and it also expressed the empiricist’s faith in the supreme reality of concrete experience.⁶³⁴

⁶³² Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*, 212.

⁶³³ *Ibid.*, 215; 214.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*, 213–14. Greenberg had invoked this “positivist or empiricist state of mind” in a 1944 article in which he had focused on illusionism and medium specificity: “[I]n a period in which illusions of every kind are being destroyed the illusionist methods of art must also be renounced. The taste most closely attuned to contemporary art has become positivist, even as the best philosophical and political intelligence of the time... Let painting confine itself to the disposition pure and simple of color and line, and not intrigue us by associations with things we can experience more authentically elsewhere.” See Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1*, 203.

He might have rethought this link in later years, but Greenberg didn't sever Cubism from its historical context at this juncture.

In the following issue of *Partisan* Greenberg made an even more significant claim regarding contemporary practice. Not only was Cubism in decline, but, he wrote in "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," "what we have to do with here is an important new phase in the history of painting."⁶³⁵ He had begun to shape this argument in a piece published in the interim in which he had posited that Mondrian's use of the term "equivalent" might be the "terminus toward which several of the most important threads in contemporary painting" were converging: "the even, all-over, 'polyphonic' picture in which every square inch is rendered with equal emphasis and there are no longer centers of interest, highlights, or dominating forms, every part of the canvas being equivalent in stress to every other part."⁶³⁶ In "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," he traced the history of this development back to Monet and Pissarro, arguing that, while it remained easel painting—"somehow"—and still hung on the wall, the polyphonic picture came "closest of all to decoration—to wallpaper patterns capable of being extended infinitely—and in so far as it still remains easel painting it infects the whole notion of this form with ambiguity."⁶³⁷ That Greenberg was baffled by both the phenomenon itself and its implications is clear from his attempt to account for the emergence of this "uniformity": "It corresponds perhaps to the feeling that all hierarchical distinctions have been exhausted, that no area or order of experience is either intrinsically or relatively superior to any other. It may speak for a monist naturalism that takes all the world for granted and for which there are no longer either first or last things, the only valid

⁶³⁵ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*, 223.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁶³⁷ *Ibid.*, 222-23.

distinction being that between the more or less immediate. Or maybe it means something else—I cannot tell.”⁶³⁸ But whatever had prompted this anti-hierarchical impulse, it would have equally significant implications for criticism. The decline of Cubism and the crisis of the easel picture were rooted in historical or social phenomena: “all hierarchical distinctions have been exhausted” and “monist naturalism” refer, not to internal (i.e. formal) developments but to larger social and historical developments.

Foucault argues that to understand discourse as “a practice that systematically forms the object of which it speaks,” it’s necessary to jettison “the enigmatic treasure of ‘things’ anterior to discourse” for the “regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse.”⁶³⁹ I would argue that a shift in the order of discourse began to make itself felt when the question of its object was raised for American art discourse in the late 40s. As Greenberg argued in “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” “[T]he future of the easel picture as the vehicle of ambitious art has become very problematical; for in using the easel picture as they do—and cannot help doing—these artists are destroying it.”⁶⁴⁰ The object of which American art discourse had traditionally spoken took this vehicle for granted (“judging good from bad” assumed the easel picture), which meant that this “crisis” would pose a significant challenge to that discourse, and, therefore, to art criticism. As Greenberg argued, “Uniformity—the notion is antiaesthetic. And yet the pictures... get away with this uniformity, however meaningless or repellent the uninitiated may find it.”⁶⁴¹ If the object of which discourse spoke prior to the late 40s was aesthetics or taste, painting that wasn’t just

⁶³⁸ Ibid., 224–25.

⁶³⁹ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 48–49.

⁶⁴⁰ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*, 225.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid., 224.

“*un*-aesthetic” but “*anti*-aesthetic” was meaningless within that discourse, making a new order of discourse necessary for the polyphonic picture to “become articulate,” as Rahv had put it in another context, “as art.”⁶⁴² Or, to put it in Foucauldian terms, if the object of which art discourse had previously spoken was no longer “given to the speaking subject,” criticism was now charged, in some sense, with the task of forming it.⁶⁴³

Rosenberg underscored this point retrospectively in describing the difference between an “event” (which was how he ended up describing this object) and a “picture” in 1959. “I should like to point out that in dealing with *new* things,” he writes in the preface to *The Tradition of the New*, “there is a question that precedes that of good or bad. I refer to the question, ‘What is it?’—the question of identity. To answer this question in such a way as to distinguish between a real novelty and a fake one *is itself an evaluation*, perhaps the primary one for criticism in this revolutionary epoch.”⁶⁴⁴ For Rosenberg and Greenberg, this was not a crisis for *art* but simply for its traditional *vehicle*; for others, especially Hilton Kramer, the attack on the easel picture would spell the decline if not the demise of Western culture. Unlike Kramer, who would continue to rail against artists who abandoned easel painting long after a change in the order of art discourse had come about, Greenberg and Rosenberg responded to this crisis (although they clearly didn’t understand it in the same way) by considering its implications for criticism. “If art in our time has been completing a transformation with respect to its objective nature as well as its interests,” Rosenberg went on to say in the preface of *Tradition of the New*, “to apply to it canons

⁶⁴² Or, as Rosenberg put it, “An action is not a matter of taste.” Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *ARTnews* 51, no. 8 (December 1952): 50.

⁶⁴³ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 46.

⁶⁴⁴ Rosenberg, *The Tradition of The New*, 3-4.

derived from craftsmanship, as if perfection in making were still the essence of the work, is bound to show everything in reverse.”⁶⁴⁵

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., 6.

Chapter 6

A Change in the Order of Discourse

In this chapter, I trace the change in the order of discourse that occurred within the art press by tracking a series of exchanges that took place, starting in the early 50s, as cultural critics began to write for the art press. A field of art critical production began to develop with the publication of Harold Rosenberg's "The American Action Painters" in the December 1952 issue of *ARTnews* followed by Hilton Kramer's response to it, which was published in *Partisan* the following summer, and the subsequent publication of Greenberg's "'American-Type' Painting."

Foucault argues that, "a change in the order of discourse does not presuppose 'new ideas,' a little invention and creativity, a different mentality, but transformations in a practice, perhaps also in neighboring practices, and in their common articulation."⁶¹⁶ A "transformation in a practice" was precisely what Ransom had not only argued for but realized in New Criticism, which was not a critical *movement*—or it didn't start out that way—but, rather, a critical *practice* (a practice that was further transformed when the academy turned it into a "method for reading," as Louis D. Rubin, Jr. put it). There's no question that it was linked to or driven by a theory, but it was the material practice of New Criticism in the pages of *Kenyon* and elsewhere that changed literary discourse. And, as literary criticism began to change, "neighboring practices"—art criticism and cultural criticism—began to shift as well.

In contrast to the transformation in practice that happened with the advent of New Criticism, the shift in art critical practices that occurred in the 50s did not happen in a discrete site nor did it occur within a critical field. It was therefore not as clear-cut as the transformation was—or appears to have been—for literary criticism. As I argued, New

⁶¹⁶ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 209.

Criticism took up a position in relation to the dominant critical models (Marxism and New Humanism) and literary history. A “critical art discourse” developed when the critical discourse that I’ve associated with the cultural critics merged—or converged—with art discourse. The site of this convergence was the art press.

As a result of changes to its editorial staff and a contraction of criticism in the popular press (Henry McBride and Margaret Breuning joined the staff when the large-circulation newspapers for which they worked dropped their art pages), *ARTnews* began to shift its focus from news to criticism starting in the late 40s (followed a couple of years later by *Art Digest*), paving the way for critics who had been writing for the critical press (Greenberg, Rosenberg, Kramer, and Leo Steinberg, among others) to contribute to these magazines. With no dominant critical position to challenge in the art press, cultural criticism didn’t have to expropriate this site; however, it did have to be adapted to it. And this adaptation would alter it. Which is one reason why the “critical art discourse” that developed in the 60s was not simply a continuation of cultural criticism—out of which it, in part, emerged—but a transformation of it. Yet it’s also clear that the art press had begun to change even before cultural critics intervened in this site. Foucault writes:

The transformation of a discursive practice is tied to a whole, often quite complex set of modifications which may occur either outside of it (in the forms of production, in the social relations, in the political institutions), or within it (in the techniques for determining objects, in the refinement and adjustment of concepts, in the accumulation of data), or alongside it (in other discursive practices).⁶⁴⁷

The transformation that took place in art discourse in the 50s resulted from modifications in all three of these realms: in the “forms of production” as large-circulation newspapers

⁶⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: New Press, 1994), 12.

began to drop their art pages and in the “social relations” as the middle class expanded and the art public began to change (as a result, in part, of the rapid expansion of higher education in art and art history); in the “techniques for determining objects” and “the adjustment of concepts” as the art magazines shifted their focus to critical writing and cultural critics introduced new sets of concerns (and critical approaches) to these magazines; and “in other discursive practices,” as the professionalization and consolidation of literary criticism and the dispersal of cultural criticism not only changed the critical discourse that cultural critics had been participating in but spurred some of them to seek alternative sites in which to publish.⁶⁴⁸

I’ve turned to Foucault, and to his “change in the order of discourse,” because the “critical art discourse” that emerged in the 60s was the result of “transformations in a practice.” The new discourse wasn’t reducible to a particular critical practice (modernist formalism for example); rather, it involved a shift in the practice of criticism itself. The criticism of the interwar period (whether impressionistic, appreciative, or aesthetic) could—or did—take the identity of its object for granted, and the task at hand was to judge good from bad based on a subjective, quasi-objective, or aesthetic standard. But this criticism was unequipped to deal with the rejection of the traditional forms and formats of art practice (easel painting in particular). As Rosenberg pointed out, postwar American art raised a question that “preceded that of good and bad.” In the new order of discourse, criticism would critically construct its object in a variety of ways.

⁶⁴⁸ For a discussion of the expansion of higher education in art and art history, see Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

Which doesn't mean that this "change" was either punctual or all-encompassing. As Foucault writes, "To say that one discursive formation is substituted for another is not to say that a whole world of absolutely new objects, enunciations, concepts, and theoretical choices emerges fully armed and fully organized in a text that will place that world once and for all."⁶⁴⁹ Critics continued—and continue to this day—to practice some of the types of criticism identified by Buck a century ago, but the fact that there is (or was anyway) some consensus about the meaning of the term "criticism" at one point is significant. In general, art discourse shifted from a tradition-based aesthetic criticism in which, as Greenberg once put it, "as culture developed in the past, so must it in the future," to a predominantly historical criticism that critically constructed its object.⁶⁵⁰

What I'm arguing is that criticism as we know it—i.e. criticism in the form that it began to take in the 60s—was born out of the convergence of cultural criticism and the art criticism of the interwar period. The practice that emerged was like art criticism in that it dealt with a particular discipline, but its focus shifted away from judgments based on Harriet Monroe's "strictly aesthetic standard." It was like cultural criticism in that it critically constructed its object, except that that construction was art historical rather than social-historical. What this means is that it included—or adumbrated—a theory or framework for understanding culture or, increasingly, art more specifically. Rosenberg's

⁶⁴⁹ The whole passage reads: "To say that one discursive formation is substituted for another is not to say that a whole world of absolutely new objects, enunciations, concepts, and theoretical choices emerges fully armed and fully organized in a text that will place that world once and for all; it is to say that a general transformation of relations has occurred, but that it does not necessarily alter all the elements; it is to say that statements are governed by new rules of formation, it is not to say that all objects or concepts, all enunciations or all theoretical choices disappear... we must not forget that a rule of formation is neither the determination of an object, nor the characterization of a type of enunciation, nor the form or content of a concept, but the principle of their multiplicity and dispersion." Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 173.

⁶⁵⁰ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3*, 129.

criticism came closest to what Bourne meant by a “discussion of a larger scope,” since, as I’ve noted, Rosenberg continued to understand criticism in terms of “making a judgment regarding the tendency of culture as a whole.” Greenberg, as I argue in the following chapter, would begin to perceive a new (but related) threat to the perpetuation of “art and literature of a high order” in the late 40s (related, that is, to kitsch), which contributed to the critical shift that he would make.

There’s another aspect to consider here. For critics, a “hierarchy of the arts” had existed since at least the turn of the century: critical discourse had focused primarily on literature (Morris and Greenberg were exceptions to this rule), which was considered the “nerve center of culture” in the 30s. Bourdieu addresses the impact on the cultural field of this kind of hierarchy and the conjunction of new art and new criticism. “In the case of the field of painting,” he writes, “autonomy had to be won from the literary field too, with the emergence of specific criticism and above all the will to break free from the writers and their discourse by producing an intrinsically polysemic work beyond all discourse, and a discourse about the work which declares the essential inadequacy of all discourse.”⁶⁵¹ In the mid-40s artists like Barnett Newman began to write about their own and others’ work and would publish their writings in several little magazines that were launched in the late 40s, developing a “specific criticism” to deal with the “polysemic work beyond all discourse” that had emerged in the last decade.

While the A.A.A. was formed primarily to address the lack of attention paid to abstract art in the late 30s, the artists who would come to be known as the Abstract Expressionists organized as a group to discuss their work and a number of them published

⁶⁵¹ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 47.

critical essays. Although it was limited to a handful of often short-lived little magazines (a single issue of *Possibilities* was published for instance), this “specific criticism” was important to the development of these practices. As Ann Gibson argues, “[I]t is important to see that the Abstract Expressionist magazines as well as their Surrealist predecessors not only mirrored but also contributed to the formation of artists’ ideas.”⁶⁵² To cite a single example, the “sublime issue” of *The Tiger’s Eye*, a little magazine launched in 1947, both attested to the widespread interest in the sublime and helped crystallize the artists’ understanding of it.⁶⁵³ Robert Motherwell wrote in that issue, “Perhaps—I say perhaps because I do not know how to reflect, except by opening my mind like a glass-bottomed boat so that I can watch what is swimming below—painting becomes Sublime when the artist transcends his personal anguish, when he rejects in the midst of a shrieking world an expression of living and its end that is silent and ordered. That is opposed to expressionism.”⁶⁵⁴ The artists’ writings and a handful of early shows (as well as the writing that accompanied these shows) helped make it clear not only what was at stake for these artists, but how their work was intended to convey it.⁶⁵⁵

⁶⁵² Ann Eden Gibson, *Issues in Abstract Expressionism: The Artist-Run Periodicals* (Ann Arbor, MI; London: UMI Research Press, 1990), 60, fn. 5.

⁶⁵³ This issue was published in December 1948. See “The Ides of Art: Six Opinions on *What is Sublime in Art?*” in *ibid.*, 159–70. In addition to the contribution that he made to that issue, “The Sublime is Now,” Newman published several important essays in *The Tiger’s Eye*, including “The First Man Was an Artist.”

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁶⁵⁵ Rosenberg wrote an essay for a catalogue that was published in conjunction with a 1949 exhibition curated by Samuel Kootz titled *The Intrasubjectivists*. See Samuel M. Kootz and Harold Rosenberg, *The Intrasubjectivists* (New York: Kootz Gallery, 1949). That the work of these artists posed a challenge to the prevailing critical models was underscored by a 1945 show curated by Howard Putzel. As Newman writes, “Mr. H. Putzel in his recent exhibition [May 14, 1945] at his 67 Gallery, called *A Problem for Critics*, has shown the need of naming and perhaps explaining the new movement in painting that is taking place in America. That such a movement exists—although [it is not organized] in the way the surrealist and cubist movements were organized—is certain.” Barnett Newman, *Barnett*

Greenberg argued in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” that in order to have “aesthetic validity” the non-representational or abstract could not be arbitrary or accidental but must “stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original.”⁶⁵⁶ Abstract art that did not meet this condition might be viable as art, but it was not aesthetically valid (and therefore didn’t qualify as avant-garde art). By the mid-40s, *aesthetic* validity was no longer enough to guarantee the work’s *artistic* validity for some artists (as well as Greenberg). Although the geometric abstractionists associated with the A.A.A. would seem to have followed Greenberg’s call for self-reflexivity to its logical conclusion, their concern with “form, color, and spatial arrangement” had “reduced painting to an ornamental art” in which the surface was “broken up in geometrical fashion into a new kind of design-image,” as Newman put it in “The Plasmic Image,” an unpublished essay written in 1945.⁶⁵⁷ The “painter of the new movement” understood the distinction between this kind of abstraction and what Newman called “the art of the abstract,” since this painter “was not concerned with geometric forms per se but in creating forms that by their abstract nature carry some abstract intellectual content.” According to Newman, Mondrian’s “fanatic purism” was the “matrix of the abstract aesthetic,” or abstract art whose content was aesthetic—and nothing more. “There is a difference,” he wrote, “between a purist art and an art form used purely. In the former, the result is a formal pattern which, separated from the emotional excitement that accompanies insight or revelation, is objective, cold, impersonal, and consequently incapable of giving complete satisfaction to the intensity generated by man’s spiritual need.

Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews, ed. John Philip O’Neill (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 153.

⁶⁵⁶ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 37.

⁶⁵⁷ Newman, *Barnett Newman*, 139.

The best that can be said for this type of art is that it is decorative, that it satisfies man's taste for 'beauty.'"⁶⁵⁸

Writing in 1970, Irving Sandler argued that artists in the 40s "faced what they referred to repeatedly as a 'crisis of subject matter.'" Their preoccupation, Sandler went on to say, "was with meaning—with what to paint, rather than with how to paint. Indeed, their objection to geometric painting was based on their belief that it had become too much a matter of making pictures whose end was composition for its own sake. As [Adolph] Gottlieb said in 1943: 'It is generally felt today that this emphasis on the mechanics of picture-making has been carried far enough.'"⁶⁵⁹ For Newman, the "plasmic" image had a cultural (even spiritual) function, distinguishing it from the "plastic conception" that the artists associated with the A.A.A. had argued for in their 1940 pamphlet. Or as Gottlieb went on to say in the radio broadcast that Sandler cited, "In times of violence, personal predilections for niceties of color and form seem irrelevant."⁶⁶⁰ For Newman and Gottlieb, the "art of the abstract" not only went beyond the A.A.A.'s "form problem," its meaning was not (or not only) aesthetic.

Newman was also not convinced by the attempt to "assign a surrealist explanation to the use these painters make of abstract forms."⁶⁶¹ (One observer writes that the

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., 140; 141. The previous year Robert Motherwell wrote, "It is an aesthete's error to suppose that the artist's principal concern is Beauty." See Robert Motherwell, *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*, ed. Dore Ashton and Joan Banach (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 30.

⁶⁵⁹ Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 31.

⁶⁶⁰ Quoted in Lawrence Alloway, Mary Davis MacNaughton, and Sanford Hirsch, *Adolph Gottlieb: A Retrospective* (New York: The Arts Publisher, in association with the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, 1981), 42.

⁶⁶¹ Newman, *Barnett Newman*, 140.

distinction Motherwell made in 1944 between the Surrealists' "psychic automatism" and the Americans' "plastic automatism" was "the key generative concept that enabled Americans to move away from Surrealism and develop independent styles that were later grouped under the Abstract Expressionist rubric."⁶⁶²) The painter of the new movement was neither concerned with "his own feelings or the mystery of his personality" nor was he interested in the impersonal ornament of geometric abstraction. "It is a religious art," Newman writes, "which through symbols will catch the basic truth of life, which is its sense of tragedy."⁶⁶³ Whereas Cubism, as Greenberg argued, had originated "from a complex of attitudes that embodied the optimism, boldness, and self-confidence of the highest stage of industrial capitalism," the painter of the new movement was concerned with setting down "the ordered truth that is the expression of his attitude toward the mystery of life and death."⁶⁶⁴ If Cubism was concerned with the "optimism" of the pre-World War I years, Abstract Expressionism was concerned with the "basic sense of life"—i.e. tragedy—of the World War II years. Even as they were linked to "universal" notions like the "mystery of life and death," Newman's claims for this work were historical, since he was arguing for a historically "valid" use of abstract form, to borrow Greenberg's term, setting it against the outmoded (though supposedly timeless) aesthetic standard by which geometric abstraction

⁶⁶² Robert Hobbs, "Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism: From Psychic to Plastic Automatism," in *Surrealism USA* (New York: National Academy Museum in conjunction with Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005), 58. As Motherwell wrote, "[P]lastic automatism though perhaps not verbal automatism—as employed by modern masters, like Masson, Miró and Picasso, is actually very little a question of the unconscious. It is much more a plastic weapon with which to invent new forms. As such it is one of the twentieth century's greatest formal inventions." Motherwell, *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*, 34–35.

⁶⁶³ Newman, *Barnett Newman*, 140.

⁶⁶⁴ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*, 213; Newman, *Barnett Newman*, 140.

was measured.⁶⁶⁵ (As Greenberg had argued in 1940, the standards of taste from which abstract art had derived were not “the only valid standards through eternity.”⁶⁶⁶) Artists’ understanding of what made an abstract work “valid” was shifting as they began to understand their work in relation to its historical context and, not coincidentally, its most noted critics would be those who approached it in this way.⁶⁶⁷ As Motherwell put it, “It is because reality has a historical character that we feel the need for new art.”⁶⁶⁸

It’s no wonder, then, that the aesthetic critics who wrote for the art press and the popular press were “befuddled” by the Abstract Expressionists’ work, as Edward Alden Jewell confessed to be in his review of an exhibition of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors in 1943.⁶⁶⁹ This was the review that prompted Rothko and Gottlieb to write

⁶⁶⁵ This historical awareness is echoed in a brochure published by the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors in 1943, which also argued for the centrality of the New York art world as a result of both the “influx of many great European artists” and the “growing vitality of our native talent”: “[T]oday America is faced with the responsibility either to salvage and develop or to frustrate Western creative capacity. This responsibility may be largely ours for a good part of the century to come... In the last analysis the quality of a civilization is largely judged and understood through its art. It follows that to understand one’s own time one must experience the art of one’s own time. Since no one can remain untouched by the present world upheaval, it is inevitable that values in every field of human endeavor will be affected. As a nation we are now being forced to outgrow our narrow political isolationism. Now that America is recognized as the center where art and artists of all the world meet, it is time for us to accept cultural values on a truly global plane.” Quoted in Edward Alden Jewell, “End-of-the-Season Melange,” *New York Times*, June 6, 1943, sec. 2, 9.

⁶⁶⁶ Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoön,” 296.

⁶⁶⁷ Rosenberg put it this way: “The new American painting is not ‘pure art,’ since the extrusion of the object was not for the sake of the aesthetic. The apples were not brushed off the table in order to make room for perfect relations of space and color. They had to go so that nothing would get in the way of the act of painting. In this gesturing with materials the aesthetic, too, has been subordinated. Form, color, composition, drawing are auxiliaries, any one of which—or practically all, as has been attempted, logically, with unpainted canvases—can be dispensed with.” Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 23.

⁶⁶⁸ He goes on to say, “Not all values are eternal. Some values are historical... It is the values of our own epoch which we cannot find in past art. This is the origin of our desire for new art.” Motherwell, *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*, 28.

⁶⁶⁹ He wrote, “You will have to make of Marcus Rothko’s ‘The Syrian Bull’ what you can; nor is this department prepared to shed the slightest enlightenment when it comes to Adolph Gottlieb’s ‘Rape of Persephone.’” Edward Alden Jewell, “Modern Painters Open Show Today: 55 Members of the

their famous letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, which began, “To the artist, the workings of the critical mind is one of life’s mysteries. That is why, we suppose, the artist’s complaint that he is misunderstood, especially by the critic, has become a noisy commonplace.”⁶⁷⁰ However, the artists weren’t writing to offer an explanation of their paintings, which, they argued, “must come out of a consummated experience between picture and onlooker.” For these artists, the point at issue was not the paintings’ explication but “whether the intrinsic ideas carried within the frames of these pictures [had] significance.”⁶⁷¹

Rothko and Gottlieb insisted that subject matter was “crucial”—there was “no such thing as good painting about nothing”—even if it wasn’t explicit (and that the only valid subject was that which was “tragic and timeless”).⁶⁷² As Robert Hobbs observes, Gottlieb was quick to point out that the symbols employed in his pictographs didn’t have a referent outside the paintings; he was not creating “hieroglyphs whose meaning could be discerned by checking motifs in a dictionary of symbols,” but was concerned with “those meanings” that were “communicable through painting.”⁶⁷³ The result was the “intrinsically polysemic work beyond all discourse” that Bourdieu described.

At the same time, a discourse that declared the “essential inadequacy of all discourse,” or what has been referred to—in a claim that’s so commonplace that it’s become

Federation Represented in Third Annual Exhibition at Wildenstein’s,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1943, 28.

⁶⁷⁰ “A Letter from Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb to the Art Editor of the New York Times,” accessed March 18, 2016, <http://fedartnyc.tumblr.com/post/82412858602/a-letter-from-mark-rothko-and-adolph-gottlieb-to>.

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*

⁶⁷³ Robert Carleton Hobbs and Gail Levin, *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years* (Ithaca, NY: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1978), 20.

a trope—as the Abstract Expressionists’ “evasion of language” emerged. Writing about this “evasion,” Ann Gibson cites numerous examples of the artists’ resistance to the interpretation of their work: “[T]o interpose any literary allusion is to establish a serious block to communication” (Clyfford Still); “I am certain there are no words needed to understand it. As far as I’m concerned, after I’ve made the work I’ve already said everything I have to say” (David Smith); “It is gratuitous to put into a sentence the stirring that takes place in these pictures” (Newman on Gottlieb’s work).⁶⁷⁴ Or again, there’s Rothko and Gottlieb’s letter: “No possible set of notes can explain our paintings.”⁶⁷⁵ *The Tiger’s Eye* published guidelines in its first issue that read in part: “[T]oo close an association between art and the profession of art criticism creates a marriage of hypocrisy for neither the artist nor the critic are [sic] motivated by altruism towards each other... So it is our intention to keep separate art [sic] and the critic as two individuals who, by coincidence, are interested in the same thing, and any text on art will be handled as literature.”⁶⁷⁶ While the artists turned their backs on criticism or developed their own (Newman clearly did both), cultural critics had to “break free” from the “writers and their discourse” in a more tangible way. Greenberg had made a partial break, but Rosenberg would make a definitive one with the publication of “The American Action Painters.”

I wrote at the outset that, in the 50s, art criticism began to count in a way that it hadn’t before the emergence of Abstract Expressionism. The question of why critical discourse converged with art discourse at this particular moment has to do with the

⁶⁷⁴ Ann Gibson, “Abstract Expressionism’s Evasion of Language,” *Art Journal* 47, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 208, doi:10.2307/777048.

⁶⁷⁵ “A Letter from Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb to the Art Editor of the New York Times.”

⁶⁷⁶ Quoted in Gibson, “Abstract Expressionism’s Evasion of Language,” 211.

practices that were the subject of the new discourse. It wasn't just that this work was different from earlier practices or that a new art public began to develop at this time, although these were crucially important factors for the emergence of a critical art discourse. The convergence I'm arguing for happened because art's meaning was at stake for both the artists who were producing it and the critics who were writing about it and, as a result, the object of art discourse began to shift from aesthetics to art. But, if the meaning of abstract art was no longer assumed to be given and the artists themselves refused to explain their work, then, perhaps paradoxically, its meaning would be produced discursively. Before I get into this, however, I want to turn to the changes that the art press underwent in the late 40s.

News vs. Criticism

ARTnews inaugurated its forty-fifth year by becoming a monthly magazine in February 1946. Because this involved nothing more than combining the two issues that were being published each month, the publishers wrote that the change was "one only of expansion."

Reiterating Frankfurter's claims of five years earlier, they continued:

All familiar features of *ARTnews* will be retained—including its timely, accurate reporting of significant news and equally timely, impartial, knowledgeable criticism... Every important exhibition throughout February has been previewed and is reviewed herein. Every significant new event is reported in the accompanying news columns... Most of all, the extra space in each monthly issue will allow us, more than ever, to *make* art news as well as reflect it.⁶⁷⁷

The publishers' letter wasn't entirely accurate about the scope of the change, since there were also some modifications to the magazine's design. The masthead and table of

⁶⁷⁷ "A Letter from the Publishers of *ARTnews*," *ARTnews* XLIV, no. 20 (February 1946): 12.

contents now took up an entire page instead of a half-page and the font was changed, the new layout giving the magazine a more professional look (a brief overview of the current issue's contents was also added).

More important, as it turned out, Thomas Hess, who had worked at the *Modern* for a summer after graduating from Yale with a degree in French art and literature, was added to the masthead as an editorial associate the same month, and he would be named associate editor in April 1947. (In January of the following year he became managing editor.) Most of the feature articles in the magazine dealt with historical topics in the early 40s and the editors focused a great deal of energy on special issues during the war (on camouflage, war posters, war cartoons). Hess started out writing feature-length articles on older artists (Jacques Villon, Lyonel Feininger, Matisse, Gaston Lachaise) but also wrote about the Whitney Annuals and some contemporary artists. Reviews were unsigned when he began contributing—the writers' initials had been eliminated when the prices of the work had been added at the end of each review—and by the time the magazine started identifying the writers again in 1949 Hess appears to have become selective about the shows he wrote about. Equally as important for the magazine's development was the new roster of critics who would begin writing for the magazine in the late 40s and early 50s. This roster included a number of artists (Elaine de Kooning, Fairfield Porter, Ad Reinhardt) and poets (John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara) who, together with Hess and Rosenberg, would shape the magazine's identity in the decade that followed.

In 1950 *ARTnews* discontinued a section called the "box score," which compared "kernels of opinion" that had been "extracted" from reviews published in the New York

newspapers.⁶⁷⁸ This happened in February, which was the same month that Henry McBride was added to the masthead as contributing editor. In his editorial on the “death” of the section, Frankfurter wrote that when the *World-Telegram* “absorbed” the *Sun*, not only did the editors elect not to retain McBride, they eliminated the art column altogether (although they kept the antiques, stamp-collecting and tropical-fish columns). Since this left only the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune*—the box score having shrunk from five papers to three since its inauguration in 1941—actively reviewing the “roughly hundred exhibitions a month throughout the New York season,” the section would no longer appear, Frankfurter wrote, “unless and until present conditions radically change.”⁶⁷⁹

For Frankfurter, the “symptoms” were “more important than the patient” and were attributable to the general condition of American journalism and the “special state” of art criticism. As for the first, he considered newspaper editors to be out of touch with the “basic currents of life,” but also pointed to the rise of the weekly magazines (*Life*, *Look*, *Time*, *Newsweek*) and the large-circulation monthlies (*Ladies’ Home Journal*), which had been “flourishing on a rich diet of material on thinking subjects.” (The famous *Life* magazine article on Jackson Pollock was published in August 1949.) More crucial was the fact that art criticism was “perhaps at its lowest ebb in modern history—unless we subtract from the mass of published criticism that which is not criticism in the proper sense but art journalism.” Frankfurter contrasted the art journalist—the “one who, assigned to ‘review’ a Rembrandt exhibition, proceeds to make his story as sensational as possible by casting doubts (although carefully hedged) on the authenticity of some pictures”—with the “proper

⁶⁷⁸ The box score employed the grid format used to summarize baseball statistics.

⁶⁷⁹ Alfred Frankfurter, “Vernissage,” *ARTnews* XLVIII, no. 10 (February 1950): 15.

critic” whose vocation involved the “painstaking chore, requiring infinitely greater professional training and general culture, of interpreting the already much-interpreted classics to an ever-renewing public.”⁶⁸⁰ Criticism’s proper object, then, was not contemporary art but the “classics,” which explains the magazine’s tendency to privilege them in its feature articles. (Frank Jewett Mather had argued that, “The best criticism is rarely if ever of the contemporary scene. It is of objects scrutinized at a certain remove and in historical perspective.”⁶⁸¹)

More critics were needed who could “carry out the exacting professional discipline of the city room” and “turn out their copy on time and intelligibly written,” but it was probably the case that editors and publishers had hired art journalists because “scholarly critics who can do these things are rare.” (It’s unclear whether Frankfurter considered reviews and articles that dealt with contemporary art to be “proper” criticism, but, for him, there was nothing between the poles of “art journalist” and “scholarly critic.”) How to resolve this problem? Frankfurter, looking to the “graduate schools of art history,” noted that a number of programs offered courses in museum curatorship and administration, but not a single institution, to his knowledge, offered a course “much less a seminar” in the “technique and practice of written art criticism.” When these institutions “awoke” to their responsibilities toward this “essential function”—“the critic’s place as a funnel to the public”—there would be better art criticism and maybe even more (but certainly better) art pages in the newspapers.⁶⁸² For Frankfurter, like Ransom, criticism was a pursuit that

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁸¹ Mather, *Concerning Beauty*, 226.

⁶⁸² Frankfurter, “Vernissage,” February 1950, 15. In the following issue Frankfurter wrote in response to Dr. Ulrich Middeldorf’s (Chairman of the Department of Art at the University of Chicago) offer to “join

required training (although not the kind of training that Ransom had in mind) rather than a “job for which no specific qualifications were required.”⁶⁸³ In the mid-50s, when the academy began to focus on this issue, Creighton Gilbert lamented the “exceedingly poor” quality of the submissions received by the College Art Association for the new Frank Jewett Mather Citation in Art Criticism, writing, “In considerable part this is due to the relatively slight attention given to art criticism by newspapers” but acknowledged that one of the award’s objectives was “to increase awareness of criticism as a standard function of a newspaper.”⁶⁸⁴

The CAA board was initially surprised to receive worthy submissions from critics writing for art magazines, which had, by this time, begun to make the shift from news coverage to criticism: “As originally conceived, the citation was to go to criticism by members of the staffs of publications of general circulation and art magazines were not considered as coming under that heading; nevertheless some excellent material was sent in from the specialized publications of the art world, and in two cases”—the award was divided among seven recipients—“it seems to us to demand recognition.”⁶⁸⁵ Clearly, it wasn’t just a matter of “coming under the right heading”; the grudging admission and the apparently reluctant acquiescence to the demand for recognition hints at the board’s resistance to the

with you in any campaign which you might like to continue on that particular issue,” that, “we’ll be glad to hire at *ARTnews* a few promising graduates who can spell ‘Pollaiuolo’ and know their dates roughly without having to be told where to look up either, who have at least begun to form a taste in modern painting (by which is not meant either Cézanne or Picasso) and who can write an interesting, intelligent caption to fit under a reproduction.” See Alfred Frankfurter, “Vernissage,” *ARTnews* XLIX, no. 1 (March 1950): 13.

⁶⁸³ Ransom, *The World’s Body*, 228.

⁶⁸⁴ Creighton Gilbert, “Citations in Art Criticism,” *College Art Journal* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1955): 189.

⁶⁸⁵ Alfred Frankfurter, Creighton Gilbert, and S. Lane Faison, “CAA Awards in Art Criticism,” *College Art Journal* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1954): 218.

possibility that “the specialized publications of the art world” were a viable source of worthwhile criticism—they assumed, that is, that these magazines were simply trade publications. The following year, however, the CAA board was beginning to catch up and, despite Gilbert’s urging, citations were awarded “for the best newspaper and magazine art criticism.”⁶⁸⁶

Robert Goldwater commented on the “quantity” issue in an article published in the February 1952 issue of *Magazine of Art*, arguing that, “we suffer not from an overabundance of criticism, but from its dearth. For the plain fact is that critical writing about art has not kept pace with the expansion of creative activity and interest in this country.”⁶⁸⁷ The result was a uniformity in the writing that didn’t respond adequately to the diversity of the work that was being made. Critics who didn’t make distinctions, who suppressed their personal predilections and wrote with equal conviction about everything, were just reporters. Responsible criticism involved “neither blind bias nor narrow exclusion,” he argued, but instead required that the critic “explain and justify his preferences, first to himself and then to his audience. In this way, readers, reflecting upon the assumptions of the critic’s taste, would come to clarify their own.”⁶⁸⁸

According to Goldwater, the memorable critics were the most partisan ones: Diderot, Baudelaire, Zola, Ruskin, Fénéon, Fry, and, most recently, McBride. For

⁶⁸⁶ Lamar Dodd and Theodore Bowie, “College Art Association Activities,” *College Art Journal* 14, no. 3 (Spring 1955): 188. Dave Weber of the *Santa Fe New Mexican* received the newspaper citation “for bold expression of opinion, for fresh and pungent writing, and for remarkable power of visualization.” Frankfurter was awarded the magazine citation. Kermit Lansner and Fairfield Porter (both writers for *ARTnews*) received honorable mentions, the latter for his “remarkable ability to give a complete and critical report without irrelevant aestheticizing in a very brief compass.”

⁶⁸⁷ Robert Goldwater, “Partial Criticism,” *Magazine of Art* 45, no. 2 (February 1952): 50.

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

Goldwater, subjective judgment was the key to criticism while objectivity yielded only a homogeneous, ineffective journalism. (Goldwater was not referring to the objectivity of Buck's "scientific" critic, but to the "impartiality" of the technical critic that the *ARTnews* publishers had referred to when they announced the monthly publication schedule.) He concluded that, "[If] the first steps could be taken to break down the disguise of reportorial eclectic objectivity, and open partisanship be established, spokesmen for the many camps would of necessity quickly arise. And thus we should be headed towards the true solution that our diversified art calls forth: the combining of an over-all pluralism with individual conviction."⁶⁸⁹ Acting as spokesmen for particular artists, critics would become advocates—in the legal sense—for the work. Judgments weren't normative but subjective, and critics who justified their positions by arguing effectively were more likely to convince the public. The critic would judge the work and the public would judge the critic by the persuasiveness of his or her arguments.⁶⁹⁰ Under this rubric, rhetorical skill, perhaps even more than the soundness of the argument, would determine the critic's (and by extension the artist's) success.

Criticism was a much-debated—or at least editorialized—topic in *Magazine of Art* in the early 50s. Perhaps it was a coincidence that it began to preoccupy Goldwater several months after he and his co-editor, James Thrall Soby, announced changes to the magazine

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁰ Duncan Phillips, whom Goldwater invited to contribute an editorial on a topic of his choice, elected to respond to Goldwater's call for partial criticism. Not surprisingly, Phillips decried the current depreciation of "impressionism as a continuing point of view." He was most concerned about the continuity of tradition and, rejecting eclecticism "because of its weak dilutions and its stale compounds," believed the test of the work was whether it could be "seen in the company of the nineteenth-century Titans." In Phillips's view it was up to patrons to "mold the taste of an approving public" and critics served as the purveyors of that taste. See Duncan Phillips, "The Critic--Partisan or Referee?," *Magazine of Art* 46, no. 2 (February 1953): 50+.

as a result of budgetary constraints, but his frequent re-visitation of the topic might also have been a veiled attempt to lobby for the continued relevance of the magazine itself.⁶⁹¹ The final number of the magazine contained a valedictory written by Goldwater and Soby in which they argued for the real and continuing need for journals—like *Magazine of Art*—whose principal value was their independence: “like universities, like museums, like art itself, this requirement is a proper part of [its] vital existence.” (The magazine was published by The American Federation of Arts, the non-profit educational association founded in 1909.) It was the magazine’s disinterestedness, in other words, that vouchsafed the integrity of the critics’ interestedness. (As Bourdieu argued, “The literary and artistic world is so ordered that those who enter it have an interest in disinterestedness.”⁶⁹²) The editors’ characterization of *Magazine of Art* as “an independent magazine that is responsive to the contemporary situation without being a news magazine” obviously distinguished it from both *ARTnews* and *Art Digest* and their “reportorial eclectic objectivity.”⁶⁹³

Art Digest, not to be left out of this debate, published an article in the April 15, 1954 issue titled “Is Reviewing Responsible?” by Edith Gregor Halpert, director of the Downtown Gallery, who observed that, although museum attendance had increased ten-fold in the past decade, the number of art pages and art publications had decreased

⁶⁹¹ “Unsigned Statement,” *Magazine of Art* 44, no. 6 (October 1951): 206. Between February 1952 and May 1953 (the last issue), Goldwater published five editorials on the subject of criticism as well as a rejoinder by Duncan Phillips to one of his. In the final issue the editors reprinted the statements made by two art critics and a music critic at the 1952 Pittsburgh International with the title “A Forum of Critics.” See Virgil Thomson, Eric Newton, and James Johnson Sweeney, “A Forum for Critics,” *Magazine of Art* 46, no. 5 (May 1953): 231–32.

⁶⁹² Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 40.

⁶⁹³ Robert Goldwater and James Thrall Soby, “Valedictory,” *Magazine of Art* 46, no. 5 (May 1953): 194.

“shockingly.”⁶⁹⁴ There were about 150 galleries in New York, she noted, but the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune* had only five professional critics between them. The situation with art magazines was even worse, although the paucity of critics wasn’t the only problem. “The American penchant for ‘news’ is unfortunately mis-applied in the art field,” she wrote, “So much space and discrimination are used in connection with foreign artists, with 19th century and earlier painters and sculptors, that my plea is for fair practice in connection with contemporary American art.” Halpert, raising the perennial issue of the distinction between the “reviewer” and the “critic,” was particularly concerned that “reviews must appear simultaneously with the opening,” which meant that the reviewer rarely, if ever, saw the whole show. More interested in critical rigor than hastily-written reviews (or “news”), Halpert ended by stating that, “If our press is to make a real contribution toward art development in this country; if it is to pass serious critical judgment; if it is to analyze and direct trends for future generations, it has a serious responsibility to face.”⁶⁹⁵

ARTnews would respond to the shrinking site of art discourse by making a tentative effort to expand its contemporary art coverage in the late 40s, but there were clear signs that “the classics” remained the priority. Each year, the magazine published a list of the “most important” acquisitions by public collections. The list included “old master,” “nineteenth-century painting,” “modern European painting,” “old sculpture,” and “modern sculpture” (Boccioni’s 1913 *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* won for 1949) (fig. 1), but Frankfurter wrote in the January 1950 number that, “The place of the *most important*

⁶⁹⁴ Edith Halpert, “Is Reviewing Responsible?,” *Art Digest* 28, no. 14 (April 15, 1954): 11. S. Lane Faison, writing on the CAA criticism awards, lamented the loss of Magazine of Art, writing, “Art criticism has been declining, at least in quantity.” See S. Lane Faison, “Art Criticism,” *Art Digest* 29, no. 11 (March 1, 1953): 5.

⁶⁹⁵ Halpert, “Is Reviewing Responsible?,” 11-12.

modern American painting acquired by an American public collection has not been filled for several years because no one painting could be found that seemed worthy of being singled out for this honor.”⁶⁹⁶ Peter Blume, Arp, Balthus, Lee Gatch, and Ben Shahn were deemed to have had the best one-man shows in 1949 (“the condition being that each exhibit consist *chiefly* of new work”), which was the same year that Pollock, for example, had exhibited *Number One* (1948) at Betty Parsons (fig. 2). The magazine declined to name a “most important modern American painting” the following year as well (the year MoMA purchased *Number One*), citing the delay in the announcement of that year’s acquisitions by the Whitney and the Met, although it did name an “interim candidate”: Ben Shahn’s *Silent Music*, which was purchased by the Phillips Gallery (fig. 3).

The magazine’s inability to recognize modern American painters would change over the course of the decade; with Hess’s arrival it recognized them as critics. Elaine de Kooning, for instance, was hired as a reviewer in the summer of 1948 (Hess had become managing editor in January of that year). A number of artists, including Balcombe Greene, Harry Holtzman, Erle Loran, George L. K. Morris, Robert Goodnough, Jack Tworkov, and Allan Kaprow, among many others, contributed to the magazine in the 50s, but the most frequent contributors were de Kooning, Fairfield Porter, and Ad Reinhardt and it’s no coincidence that the work of these artists was championed by the editors. In the early 50s, the magazine’s increased coverage of contemporary art consisted primarily of the “X Paints a Picture” series (which de Kooning inaugurated and often contributed to) and McBride’s feature articles and reviews column, “By Henry McBride.” Hess also continued to write feature articles on contemporary art—typically reviews of museum exhibitions.

⁶⁹⁶ Alfred Frankfurter, “Vernissage,” *ARTnews* XLVIII, no. 9 (January 1950): 50.

While Frankfurter clearly considered the addition of McBride to the editorial staff as something of a coup, Hess appears to have been the force behind the magazine's critical shift.

Porter began writing for the magazine in November 1951, contributing reviews and features regularly until 1959 when he left to become the art critic for *The Nation*. (De Kooning recommended him after an argument they'd had about a Gorky exhibition at the Whitney.) Porter might be called a painter's critic, since he wrote from the perspective not just of a practitioner but, more specifically, from the point of view of a painter.⁶⁹⁷ As Rackstraw Downes put it, "He knew what artists are peculiarly equipped to know because they experience it every day in the studio; that is, that no matter how skillfully and knowledgeably they organize what in literary criticism are called the Aristotelian elements of the work—in painting these would be composition, imagery, color, space, drawing, brushwork—a picture will not necessarily catch fire, come alive."⁶⁹⁸

Porter was particularly opposed to what he called "literary" criticism, which turned art into the background for (preconceived) ideas. In "The Short Review," published in 1958, he wrote, "A review can be at best a parallel creation, its subject being the nature of the painting or sculpture. Criticism creates an analogy, and by examining an analogy you see what the art essentially is. Criticism should tell you what is there."⁶⁹⁹ He was the antithesis of Goldwater's ideal critic; his goal was to be as non-partisan, detached, and disinterested as possible. In contrast to the poetic impressionism of the poet-critics who

⁶⁹⁷ In fact, he considered himself a stronger critic. See Rackstraw Downes, "Introduction," Fairfield Porter, *Art in Its Own Terms: Selected Criticism 1935-1975*, ed. Rackstraw Downes (New York: Taplinger Pub. Co, 1979), 19.

⁶⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

began to write for the magazine in the mid-50s, Porter's criticism might be described as a kind of technical-impressionism.

It wasn't that Porter eschewed judgment; rather, he disapproved of criticism that involved comparisons of contemporaries' work. Like the other technical critics who wrote for the magazine, he evaluated individual artworks on their own terms. "I believe that accurate impressionist criticism is the kind that communicates to a reader of a magazine what the character of a painter's work is... I do not much believe in criticism of contemporaries that estimates importance, because although some things are better than others, as Shakespeare is better than Shaw, this has too much to do with restricting, either morally, like a minister, or pseudo-scientifically like a social worker; and it makes art and art criticism competitors of ethics, which they are not."⁷⁰⁰ For Porter, measuring a work's importance involved not only a qualitative distinction (inferior or superior) but, even worse, a moral judgment (right or wrong) that applied to the work's long-term value as opposed to its present worth. Hierarchical distinctions were the task of the historian (or History) rather than the critic, which, by definition, meant they must be deferred; "good" and "bad" were relevant to the discussion, but "better" and "worse" only applied to historical comparisons. He was not only *not* interested in painting in general, he was convinced that legitimate criticism couldn't engage in generalizations.

Although Porter compared artists' work to that of both their predecessors and their contemporaries, he didn't judge its value or worth against theirs, measuring it instead by what can only be described as a personal standard. But it was precisely because this form of impressionist criticism didn't involve that kind of judgment that Porter argued for its

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid.

accuracy. Under the assumption that it was possible to isolate the nature or character of the work, Porter saw criticism's task as something like translation (or paraphrase). If he succeeded, viewers would have a similar if not identical understanding of the work's nature; the only "risk" the critic faced was failure to provide a fitting analogy. Criticism shouldn't attempt to persuade the viewer, but should simply convey what might be called the work's empirical essence.

The function of his "technical impressions" was to determine not only whether a painting or sculpture worked, whether it was well-conceived and skillfully executed, but whether it contained something more, something unexpected—whether it had "vitality," caught fire, etc. About Willem de Kooning he wrote, "Here is that shock or surprise that is so often the sign of original creation."⁷⁰¹ Whether or not his reviews can be said to have created analogies for the works, they were uncompromising, occasionally dismissive. His writing was, by turns, mordant ("[Homer] paints as if he were Abraham Lincoln walking three miles to return three cents change"), quasi-lyrical ("Skin is as like sky or wall as wall or sky are like each other or like skin."), pedantic ("[Theodore Hancock] does not appreciate the difference between verbal constructions and construction with lines and colors"), and expansive ("It is impossible to give up any part of [Charles Heidenrich's] pictures, for each part gives so much pleasure that its loss would be painful.")—there were various ways, it seems, to produce a parallel creation—but he was always keenly observant.⁷⁰²

His *ARTnews* features often read like expanded versions of his reviews, but Porter began

⁷⁰¹ Fairfield Porter, "Willem de Kooning," *ARTnews* 54, no. 7 (November 1955): 49.

⁷⁰² Fairfield Porter, "Homer: American vs. Artist: A Problem of Identities," *ARTnews* 57, no. 8 (December 1958): 26; Fairfield Porter, "Gifford Beal," *ARTnews* 55, no. 9 (January 1957): 22; Fairfield Porter, "Theodore Hancock," *ARTnews* 55, no. 3 (May 1956): 50; Fairfield Porter, "Charles Heidenrich," *ARTnews* 54, no. 1 (March 1955): 51.

to elaborate a theoretical framework when he became the critic for *The Nation*, a position he held from 1959 to 1961, expounding upon his theory considerably in a number of longer essays during this two-year period.

Hess was a regular contributor of feature articles from 1946 until he became editor in 1965, when Frankfurter died. He was a strong advocate for Porter, taking every opportunity to promote his work and sharing his critical interest in a number of artists (e.g. Wolf Kahn, Elaine de Kooning, and Larry Rivers). However, unlike Porter, he had an agenda: he would become driven by a desire to secure critical—and, more importantly, institutional—recognition for the Abstract Expressionists and, later, for the painters who were heir to their innovations. With international acknowledgment that the center of the art world was now occupied by American art, Hess would advocate for what amounted to the institutionalization of Abstract Expressionism. Like George L. K. Morris, he had developed a tradition-based theory of modern painting by the late 40s that he would subsequently read through Rosenberg's essay on action painting.

In a feature-length review of a forty-year survey of American art held at the Modern in 1951, Hess observed that “the matrix of pictorial invention was magically transferred to America, stimulating to the point of death our provincial tradition, and evolving in its place styles that no longer ‘look American,’ but have the confident, international air that is characteristic of modern art.” For Hess, provincialism, above all, was what had prevented American art from being “modern,” but the emergence of Abstract Expressionism had presented the solution to this problem. “[O]ne finally recognizes the appearance of new forces and styles that are continuations *from* rather than versions of Paris... Human gesture

becomes a new subject and a new means—not that such indications of originality are too significant, for this ‘newness’ is exactly an understanding of the past.”⁷⁰³ Divergence from Paris represented a shift in ethos. What marked the success of these painters, Hess wrote the following year in *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*, was “the emergence of a distinct and human individuality—a specific warmth, felt and unique... [I]n their work a new interpretation of nature and of man is made.”⁷⁰⁴ While provincialism had marginalized American art, Abstract Expressionism was *the* new international art, making the U.S. in general, and New York in particular, the dominant force in modern art. This is a familiar story, but Hess’s use of the phrase “magically transferred” was carefully calibrated to prevent the impression that Abstract Expressionism had evolved from the School of Paris. Convinced that the idea of the avant-garde was outdated, Hess was often at pains to put some distance between American painters and the European avant-garde.

While abstraction, for Porter, was a means employed by painters—successfully or not—to achieve certain ends, Hess was ambivalent about it. In a somewhat tortured sentence, he argues both for and against the concept: “For present painting, the past can testify to the fact that no art is abstract, for genius can invest any form, no matter how capriciously invented, with an intensity that will make it concrete to all understanding observers; too, all art is abstract in that it is away from its subject’s original syndrome in nature—different from everyday experience, in fact ‘ab’ nature ‘in’ art.”⁷⁰⁵ Abstraction was connected to the new attitude or ethos that had emerged with Abstract Expressionism,

⁷⁰³ Thomas Hess, “Is Abstraction Un-American?,” *ARTnews*, February 1951, 40–41.

⁷⁰⁴ Thomas B. Hess, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase* (New York: Viking Press, 1951), 154.

⁷⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

providing a new motivation for employing it rather than a historical solution to painting problems: “Some artists, in order to heighten a certain idea of reality, have left resemblance and have, indeed, looked toward the idea of an abstract art—for, perhaps, in the twentieth-century sense of the term, abstractness does not depend so much upon degree of fidelity to nature as it does upon an *état-d’âme*, an inner compulsion to leave the appearance of the subject, instead of burrowing within it.”⁷⁰⁶ Although he concedes that the paintings he discusses “have little relationship to the appearances of things in nature, and if it is convenient for us to have labels, then ‘abstraction’ seems proper for them,” he ends by quoting Picasso: “There is no abstract art.”⁷⁰⁷

As a kind of technical-impressionism, Porter’s “analogies” didn’t position the work in any way. In this sense, Porter was a rather conventional critic, since he didn’t depart from the critical norms that had prevailed in the art press since World War I. Like Morris’s, Hess’s position was “tradition-based” although he understood the term “tradition” in a different way (Morris, who rejected expressionism, continued to champion the work of the A.A.A. into the 50s). As Hess wrote, “Drawing learnedly from the past, sensitive to the world around him, the artist in America creates the traditions of the present.”⁷⁰⁸ These “traditions of the present” didn’t represent a break with the past—“human gesture” was “exactly an understanding of the past” and de Kooning had “taken cognizance” of the “entire tradition of modern painting”—and, as Hess argued, “no progress or betterment” was involved in the assimilation of the past (Eliot had argued that the development or

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid., 15; 158.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid., 154.

“refinement” of the poetic tradition didn’t involve “any improvement”).⁷⁰⁹ His traditions of the present were therefore rooted in tradition. Hess would, perhaps, have agreed with Greenberg’s claim that, “New York had caught up with Paris as Paris had not yet caught up with herself,” but he rejected a formal reading of this work.⁷¹⁰

As far as Hess was concerned, modern art owed as much to van Gogh (in whose paintings “emotion finds equivalence in the substance of paint”) and Gauguin (who “considered the possibilities of absolute freedom” by having the courage to “live and die” his paintings) as it did to Picasso.⁷¹¹ His characterization of the Cubists’ contribution to modern art is idiosyncratic: “The Cubists, in making the picture independent of a specific environment, were able at the same time to take the act of painting itself, and the knowledge and inspiration that goes into this act, as their theme”—Cubism as proto-action painting.⁷¹² Hess’s interpretation of Abstract Expressionism would have made him especially receptive to Rosenberg’s reading; it is likely that Hess invited Rosenberg to contribute to the magazine.

“The American Action Painters”

Randall Jarrell was, of course, referring to literary criticism when he bemoaned the arrival of “the age of criticism” in 1952, but art criticism was about to undergo a transformation that arguably led to its own age. In 1952 *Partisan* held a symposium titled “Our Country

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid., 91; Eliot, *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays*, 29.

⁷¹⁰ Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 234.

⁷¹¹ Hess, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*, 67.

⁷¹² Ibid., 41; 67. Monet later came in for similar treatment with Rosenberg supplying the terminology: “He had discovered on the surface of the painting a new arena for the drama of art. This is what makes him so modern today.” See Thomas Hess, “Monet: Tithonus at Giverny,” *ARTnews*, October 1956, 42.

and Our Culture,” bringing the magazine’s oppositional stance to a rather definitive end.⁷¹³ Perhaps not coincidentally, the same year marked the intersection of art criticism and cultural criticism as Rosenberg and Greenberg published their first essays on contemporary art in *ARTnews*.⁷¹⁴ Greenberg, who had become an associate editor of *Commentary* in 1945, had stopped writing for *The Nation* in 1949. Rosenberg, having distanced himself from *Partisan* in the early 40s, published two long essays on “Marx’s Drama of History” in *Kenyon* in 1948 and 1949, which together functioned as a kind of prologue to “The American Action Painters,” or, as Annika Marie argues, “Rosenberg’s concept of action predates and exceeds what has become its canonical appearance in 1952. It is a sustaining and sustained theme developed throughout Rosenberg’s long career.”⁷¹⁵ (In other words, the Marxism that was implicit in Rosenberg’s essay is much less difficult to substantiate than Greenberg’s was for T. J. Clark.)

Let me start, however, with an earlier essay in which Rosenberg, arguing against the Popular Front, had written that Paris had represented the “International of culture” in the

⁷¹³ Newton Arvin et al., “Our Country and Our Culture: A Symposium,” *Partisan Review* XIX, no. 3 (June 1952): 282–326; William Barrett et al., “Our Country and Our Culture: A Symposium (II),” *Partisan Review* XIX, no. 4 (August 1952): 420–50; Louise Bogan et al., “Our Country and Our Culture: A Symposium (III),” *Partisan Review* XIX, no. 5 (October 1952): 562–97; *Partisan* had also scaled back its operations the previous year when it lost the patronage of a major sponsor. See John O’Brian, Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1*, 288.

⁷¹⁴ Greenberg had published a piece on Renoir in the magazine a couple of years before.

⁷¹⁵ Annika Marie, “The Most Radical Act: Harold Rosenberg, Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt” (Ph.D., The University of Texas at Austin, 2007), 67, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.uh.edu/pqdtglobal/docview/304831069/abstract/11FB8E257CEA4E7DPQ/1?accountid=7107>. “Marx’s Drama of History” was the title under which Rosenberg had hoped to publish a volume containing these two essays and an earlier one titled “Character Change and the Drama,” which he had published in *The Symposium* in 1932. *Ibid.*, 68. See Harold Rosenberg, “The Pathos of the Proletariat,” *The Kenyon Review* 11, no. 4 (Autumn 1949): 595–629; Harold Rosenberg, “The Resurrected Romans,” *The Kenyon Review* 10, no. 4 (Autumn 1948): 602–20.

1920s.⁷¹⁶ The Paris International was *not* Parisian, according to Rosenberg, since it was the city's "passivity" that "allowed it to be possessed by the searchers of every nation"—Spaniards (Picasso, Gris), Italians (Boccioni, Severini), Russians (Archipenko, Diaghilev), etc.⁷¹⁷ Although by 1940 the International, wiped out by the "higher need" of anti-fascism, was no more, what had happened in Paris had proven that "such a thing could exist" and "that this culture had a definite style: the *Modern*." And, just as it had produced the "No-Place" of the International, the Modern, for which "time no longer reared up like a gravestone or flourished like a tree," produced a "No-Time," which was "as far as mankind has gone toward freeing itself from the past."⁷¹⁸ Freedom from the past was vital to the proletariat, whose pathos, as Rosenberg argued in the second of the two *Kenyon* essays, was attributable to the "drama in the suspense" between a revolution initiated on its own behalf and one that it undertook "as a tool for others."

In that essay, "The Pathos of the Proletariat," Rosenberg maintained that if "existence determined consciousness," as Marx wrote, there was no way to predict what kind of consciousness the proletariat would develop (or what kind of action it would take as a result), in which case the proletariat itself must remain a hypothesis.⁷¹⁹ Rosenberg not only challenged the presumption of class consciousness but argued for the capacity of the working class to develop an independent will or consciousness, an idea that Lenin had categorically rejected. Holding out for this hypothetical proletariat, Rosenberg was convinced that it needed a degree of self-determination that even Marx denied it. However,

⁷¹⁶ Rosenberg, "On the Fall of Paris," 441.

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 440.

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 441; 443.

⁷¹⁹ Rosenberg, "The Pathos of the Proletariat," 618.

it wasn't Marxism that he was taking issue with but Marxist politics, which arose out of an ambition "to create the proletariat as a revolutionary class."⁷²⁰ "Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself," Marx wrote in *The German Ideology*, "the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution."⁷²¹ From Rosenberg's perspective, the "movement," having arrogated responsibility for the "alteration of men" to itself, threatened the role of the revolution. "Instead of learning in action," he wrote, "the working class is put to school by the Party." In which case, "the high claims of socialism for the release of human individuals into unlimited creativity through the 'self-activity' of the proletariat are no longer legitimate."⁷²²

Rosenberg rejected Lenin's characterization of the proletariat as a "collective character... with the revolutionary ego and consciousness necessary to play its part," its struggles "but reflexes of economic contradictions," since it was precisely this mechanistic view that set it up to be manipulated by a "conscious and active ego"—otherwise known as "the Bolshevik Party of 'scientific' (destiny-knowing) professional revolutionaries."⁷²³ He was suspicious of any kind of consciousness-raising, which, no matter how spontaneous, involved leaders and followers. For this reason, he focused on another Marxist tenet—"the working class is either revolutionary or it is nothing"—which implied that the proletariat was not just characterized by struggle but essentially *composed of*, or constituted by, it.⁷²⁴ "The proletariat must make itself and continue to make itself in revolutionary action; at rest it has

⁷²⁰ Ibid., 624.

⁷²¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 621.

⁷²² Ibid., 621; 625.

⁷²³ Ibid., 626.

⁷²⁴ Ibid., 599.

no identity.” Action, then, was its mode of existence, making that existence “an oscillation between struggle and nothingness.” This oscillation—the negation of the ultimate negation (nothingness)—was the “revolution in permanence” performed by the proletariat whose “daily life is an enactment of [the] Hegelian dialectic.”⁷²⁵

Three years later, Rosenberg published “The American Action Painters” in *ARTnews*. Proposing to rescue this essay from its “lazy existentialist-humanist reading,” Fred Orton offers a political reading that emphasizes Rosenberg’s law background as the larger context for his theorization of the proletariat’s identity (i.e., his refusal to treat it as a “personification”). “The law does not recognise ‘personality,’ a person with a biography, a life pictured as fully and precisely as possible. It is only interested in a person’s actions, an ‘identity’ to which its judgements are applied.”⁷²⁶ Although Rosenberg didn’t attempt to conceal his Marxist sympathies in this essay—there’s no mistaking either the language or the politics of a statement like “the mode of production of modern masterpieces has now been all too clearly rationalized”—and any number of parallels can be drawn between the action painter and his “hypothetical” proletariat, nowhere does he suggest, even implicitly, an analogy between them.⁷²⁷ At the same time, it’s impossible to deny the connection between claims like “Art as action rests on the enormous assumption that the artist accepts as real only that which he is in the process of creating” (“The American Action Painters”) and “With everything solid melted into air, only what [the workers] themselves create can have

⁷²⁵ Ibid., 612; 615.

⁷²⁶ Fred Orton, “Action, Revolution and Painting,” *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 2 (1991): 3; 8.

⁷²⁷ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 22.

reality for them” (“Pathos of the Proletariat”).⁷²⁸ The connection between creation, or self-creation, and reality was crucial for Rosenberg throughout the 40s and 50s.⁷²⁹ His depiction of the action painter is, at the very least, consistent with the description of the proletariat he had outlined in the *Kenyon* essays—which is unsurprising given that he considered both to be revolutionary actors.

Orton is quick to point out that “there is nothing nationalistic, patriotic or chauvinistic about [Rosenberg’s] use of ‘American’ or his idea of what kind of person the ‘American’ action painter might be.”⁷³⁰ The focus on American-ness was motivated instead by the need to distinguish this painting not simply from the School of Paris but from International Style architecture and design, which led to “Modern-design fabrics in bargain basements, Modern interiors for office girls living alone, Modern milk bottles”—i.e. the “revolution in taste” brought about by the mass-production of the Modern.⁷³¹ While the International had been rescued by—or, better, *as*—the Modern after the fall of Paris, the Modern now needed rescuing from its internationalization.

⁷²⁸ *Ibid.*, 48; Rosenberg, “The Pathos of the Proletariat,” 605. Or, as Marie writes, “Instead of seeing a Marxist political idea couched in the concept of Action Painting, it may be that Action Painting is an aesthetic idea couched in Marxism.” Marie, “The Most Radical Act,” 67–68.

⁷²⁹ For Porter, access to reality was an empirical issue: the critic’s job was to articulate “what was there.” Since Vuillard only showed “what he directly knew,” he revealed to viewers that their only reality was their own. What Porter’s hard-boiled empiricism and Rosenberg’s metaphysical materialism had in common was an awareness that, as Rosenberg put it, “only what he constructs himself will ever be real to him.” This was Rosenberg writing in 1947 in what turned out to be the sole issue of the little magazine *Possibilities*, which he co-edited with Robert Motherwell, John Cage and Pierre Chareau. He wrote in “The American Action Painters” that, “A good painting in this mode leaves no doubt concerning its reality as an action and its relation to a transforming process in the artist.” See Harold Rosenberg, “Introduction to Six American Artists,” in Gibson, *Issues in Abstract Expressionism*, 247; Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 48.

⁷³⁰ Orton, “Action, Revolution and Painting,” 8.

⁷³¹ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 49.

In “Pathos of the Proletariat” Rosenberg had linked the proletariat to the American, since both were characterized by action (“The American does not meditate, he acts. So, too, the proletariat, whose self-consciousness arises through the ‘practical movement’”) and pastlessness (“The proletariat is of this ‘American’ sphere, in which persons, places, things, human relations, exist without the time-dimension”).⁷³² But there was an important distinction between them: “As the American is the free man and master of the industrial epoch, even when he refuses his freedom and mastery, the proletarian is its inherent victim. He represents the internal flaw of the modern, its original sin.” Action was “a fact” for the American, but it could only be a possibility for the worker. Speaking “only half-figuratively,” Rosenberg argued that “to become human the proletariat must ‘Americanize’ itself, that is, become a character who, living in a present devoid of the aura of memory, joins itself to human history through the freedom of its action.” But, because the American’s pastlessness wasn’t the result of a revolutionary consciousness, his freedom didn’t “join him to human history,” limiting not only the scope of his historical role but his humanity. “America, democracy, the proletariat will triumph,” Rosenberg writes, “yet civilization will not perish. In the world denuded by ceaseless activity, a new humanism has become possible, that of soberly facing the real conditions and relations of men.”⁷³³ Here, the sober confrontation of “real conditions and relations” doesn’t involve the collective class consciousness of a “personification” but the “new humanism” of the “Americanized” actor.

⁷³² Rosenberg, “The Pathos of the Proletariat,” 606.

⁷³³ Ibid., 606; 609.

In this sense Rosenberg followed his earlier argument to its logical conclusion in “The American Action Painters.” Having moved in the direction of abandoning the idea of the proletariat’s collective identity, Rosenberg argues that, with action painting, the “revolution against the given... has re-entered America in the form of personal revolts.”⁷³⁴ In “Pathos” Rosenberg was holding out for the possibility of the proletariat (the belief that the hypothesis might still be proven). As he wrote in the concluding paragraph, “So long as the category exists the possibility cannot be excluded that [the proletariat] will recognize itself as a separate human community and revolutionize everything by affirming itself and its tradition-less interests.”⁷³⁵ But he realized that, whether a personification or a hypothesis, the proletariat’s fate was sealed simply by invoking it. The only way to avoid vitiating “experience determines conscious”—which was the unavoidable consequence of positing any kind of consciousness—was to eliminate consciousness (or, more accurately, any conception of it) from the equation altogether. In “The American Action Painters,” this resulted not only in the famous argument that the artists had decided “just to paint,” but in Rosenberg’s conclusion that, “[T]here is no point in an act if you already know what it contains.”⁷³⁶

In “The American Action Painters” Rosenberg was holding out for possibility *as such*. What the American had that the proletariat lacked was the ability to act on his own behalf—at least within the arena of art. “The artist works in a condition of open possibility, risking, to follow Kierkegaard, the anguish of the esthetic, which accompanies possibility

⁷³⁴ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 48. Or, as Rosenberg later put it, “The American painter found a new function for art as the action that belonged to himself.” See Harold Rosenberg, “The Premises of Action Painting,” *Encounter* 20, no. 5 (May 1963): 47.

⁷³⁵ Rosenberg, “The Pathos of the Proletariat,” 629.

⁷³⁶ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 23; 22.

lacking in reality. To maintain the force to refrain from settling anything, he must exercise in himself a constant ‘No.’”⁷³⁷ Action painting wasn’t painting in the service of anything except the painter—although it was, in some sense, painting in the service of the dialectic, the “perpetual evolution” that didn’t allow anything to be settled. “It is to be taken for granted that in the final effect, the image, whatever be or not be in it, will be a *tension*.” It wouldn’t *represent* a tension; it would *be* one. The only way to recover the Modern of the Paris International was for the act, the dialectical encounter, to *become* the work. The No-time of the International becomes a radical present “located” in dialectical struggle (the “tension”) and negation (the “constant ‘No’”): action painting was either revolutionary or it was nothing (apocalyptic wallpaper).

The point of rehearsing the links between Rosenberg’s intellectual and political formation and the issues he took up in “The American Action Painters” is not simply to locate the origin of his ideas, but to provide a context for them, and for terms like “American,” “international,” and “cosmopolitan,” which were instrumental in the construction of “action painting” that took place in the pages of *ARTnews*. Hess’s interest in Rosenberg’s criticism might be said to have involved both a professional and a theoretical component. There was a real affinity between these critics’ thinking (and the fact that Hess hewed as closely as he did to the underlying principles of Rosenberg’s position demonstrates that his understanding of it wasn’t superficial), but I would argue that the critical reception of Rosenberg’s essay was largely a product of Hess’s reading of it. Abstract Expressionism had transcended the School of Paris rather than evolved from it in Hess’s view and, although Hess was already using a somewhat similar framework to discuss this

⁷³⁷ Ibid., 48.

work, Rosenberg provided a theoretical basis for it. But Rosenberg didn't mention the name of a single artist in his text and no reproductions accompanied it. Hess nevertheless became something of a proselytizer for the "action painter," taking it upon himself to link the term not only with certain artists but with a set of attributes. Identifying the artists wasn't necessary—it was clear who Rosenberg had in mind—but Hess's use of "action painting" as a label was precisely what Rosenberg had sought to avoid. Rosenberg identified the "new painting," which is how he tended to refer to it in the essay (he only called it "action painting" twice), as a movement, but he made a point of distinguishing it from a school, which would have entailed not simply a "new painting consciousness," but "a consciousness of that consciousness—and even an insistence on certain formulas"—formulas that would have resulted, in turn, from "the linkage of practice with terminology—different paintings are affected by the same words."⁷³⁸

I would argue that Rosenberg's unwillingness to name the artists that he was referring to was, in part, a tactic that allowed him to identify action painting as "vanguard art" without having to acknowledge the implications of this move.⁷³⁹ Maintaining a distinction between vanguard art and the avant-garde was important to Rosenberg because he rejected the idea that art advanced or progressed: vanguard artists could be "revolutionary" without having to be "ahead" of others. The problem, however, is that, as Bourdieu put it, "To introduce difference is to produce time," making the issue of "advance" or "progress" unavoidable.⁷⁴⁰ For Rosenberg, who continued to adhere to the

⁷³⁸ Rosenberg, "American Action Painters," 22.

⁷³⁹ "There was not in Action Painting as in earlier art movements a stated vanguard concept, but there were the traditional assumptions of a vanguard." Rosenberg, "The Premises of Action Painting," 47.

⁷⁴⁰ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 106.

tenets of social or cultural criticism, these artists were doing “advanced” work in relation to the social context, not (or not only) in relation to each other. The term “action painting” was intended to function as a general descriptor rather than as a moniker or label (as was “the new painting”), since Rosenberg wanted to avoid the “linkage of practice with terminology.” Bourdieu underscores the relationship between “the names of schools or groups—words which make things, distinctive signs which produce existence” and “creating a new position, ahead of the positions already occupied, in the vanguard.”⁷⁴¹

Hess, it could be argued, wanted a following, but Rosenberg was interested in other possibilities. More than a theory or defense of the artists and the work, “The American Action Painters” was an appeal for an audience—and a critic. “The new painting,” he wrote, “came into being fastened to Modern Art and without intellectual allies.” It had been mistaken, in other words, for the Modern Art that was now being administered by what he called the “taste bureaucracy.” While understanding of this work was limited to “the tiny circle of poets, musicians, theoreticians, men of letters, who have sensed in their own work the presence of the new creative principle” (i.e. other vanguard practitioners), its wider appeal was the result of its use as “material for educational and profit-making enterprises: color reproductions, design adaptations, human-interest stories.” What Rosenberg feared most was art’s—and artists’—instrumentalization, whether by “destiny-knowing professional revolutionaries” or the taste bureaucracy. “Despite the fact that more people see and hear about works of art than ever before,” he wrote, “the vanguard artist has an audience of nobody... His paintings are employed not wanted.”⁷⁴²

⁷⁴¹ Ibid., 60.

⁷⁴² Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 49–50.

Rosenberg was facing the same issue as the College Art Association's Mather award board (albeit for a different reason): it wasn't clear where to look for art criticism in the early 50s. At least that's one way to interpret the essay's final sentence. "So far," Rosenberg wrote, "the silence of American literature on the new painting all but amounts to a scandal." This painting's lack of "intellectual allies" wasn't a question of advocacy (it had enthusiasts in ever-increasing numbers); it was a question of discourse. "American vanguard art needs a genuine audience—not just a market," wrote Rosenberg, "It needs understanding—not just publicity."⁷⁴³ His appeal to "American literature" might seem misplaced given the context of the essay, but as Rosenberg had argued in "The Herd of Independent Minds," the little magazines were falling down on the job.

If by "American literature" Rosenberg meant cultural criticism, he was, of course, only half right, since Greenberg had been writing about "this painting" for years, although technical criticism, even Greenberg's hybridized version, was precisely *not* what Rosenberg had in mind (and, besides, Greenberg had stopped writing regularly three years before). Hess's book clearly didn't qualify either. But Rosenberg's point is perhaps best illustrated by McBride, the only contributor to the fiftieth anniversary issue of *ARTnews* who mentioned the work to which Rosenberg was alluding in his essay for that issue, which appeared six months before "The American Action Painters." McBride used this opportunity to discuss the critical reception of Dorothy Miller's *Fifteen Americans* exhibition, which had opened at MoMA earlier that spring, noting that he had been "told at the Museum" that the show had not enjoyed a "good press."⁷⁴⁴

⁷⁴³ Ibid., 50.

⁷⁴⁴ Henry McBride, "Half-Century or Whole Cycle?," *ARTnews* 51, no. 4 (August 1952): 125.

Howard Devree, for instance, wrote that, although *Fifteen Americans* told “pretty much the full tale of contemporary art” by including everything from the “sometimes stereoscopic realism” of Herman Rose’s Manhattan rooftops to the “completely nonobjective swirls of Jackson Pollock’s intricacies,” it left something out. What was missing was the work of artists whose approach was “more or less abstract while holding to representational elements,” work that fell between the “traditional” and the “shatteringly attention-getting” or “utterly utter new” (what Devree was looking for, as Bourne had put it, was “the new without the unsettling”). One “extreme” was represented by Pollock, whose *No. 7* (1950) (fig. 4) seemed to be “adaptable to decorative mural use and might—as the artist might freely admit—be cut off at many points or extended indefinitely.” Bradley Walker Tomlin’s “tasteful decorative canvases” were “in similar ease.”⁷⁴⁵ As Greenberg wrote, the all-over or “polyphonic” picture was not just “un-aesthetic” but “anti-aesthetic,” which, as I’ve argued, made this painting “meaningless” within a discourse whose object was aesthetics. Paradoxically disparaging its “utterly utter newness” as *nothing but* aesthetic—i.e. decorative—Devree refused to take this work seriously as *painting*.

McBride not only defended the exhibition but went to bat for the artists whose work had been critiqued, writing that the trouble hinged “on the question of size.” But, he argued,

Tomlin, Pollock and Rothko use size as a weapon, and this is especially the case with Rothko, who unites it to simplicity to suggest the serenities and possibilities in vast regions on earth where people are not. Or, perhaps, he merely looks at us from another planet. Dissenters there are to his right to do this sort of thing... but for my part I conclude that when big sizes and largish styles say something, then big sizes and largish styles are justified.

⁷⁴⁵ Howard Devree, “Diverse Americans; Fifteen in Museum of Modern Art Show—New Work by Nordfeldt and Laurent,” *New York Times*, April 13, 1952, sec. Arts, X9.

And Pollock, Rothko, Tomlin, Still, Lippold, Kiesler and Baziotes, in their various ways, say plenty.⁷⁴⁶

McBride's defense might not have been unwelcome, but his lack of elaboration on what these "big sizes and largish styles" had to say would have done little to satisfy Rosenberg. Greenberg had all but predicted Devree's reaction to this work, of course, but McBride didn't offer anything to counter it and, for Rosenberg, his "support" would have been just as problematic as Devree's critique. The problem, as Rosenberg would point out in "The American Action Painters," was that this work had been greeted by nothing but silence in the critical press.

A change in the order of discourse was necessary for this work to "become articulate" as art. McBride's advocacy contributed nothing to its "articulation" and Devree's critique relegated it to decoration. Had the critics writing for the art press (that is, art critics) had the last word on this work, it would not have become *critically* significant. What was required for this work to "become articulate" was the critical engagement that Rosenberg's censure of "American literature" alluded to. Rosenberg's move to the art press (and Greenberg would make a similar, though less definitive shift over the course of the decade) was simultaneously an acknowledgment that the critical press was neglecting this work and a sign that the art press provided a context within which this could now occur. Although Hess's reading of Rosenberg's text was, in some ways, a misreading, this misreading ultimately made this painting's articulation possible (Hess's role might be compared to the role played by the essay Edmund Wilson wrote for *The Dial* to accompany *The Waste Land*).

⁷⁴⁶ McBride, "Half-Century or Whole Cycle?," 125.

As the art press shrank, art discourse became more diffuse, opening up a space for a new order of discourse to develop. The confluence of art discourse and critical discourse in this rapidly evolving site resulted in or perhaps required critics to take a position on the definition of the artist, shifting the object of art discourse from “aesthetics” to “art.” (As Henri Lefebvre wrote about the production of social space, “[I]nasmuch as abstract space tends towards homogeneity, towards the elimination of existing differences or peculiarities, a new space cannot be born (produced) unless it accentuates differences.”⁷⁴⁷) While the received history of this period positions Greenberg and Rosenberg as opposing figures, I would argue that these poles had to wait until the order of art discourse had shifted. What was required was a shift from an order of discourse in which the polyphonic picture remained “meaningless” to a new order in which this work “meant”—and whose meaning could, therefore, be contested. Before Greenberg and Rosenberg could square off *on the plane of art discourse*, in other words, a confrontation—or at least an encounter—would need to take place between cultural criticism and art criticism. In the early 50s, then, Rosenberg’s position would be opposed not by Greenberg’s, but by that of Hess’s counterpart at the newly renamed *Arts Digest*, Hilton Kramer, who would not only oppose the idea of action painting but would contest Hess’s understanding of and position on “tradition.” Given the contextual shift involved in the publication of Rosenberg’s essay, the site of Kramer’s response should come as no surprise.

⁷⁴⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 52.

The Critical Field

“The American Action Painters” didn’t elicit a letter to the editor, but, rather, a full-length essay published in the critical press, and it is for this reason that I take it to be one of the founding “statements” of the critical art discourse that would emerge within the site that had been occupied by the art press. “The New American Painting,” published in the July-August 1953 issue of *Partisan*, was Kramer’s first contribution to the magazine and would have a galvanizing effect on his writing career (as he later wrote, sounding like Greenberg in the late 30s, the essay was “a ticket to a career that I wasn’t yet certain I wanted”).⁷⁴⁸

Publishing an essay in *ARTnews* didn’t suddenly turn Rosenberg into an “art critic”—meaning that Rosenberg’s text was a far cry from both the technical criticism of the *ARTnews* reviewer and Frankfurter’s “scholarly criticism,” and was, therefore, not quite “legible” to the magazine’s public (which is why Kramer’s rejoinder appeared in the critical press). Indeed, without the “gloss” provided by Hess over the next few years—and Kramer’s subsequent position-taking in the art press—the action painters essay might not have had the impact that it did. By taking a position on Rosenberg’s essay, Kramer not only established a discursive connection between these sites (at an earlier moment, this debate would have taken place within the space of the little magazine) but began to construct the field within which these positions would operate. *Kenyon* had staked out a position within an existing field, but the shift that occurred in art discourse in the mid-50s involved the *formation* of a critical field—that is, the production of a discursive space occupied by differential and relational critical positions.

⁷⁴⁸ Hilton Kramer, quoted in William Grimes, “Hilton Kramer, Art Critic and Champion of Tradition in Culture Wars, Dies at 84,” *The New York Times*, March 28, 2012, A25.

Invoking the Pound/Eliot tradition, Kramer begins his essay in familiar *Partisan* territory: “The problem which American painters face today is roughly similar to that which faced Pound, Eliot, and their contemporaries in poetry forty years ago, with this crucial difference: four decades have removed most of the glittering possibilities without providing anything to take their place.” Kramer, like the *Partisan* editors, could not—or would not—point to an active avant-garde (although he would never have used this term). While Pound et al. had been able to “exploit” the “whole European tradition,” as well as contemporary Europe, it didn’t seem likely, Kramer argued, that this tradition could be used “in a new way” by the contemporary American painter. At the same time, there were very few Americans with whom that painter could “feel his art continuous.”⁷⁴⁹ Kramer clearly didn’t endorse Hess’s idea that “the matrix of pictorial invention” had been “magically transferred to America,” but neither did he believe that “internationalism” was, as Jewell had written, “the most insidious and formidable of the heresies we have to combat.” Rather, he was interested in identifying an American source for contemporary American art even as he recognized a connection to Europe. Less chauvinistic than Jewell and Craven, Kramer championed the work of the American artists who, in his view, had learned the lessons of the School of Paris but were “unintimidated” by their European forbears.

“For this writer,” he declared, “the hero of modern American art is Marsden Hartley.”⁷⁵⁰ Kramer would write in *Art Digest* a few months later that Hartley’s “triumph as a painter” was his synthesis of “the ideas of Cézanne and the modern Europeans” and

⁷⁴⁹ Hilton Kramer, “The New American Painting,” *Partisan Review* XX, no. 4 (August 1953): 421.

⁷⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 422.

“what Ryder represented to him.”⁷⁵¹ It wasn’t just his “willingness to immerse himself in the great styles of his time” that made him impervious to intimidation, however, but his “indifference to the ‘unique’ signature,” which together made him “one of the sturdiest figures in American art.” Like Hess, Kramer was ambivalent about abstraction, and he wrote with approbation that Hartley, having “suffered through” periods of abstraction (albeit “sometimes with notable success”), came to regard it as “a fatal indulgence of the imagination.” What he valued most was Hartley’s insistence that he was interested “only in the problem of painting, of how to make a better painting according to certain laws that are inherent in the making of a good picture—and not at all in private extraversions or introversions of specific individuals.”⁷⁵² Kramer was adamant that “idiosyncrasy” was “in no way the constituent essential for genius” and was unconvinced (as Morris was) that expressionism could produce anything worthwhile.⁷⁵³ There was, he wrote, “too great an expectation for American art,” one that was accompanied by “a furious quest for private styles and personal directions.”⁷⁵⁴ Kramer believed that any advance in painting had to harken back to—and follow upon—the innovations of the School of Paris.

Although he rejected Rosenberg’s argument and was particularly agitated by the “pastlessness” of the action painter—“Mr. Rosenberg is not indifferent to the modern

⁷⁵¹ Hilton Kramer, “Hartley’s Lonely Vigil,” *Art Digest* 28, no. 16 (June 1, 1954): 23. Cf. Greenberg’s “Americans have no longer had to retreat to Ryder... in order to get free of Cézanne and Matisse.” Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1995), 25.

⁷⁵² Kramer, “Hartley’s Lonely Vigil,” 23.

⁷⁵³ In “Art—and the personal life,” an essay he wrote in 1928, Hartley observed: “I can hardly bear the sound of the words ‘expressionism,’ ‘emotionalism,’ ‘personality,’ and such, because they imply the wish to express personal life...” And he added, “Personal art is for me a matter of spiritual indelicacy.” *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

European masters (though he does seem to find modern *American* painting irrelevant to his considerations) but he is unwilling to allow these masters much of a place in a discussion of the new American art”—Kramer could not shake the suspicion that there was something to this work (and perhaps even Rosenberg’s reading of it). A more pressing issue was that some significant “transformations” would need to occur in the art critic for this to be a viable reading: if one “risked” being an art critic as opposed to “a dramatic critic or maybe a biographer or maybe a psychologist or maybe a metaphysician,” Kramer wrote, one risked “being a stranger.”⁷⁵⁵ (This, of course, in response to Rosenberg’s claim that, “The critic who goes on judging in terms of schools, styles, form... is bound to seem a stranger.”⁷⁵⁶) Kramer didn’t just question the accuracy of Rosenberg’s analysis; he disputed its legitimacy *as criticism*. Which raises the question of why he would risk addressing it to begin with: if Rosenberg’s position was so singular (and so completely alien), wouldn’t any response only serve to legitimize it? (As Bourdieu put it, “[P]olemics imply a form of recognition; adversaries whom one would prefer to destroy by ignoring them cannot be combated without consecrating them.”⁷⁵⁷) The problem, Kramer admits, is that Rosenberg was far from alone in his interpretation. “Mr. Rosenberg’s claims would be less disturbing,” he writes, “if there were not so many painters around who give evidence of sharing his point of view. But there are many.”⁷⁵⁸ Kramer’s task, as he understood it, was to defend the status quo by challenging the “definition of the artist” that Rosenberg—on behalf of the “many” artists who shared his views—was attempting to “impose.”

⁷⁵⁵ Kramer, “The New American Painting,” 423.

⁷⁵⁶ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” 23.

⁷⁵⁷ *Field of Cultural Production*, p. 42. This, of course, is one of the reasons why Craven was understood to be “more than a journalist.”

⁷⁵⁸ Kramer, “The New American Painting,” 424.

Kramer might not have grasped much less acknowledged the political (Marxian) terms of Rosenberg's argument, but he recognized, however reluctantly, a connection between the new American painting and the modernist tradition. He writes:

And yet, throughout this movement one finds a certain unity of plastic feeling, if not of achievement. It is a unity which derives from the effort to assimilate the modern European masters, to accommodate them to the local situation, and at the same time to make that assimilation the occasion for a vigorous American art in which a generation, not merely isolated figures, can participate. One can see this in de Kooning's relation to Picasso, as well as in Hofmann's use of Kandinsky; it is here that the reappearance of surrealist motifs fall into place; and it is here also that one can understand, if not admire, the desperate imperative which moves many of the new painters to assert their own identity—to be 'unique' as soon as possible—before they have quite discovered what it is that they are doing.⁷⁵⁹

Opposed to Rosenberg's framework for understanding this "movement," Kramer could not deny the movement itself, and it is for this reason that he had to set the record straight.⁷⁶⁰ Even though he hedged his bets by ending the essay on this equivocal note, Kramer had been careful to establish his verdict on the new American painting at the outset. "[O]nly a short time ago," he writes in the opening paragraphs, "it seemed that this group might become the vital heir to the European fortune, [but] it now seems more likely that it will be another casualty of that perennial depression out of which American painting has not yet been able to bring itself."⁷⁶¹ He was holding out for painting that not only

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid., 427.

⁷⁶⁰ Unlike Jewell and Devree, Kramer did not reject the work of these artists out of hand. "We should not throw the best works of Willem de Kooning and Robert Motherwell, for instance, into the same pot with the authors of all the 'liberated' and 'imaginary' paintings which fill the avant-garde galleries, simply because their dealers do." But, facing even greater obstacles than Hartley because they were not as isolated, the new painters were in worse straits. "Whether the new painters will succeed in creating a new American art or whether it will be only an epilogue to European modernism, will depend on the wisdom they bring to this crisis in the years ahead, and on the resources with which that wisdom can be applied to the canvas." Ibid.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid., 421.

eschewed the private and the personal but was exclusively occupied with the “laws inherent in the making of a good picture.”⁷⁶²

Although the *Partisan* editors had continued to drift to the right politically after the war, they were not about to renounce the Pound/Eliot tradition of modernist literature—which had, of course, provided the foundation for the critical formation shared by Greenberg and Rosenberg. Emerging as a critic two decades after Rosenberg began writing criticism, Kramer managed to reconcile (at least to some degree) the internationalism of the cultural critic and the nationalism of the art critic (or journalist-critic), which would enable him to bring these two discourses into alignment. He straddled the space between the art press and the critical press for a time (he contributed to *Partisan* and published a couple of articles in *Commentary* while writing reviews for *Art Digest*), but the critical field was unavoidably changed by his decision to take a job as associate editor of *Arts Digest* (as it was now called) in the fall of 1954, since his “position” on the definition of the artist introduced *critical* positionality into the space of the magazine.⁷⁶³ This move, along with Rosenberg’s move to *ARTnews*, changed the structure of the field of art discourse by turning it into a relational field (that is, by turning it into an actual *field*). It would be overstating the case to say that Kramer and Hess were “linchpins” in the emergence of art’s

⁷⁶² This might be akin to Greenberg’s “Apollonian art.” As Greenberg put it in 1947, “Modern man has in theory solved the great public and private questions, and the fact that he has not solved them in practice and that actuality has become more problematical than ever in our day ought not prevent, in this country, the development of a bland, large, balanced, Apollonian art in which passion does not fill in the gaps left by the faulty or omitted application of theory but takes off from where the most advanced theory stops, and in which an intense detachment informs all. Only such an art, resting on rationality but without permitting itself to be rationalized, can adequately answer contemporary life, found our sensibilities, and, by containing and vicariously relieving them, remunerate us for those particular and necessary frustrations that ensue from living at the present moment in the history of western civilization.” Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*, 167–68.

⁷⁶³ The magazine’s name changed to *Arts Digest* in July 1954.

critical field, but their engagement with the critical discourse in which Greenberg and Rosenberg had participated played an important role in the discursive shift that took place in the space of the art magazine in the mid-50s.

As critics began to take positions on (or critically construct) the new painting, then, a critical field began to take shape. A map of the nascent field might look something like this: there was a critic who accepted abstraction in general and this painting in particular whose position was social-historical (Rosenberg); there was a critic who accepted abstraction in general and this painting in particular whose position was shifting from social-historical to formalist-historical (Greenberg); there was a critic who was ambivalent about abstraction but accepted this painting whose position was tradition-based (Hess); there was a critic who rejected both abstraction in general and this painting in particular whose position was traditionalist (Kramer). (And, although Morris wasn't writing anymore, there was a critic who accepted abstraction but rejected this painting whose position had shifted from historical to traditional.) Just as Buck's critical positions can be plotted along a continuum from "subjective" to "objective," these critical position-takings can be plotted along a continuum from "traditional" to "historical" with Kramer being the most traditional and Greenberg being the most historical.

With the exception of Rosenberg, each of these critics had developed a theory or framework for understanding the shift from the School of Paris to the New York School. Rosenberg's reading was a Marxian theory of the emergence of this painting, which positioned it in relation to a particular understanding of its social (rather than its art historical) context. Hess, who rejected the principle of the avant-garde and aligned himself

with Rosenberg (and his “pastless” actor), attributed this transition to “magic.”⁷⁶⁴ He understood de Kooning’s innovations not as a progression from the School of Paris but as an “assimilation” of it (“refusing the possibilities of the provincial solution, [de Kooning] takes cognizance of the entire tradition of modern painting”).⁷⁶⁵ In Hess’s “humanist” reading, each artist’s work was distinguished by its “distinct and human individuality—a specific warmth, felt and unique.”⁷⁶⁶ Kramer saw some connections between the Americans and the Europeans but was holding out for an “assimilation” in which a “generation, not merely isolated figures” could participate. I would like to call him a modernist-traditionalist (as oxymoronic as that hyphenation is), owing to the fact that he accepted the Pound/Eliot tradition of modernism. Greenberg’s position was in transition from the social-historical interpretation that he offered for the “decline of Cubism” and the “crisis of the easel picture”—his understanding that Cubism “originated not only from the art that preceded it, but also from a complex of attitudes that embodied the optimism, boldness, and self-confidence of the highest stage of industrial capitalism”—to the formalist narrative that he would lay out in his 1955 essay “‘American-Type’ Painting.” In the late 40s, though, Greenberg had been referring to the actual historical context while Rosenberg had relied on a historical (materialist) theory.

⁷⁶⁴ Hess’s critical framework was grounded in the “traditions of the present.” His book, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*, appeared the year before “The American Action Painters” was published (and it’s unclear when he met Rosenberg), but this phrase might have owed something to Rosenberg’s “tradition-less” proletariat. Hess was not positing a complete break with the past, but he clearly thought of Abstract Expressionism not as the latest—or even the ultimate—but something like the absolute “ism,” which meant it didn’t count as one. Hess, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*, 154.

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

Hiring a critic who had cut his teeth at *Partisan* might have been an unprecedented move for *Arts Digest*, which was well known for its conservatism, but Kramer was clearly not a “*Partisan* critic” in the classic sense of that term.⁷⁶⁷ Moreover, Kramer’s response to Rosenberg’s essay coincided with a change in the magazine’s ownership. In the fall of 1953 Jonathan Marshall became the publisher of the magazine, taking over from the Boswell family, who had owned and edited it since its founding in 1926.⁷⁶⁸ In an announcement that appeared in the September 15, 1955 issue, Marshall noted that he had spent the previous two years “restudying” the magazine’s “whole policy and history.” This study led to the initiation of a number of major changes, including another name change, a new (monthly) publication schedule, and Kramer’s promotion to managing editor after only a year at the magazine. Since it had been “many years” since the magazine had been “primarily a digest of art news and information,” Marshall wrote, the word “digest” would be dropped from the title and the magazine would now be called “*ARTS*.” There would also be a new editorial policy, the aims of which could best be described by the words “*interesting, unbiased and authoritative*.” Marshall didn’t elaborate on his choice of words, but the term “interesting” reappears in his explanation of the modification that would be made to the reviews section: “critics will concentrate on the most interesting exhibitions for discussion

⁷⁶⁷ “Too many honors cannot be accorded,” Peyton Boswell, Jr. wrote in a paean to Royal Cortissoz on the occasion of the latter’s fiftieth anniversary at the Herald Tribune, “and it is sincerely hoped that he will be with us for many years to come, using his mastery of beautiful prose to fight sturdily on in defense of his artistic principles.” This was the kind of critic the magazine had championed from its inception. Peyton Boswell, Jr., “Peyton Boswell Comments,” *Art Digest* 16, no. 2 (October 15, 1941): 3.

⁷⁶⁸ Peyton Boswell sold his interest in The Art News in 1925 and founded The Art Digest the following year. When he died in 1936, his son, Peyton Boswell, Jr., took over as editor. Jonathan Marshall appeared on the masthead in the October 1, 1953 issue. See Dwight and Frankfurter, *Art Parade: Seeing the Past Forty Years Through Art News and the Frick Collection*, 13.

each month.”⁷⁶⁹ Among other things, this decision served to distinguish the magazine’s policy from that of *ARTnews*, which prided itself on its comprehensive coverage.

“Unbiased” was also a carefully chosen descriptor, since the partiality of the *ARTnews* editors had become increasingly evident by the mid-50s (Marshall underscored this point in an editorial published in the following issue: “It is not our function or duty to say ‘this or that trend or school is exclusively valid’”).⁷⁷⁰ Marshall’s announcement, including the claim that the magazine aimed to be authoritative, was intended to position it in relation to *ARTnews*, which had begun to gain prominence because of its support of action painting, and Kramer’s elevation did nothing but reinforce this position-taking.⁷⁷¹

ARTnews and *Art Digest* had coexisted peacefully since the 1920s, offering a more (*Art Digest*) or less (*ARTnews*) conservative technical criticism to more or less the same audience, but as their editors took up opposing positions on action painting (and on the question of how criticism might critically construct its object), the magazines began to occupy different positions within the field that was emerging as a result of this shift. In the

⁷⁶⁹ Jonathan Marshall, “An Announcement from the Publisher,” *Arts Digest* 29, no. 20 (September 15, 1955): 5. Starting with this issue, *ARTS* would publish about half as many reviews as *ARTnews*.

⁷⁷⁰ Jonathan Marshall, “Spectrum: The New ‘Arts,’” *ARTS* 30, no. 1 (October 1955): 7.

⁷⁷¹ Otis Gage, who wrote a column called “The Reflective Eye,” recounted a story in the November 1, 1953 issue about an unidentified New York School painter who ran into the magazine’s critics and asked, “But where does your magazine stand? You have no policy!”—the point being that the magazine “should be for or against the new painting, for or against conservatism.” For Gage, a magazine could reflect “the whole situation” or be “the magazine of a clique” whose writers only retained their jobs because of their adherence to “an established policy.” A magazine like this seemed to “be committed to ‘selling’ a certain kind of art,” becoming a “mutual admiration society” in which those “inside the circle” found “solace,” while everyone else found “only monotony.” See also January 1, 1954 “New Editorial Schedule”: “We will solicit and publish feature-length articles of general interest, from whatever quarter, and will have reviews of the major exhibitions of the year by those critics within whose special competence they fall. In this way, the magazine hopes to function as a living forum of ideas and as an outlet for the most persuasive contemporary art criticism and writing.” Otis Gage, “The Reflective Eye,” *Art Digest* 28, no. 3 (November 1, 1953): 6; “New Editorial Schedule,” *Art Digest* 28, no. 7 (January 1, 1954): 4.

early 50s each magazine began to act, as Rahv had once written, as “a form of criticism”—its position defined “by its selection of manuscripts, by its emphases in criticism, and by the tone it adopts”—albeit in a rather uneven way.

Kramer occupied a position between art discourse and critical discourse (or, perhaps more accurately, his position might be described as trans-discursive), but the recontextualization of cultural criticism within the space of the art press would have an effect on this site—and, therefore, on art discourse. “The American Action Painters” was not representative of the cultural criticism that Rosenberg had published (and continued to publish) elsewhere, as a comparison between this essay and “The Herd of Independent Minds” or “Pathos of the Proletariat” would make clear. But the fact that he was able to publish it in *ARTnews* attests to the fact that something had shifted within this site. While it might have been true that the critical discourse that *Partisan* was engaged in was becoming more mainstream by the mid-50s, it was also the case that art critics (and magazine editors) were beginning to engage in a more critical discourse—a fact that is underscored by Kramer’s hiring and subsequent promotion by *ARTS*, which began to publish more contributors to the little magazines after he was hired. An announcement at the end of Kramer’s first “Month in Review” column noted that, beginning with the next issue, Leo Steinberg, who had been writing for *Partisan* and *Commentary* (and had been added to the masthead as contributing editor that month), and Margaret Breuning would “appear with regular monthly articles on current exhibitions in New York.”⁷⁷² With steps like this, Kramer began to devote more space to contemporary art and to increase the magazine’s

⁷⁷² “Unsigned Statement,” *ARTS* 30, no. 1 (October 1955): 51.

critical rigor. (Steinberg wrote the “Month in Review” until Kramer himself took it over in October 1956.)⁷⁷³

If nothing else, Kramer’s challenge of Rosenberg’s essay broke the “silence of American literature” on the new painting, and the publication, not long after this, of Greenberg’s most programmatic piece of criticism to date hardly seems coincidental. “‘American-Type’ Painting,” published in the spring 1955 issue of *Partisan*, traced the formalist lineage of a “kind of art” that was sometimes called “American-type painting” in London, a term Greenberg used to distinguish it from both “abstract expressionism” and “action painting”—and yet, having stated that the term “abstract expressionism” was “not altogether accurate,” it is this term, not “American-type painting,” that he would use throughout the essay to refer to this work. By co-opting this term without acknowledging having done so, Greenberg moved to marginalize (if not dismiss) “action painting” by limiting it to “but three or four” of the artists covered by the term “abstract expressionism.”⁷⁷⁴

The essay reaffirms Greenberg’s position within the critical field (or establishes it within the emerging field), since, with the exception of a handful of catalog essays, he had written less on contemporary art since he had stopped writing for *The Nation* in 1949 and, more important, this was the first time he had rehearsed this narrative in such explicit detail. The opening lines of the essay not only serve as a defense of abstract painting

⁷⁷³ A comparison of the contributors’ biographies published in *ARTnews* and *Art Digest* from 1954 (when *Art Digest* began to include them) to 1959 reveals two different rosters of names. The writers who published in *ARTS* also contributed to literary journals and little magazines, including *Partisan*, *Encounter*, *Commentary*, *The Nation*, *Kenyon*, *The New Leader*, *The New Republic*, and *Hudson Review*, among others. Although some of the contributors to *ARTnews* also published in these reviews, their bios tended to privilege their creative writing credentials.

⁷⁷⁴ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3*, 217.

(sculpture, Greenberg writes, “is a different question”), but they immediately connect abstraction to “painting’s evolution as a modernist art.” Here, for the first time, Greenberg raises the issue of “expendable conventions,” arguing that painting had more of them than literature (and music had begun isolating and shedding them sooner) and, therefore, the process of discarding them was ongoing in the visual arts. “Tradition,” Greenberg writes, “is not dismantled by the avant-garde for sheer revolutionary effect,” but, rather, “to maintain the level and vitality of art under the steadily changing circumstances of the last hundred years.”⁷⁷⁵

Greenberg begins, however, by stating that, “The latest abstract painting offends many people, among whom are more than a few who accept the abstract in art in principle.”⁷⁷⁶ It’s doubtful that he would have needed to defend abstract painting to *Partisan’s* readers, especially since he and Morris had been writing about it since the magazine’s inception, but I would argue that, once again (this time for a very different reason and in a different way), he was also talking over the heads of the *Partisan* constituency. And once again, he was speaking to critics, only this time his aim was to position himself within a different discursive field (or, rather, within a field that was emerging out of a different “discursive formation”), since he wasn’t just engaging with cultural critics but also with art critics—or with cultural critics who were now becoming art critics. The issue of abstraction’s “acceptance” was far from settled for the editors of the art magazines (although Hess, under Rosenberg’s influence, was certainly coming around by this time), and this essay lays out a rationale for its exigency.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁶ Clement Greenberg, “‘American-Type’ Painting,” *Partisan Review* 42, no. 2 (Spring 1955): 179.

Greenberg returns to the phrase he had used in his review of the Masson show a dozen years before in support of his claim that the Abstract Expressionists had all “started from French painting,” deriving from it their “most vivid notion of an ambitious, major art, and of *the general direction in which it had to go* in their time (emphasis added).” For starters, Gorky had “submitted himself to Miró in order to break free of Picasso.”⁷⁷⁷ Several months later, Kramer rehearsed Greenberg’s reading of Gorky in the first article he published after he was promoted to managing editor:

If any single figure could be said to preside over the abstract painting of the younger generation in America today with the status of a master, it is the late Arshile Gorky... By extending the premises of cubism; by disengaging the components of cubist drawing and color from their immediate attachment to geometrical volumes and releasing them into a deeper, quasi-illusionistic space, in which they could take on new and unexpected forms; by playing off, in fact, this cubist vocabulary against surrealist space and movement of Miró and Matta, Gorky created a style which seemed to open up possibilities for abstract painting.⁷⁷⁸

Although he is clearly in agreement with Greenberg concerning Gorky’s influences and innovations (although, pulling back from Greenberg’s “flat shapes on a melting, indeterminate ground,” he returns Gorky’s forms to a “deeper, quasi-illusionistic space”), Kramer goes on to say about the mural-sized drawing *Summation* (fig. 5), “[I]t serves to remind us of Gorky’s closeness to the old masters, however dilute may be the results. He is like them in his willingness to undertake compositional problems of great magnitude and to work at them with an attention to detail, with a feeling for every area of the surface, which is foreign to so much that passes for painting today.”⁷⁷⁹ Kramer, like Morris, was able to travel

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid., 181–82.

⁷⁷⁸ Hilton Kramer, “Month in Review,” *ARTS* 30, no. 1 (October 1955): 48.

⁷⁷⁹ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3*, 220–21; Kramer, “Month in Review,” October 1955, 48.

a certain distance with Greenberg (as he was with Rosenberg), but, as his need to link Gorky to the old masters demonstrates, he had a different understanding of—and investment in—contemporary painting’s relationship to the past.

Kramer’s acceptance of modernism didn’t stand in the way of his aesthetic conservatism and he had a dim view of artists whose work was not grounded sufficiently in the craft of painting. Hess, I’ve argued, rejected the avant-garde, writing in his review of *Fifteen Americans* that artists like Pollock, Rothko, Lippold and Tomlin could not be called “extremists” (he was quoting Devree), since they “work[ed] with, while drastically changing and reinterpreting tradition.”⁷⁸⁰ Kramer, however, was adamantly opposed to any attempt to “reinterpret”—much less “change”—tradition. He stated this unequivocally in a review of the 1955 Carnegie International, which, he wrote, did exactly what it set out to do, since it provided an accurate picture of what was “going on” in painting:

But ‘what is going on’ is nothing less than the decline of easel painting. This decline transcends stylistic differences; it is manifested as much in those feeble realist and social realist painters, who now gush with sentiment where they used to scream with protest, as it is in those who drip, soak, slash, and otherwise inflict a non-objective image onto a canvas... For the contemporary crisis in painting consists in this: that a living, reciprocal relation with the past no longer obtains, and hence the contemporary artist, cut off from the integrity of his *craft* (by which the past has traditionally been transmitted as a vital force to the present), can only go through the motions of his art without any real *means*—and ultimately, any real hope—of bringing it to fruition.⁷⁸¹

Kramer differed from the traditionalist critics in his acceptance of modernist practices—which, for him, were part of the tradition—but he shared their belief in the need for “a living, reciprocal relation with the past.” As Duncan Phillips put it in one of the last issues

⁷⁸⁰ Thomas Hess, “Where U.S. Extremes Meet,” *ARTnews* 51, no. 2 (April 1952): 66.

⁷⁸¹ Hilton Kramer, “Pittsburgh’s International,” *ARTS* 30, no. 2 (November 1955): 18.

of *Magazine of Art*, “The modern artist must be able to submit his work to the test of being seen in the company of the nineteenth-century Titans.”⁷⁸² Kramer didn’t limit his “Titans” to nineteenth-century artists, but the only chance contemporary artists had of measuring up was through their commitment to the “integrity of their craft.” Painting was not simply rooted in a tradition; painting *was* a tradition.⁷⁸³

Kramer not only believed that there were “certain laws” that were “inherent in the making of a good picture” but that artists were responsible for adhering to and preserving those laws. Reviewing an exhibition of Ben Benn’s work in 1956, he defended the painter’s refusal to give up figuration, praising his “hard-headed craftsmanship” and “authentic painterly sensibility.”⁷⁸⁴ An older painter who had been showing since 1912, Benn was not widely known, but Kramer was convinced that his up-to-date, “modern” easel painting retained the classic virtues of this tradition without denying its historical context. Craftsmanship was crucial because of its relationship to what really counted—the “authority of the paint” or the “authority of the brush.” As a “talent willing to confront the major tasks of easel painting,” Benn was able to construct a narrative image “entirely by means of laying one brushload of paint next to another, one color next to another.”⁷⁸⁵ In spite of his hard-line, take-no-prisoners rhetoric, Kramer stressed the capacity of this painting to carry and evoke emotion. “It is color laid on with the full brush,” he wrote, “and with a touch so

⁷⁸² Phillips, “The Critic–Partisan or Referee?,” 88.

⁷⁸³ Cf. Harold Rosenberg: “Admiring inherited masterpieces in order to saddle contemporaries with the responsibility to equal them is a trick of totalitarians and busybodies.” See Harold Rosenberg, “Community Critics vs. Modern Painting,” *ARTnews* 54, no. 10 (February 1956): 59.

⁷⁸⁴ Hilton Kramer, “Ben Benn,” *Arts Digest* 30, no. 7 (April 1956): 24. Having studied at the National Academy of Design from 1904-08, Benn cultivated his interest in painting in the museums. For Kramer, it was particularly important that “from the beginning it was to the old masters that Benn submitted his talents for instruction.”

⁷⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

exactly felt that each stroke shows a quality of emotion apposite to its role in the composition and yet retains a discrete identity in its clean and limpid particularity.”⁷⁸⁶ In short, Benn’s painting represented the ideal: painterliness in the service of expression (not expressionism).

Inevitably, perhaps, Pollock’s work posed the biggest problem for Kramer. The reason he could tolerate a painting like *Shimmering Substance* (1946) (fig. 6) was because it was still related to the tradition of easel painting: it “remain[ed] a painting rather than a decorative simulacrum of painting.”⁷⁸⁷ The problem with the drip paintings, Kramer explained in a review of Pollock’s 1957 MoMA exhibition, was that the brush never touched the canvas. Gesture didn’t count if the paint hadn’t submitted to the “authority of the brush”—if it involved the whole body rather than just the hand (in which case it represented feeling that wasn’t sublimated). As Kramer put it, the drip “disavowed all connection with the measured unit of feeling which is, after all, the brushstroke’s decisive contribution to easel painting.” In addition, having replaced the hand with the body and jettisoned the scale of easel painting, the drip paintings represented a shocking display of materiality: paint was revealed to be *merely* paint. Pollock was almost redeemed by his 1953 painting *Easter and the Totem* (fig. 7), “a surprising confrontation of the Matissean style which momentarily disarmed the appalling taste which dominates the pictures painted in the last four years of his life.”⁷⁸⁸

That Kramer was able to hold in suspension a deeply conservative traditionalism and an unwavering belief in the modernist experiments of the early twentieth century was,

⁷⁸⁶ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁸⁷ Hilton Kramer, “Month in Review,” *ARTS* 31, no. 5 (February 1957): 47.

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid., 48.

perhaps, a feat in itself. He was caught, initially, between his allegiance to easel painting and his commitment to critical discourse, but as artists continued to question the traditions that Kramer understood to be sacrosanct, he was less inclined to believe that the “possibilities for abstract painting” that Gorky had opened up would lead anywhere. The artists whose work he admired and would continue to defend, Ben Bemm chief among them, did not, in his view, simply imitate Picasso or Matisse but picked up where these artists had left off, offering a continuation of tradition that was also an advance.

Greenberg’s focus on “expendable conventions” and the “dismantling” of tradition in “‘American-Type’ Painting” would certainly have raised Kramer’s eyebrows—if not his hackles. Indeed, the question of “tradition” subtended the critical debate that was emerging in the art magazines in the mid-50s: for Greenberg, tradition was being “dismantled” by the avant-garde; contemporary artists were “changing” or “reinterpreting” it according to Hess; and Kramer supported artists who were intent on preserving it. Pitting his modernist-traditionalist criticism (which, grounded in the “integrity of craft,” ended up being a variant of the aesthetic criticism of the interwar period) against Rosenberg’s critical “stranger” and Greenberg’s “avant-garde” criticism, Kramer converted technical criticism into a *critical* position. Or tried to. In any event, Kramer remained committed to easel painting and to artists who submitted to the “the authority of the brush,” judging their work in terms of its technical proficiency (craftsmanship) and “painterly sensibility.”

While Rosenberg’s reading of action painting had been challenged by a critic writing for the critical press, Greenberg’s formalist narrative would be contested by a critic writing for the art press (attesting, again, to the narrowing gap between these two

discourses). Fairfield Porter fired off an angry letter to the editor of *Partisan* in response to “‘American-Type’ Painting,” complaining that Greenberg was “very ready to tell painters what they may or may not do, without enough understanding of what they have done or are doing.”⁷⁸⁹ In addition to a technical dispute about the meaning of the terms “value” and “*chiaroscuro*,” Porter and Greenberg, who wrote a lengthy response to Porter’s letter, also sparred over the question of figuration. Greenberg insists (rightly) that he couldn’t “remember saying or implying anywhere that the ‘artist today must give up the figure.’”⁷⁹⁰ Although Porter readily admits that “there is such a thing” as “American-Type” painting, he disagrees with Greenberg about its character (it was not necessarily abstract) and its origins. The source of his disagreement remains implicit in this exchange (for Porter, contemporary painting had developed out of a consolidation of Impressionism not Post-Impressionism), but he would elaborate on his critical framework in some of the essays he published in *The Nation* several years later.⁷⁹¹ Porter ends his letter by stating that,

⁷⁸⁹ Fairfield Porter, “Letter to the Editor,” *Partisan Review* 22, no. 4 (Fall 1955): 570.

⁷⁹⁰ Clement Greenberg, “A Reply to Mr. Porter,” *Partisan Review* 42, no. 4 (Fall 1955): 573.

⁷⁹¹ Abstract Expressionism was the direct descendant of Impressionism according to the genealogy Porter constructed for it, and its most important feature was that it was painting that concerned itself with painting. “[T]he New York School that arose after the war,” he wrote, “denied Post-Impressionism. It is closer to Impressionism than to anything else. As the Impressionists passively contemplated nature, so these painters do the same to painting in all its aspects and uses... they make art out of the work, that is, the activity, of painting.” Although he conceded that de Kooning and Gorky were exceptions—“Gorky’s abstraction is Post-Impressionist, while current Action Painting makes an abstraction that comes straight from Impressionism, or relates directly to it”—Porter argued that their contemporaries owed more to Impressionism (and, more particularly, to Vuillard’s consolidation of it) than to Cézanne, who could be considered, without overstatement, Porter’s nemesis. Vuillard was not only the superior painter, but he had succeeded where Cézanne had failed. Rather than “denying the essence of the shimmer by changing it into planes to express solidity,” Porter wrote of Vuillard, he “made of Impressionism something solid and enduring like the art of the museums by unifying the Impressionist shimmer into a single object.” That is, he “did what Cézanne wanted to do.” Vuillard gave form to (and a kind of empirical proof of) painting’s engagement with vision, an integral aspect of Porter’s theory: “Vuillard’s ultimate reality is a form of vision, in terms of paint, plus the implied presence of the artist who sees, realized in a more coherent and orderly shape than was attained by the eye of Monet.” See “Class Content in American Abstract Painting,” in Porter, *Art in Its Own Terms*, 249–57.

“creativity is not advanced by imposed limitations.”⁷⁹² It wasn’t Greenberg’s prohibition of certain kinds of “creativity” that Porter was actually responding to, however, but his attempt to impose the “definition of the artist”—and his assumption, like Ransom’s before him, that anything other than his reading (of “art as art”) didn’t qualify as criticism.

⁷⁹² Porter, “Letter to the Editor,” 573.

Chapter 7

Towards a Construction of the Intelligibility of the Artwork

This chapter will end with a discussion of the “critical art discourse” that began to emerge in the early 60s, which, as I’ve noted, involved a shift in the practice of criticism from a tradition-based aesthetic criticism that was originally developed to address “the classics” to a historical criticism of contemporary art. Central to this practice was the critical construction of its object, a tenet of cultural criticism. But cultural critics focused on a “discussion of a larger scope,” to quote Bourne, rather than a particular discipline. In the 60s art critics began to focus not on the “work itself” (what I called “local judgment” in chapter 4) but on the discipline of art. (I will have more to say about this, but I’m distinguishing between the aesthetic validity of the “particular work of art” that traditionalists argued for and the artistic validity of artworks that belonged to historical categories or mediums—or “categories after the fact” in Judd’s case.) Critics in the 60s considered the relationship of contemporary art to the art of the recent past and compared contemporaneous art practices (or, as Porter put it, they “estimated contemporaries’ importance”). They also sought to determine the “validity” of contemporary artworks rather than judging the works’ conformity with the “standards of the past” or a “strictly aesthetic standard.” Critical judgment was involved in the construction of the artwork’s meaning. I suggested that the critical practices that emerged at this time advanced “a construction of the intelligibility of the artwork of their time” in terms of a critical framework, theory or program. I would add to this that the artwork was understood to have been produced—and to mean—within a specific historical context.

Before I move on to this discussion, I want to circle back to the period before the publication of “‘American-Type’ Painting.” The incipient change in the order of discourse

that I discussed in the previous chapter cannot be attributed entirely to the development of a critical field. There were other contributing factors, one of which was a shift in the composition—and size—of the art public. Greenberg began to comment on this as early as the mid-40s, when he wrote that, “The middle class in this country... is now surging toward culture.”⁷⁹³ Three years later, Greenberg made a more specific (and pointed) comment, writing that the art public, which had formerly been socially and culturally unified, had been “expanded to receive a middle class that becomes less and less willing to abide by the judgment of connoisseurs.” He went on to say:

Too many of those who now have a say in art—critics, journalists, dealers, curators, collectors—would in former times have been excluded from communication with the public by their own sense of inadequacy, if not by the resistance of the cultivated public itself. Today the art public asks expressly not to be made conscious of its own inadequacy. The new social areas that have been opened up for art consumption are able to make their wishes felt through such vessels of expression as *Life*, *Art News*, *Art Digest*, *Harper’s* and *Atlantic Monthly*. The philistinism that feels itself confirmed by this sort of art journalism is, I am afraid, more dangerous to culture than is generally realized.⁷⁹⁴

Culture was threatened once again, but Greenberg no longer looked to socialism to preserve it. (“[R]ight now,” he had written in 1946, “who talks of socialism in America?”⁷⁹⁵) And this time criticism—or, more precisely, art journalism—was implicated. Greenberg (who would stop writing for *The Nation* three months after he wrote this) might have seen his decision to publish his first piece in *ARTnews* the following year (and to contribute to the magazine’s 50th anniversary issue two years later) as a way of combatting the philistinism

⁷⁹³ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*, 57.

⁷⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 288–89.

⁷⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 58 The whole passage reads: “The future of art and literature will brighten in this country only when a new cultural elite appears with enough money and enough consciousness to counterbalance the pressure of the new mass market. The other alternative is socialism, of course—but right now who talks of socialism in America?”

that felt itself “confirmed” by the art journalism published in this magazine. But there’s another possibility that’s worth considering.

Greenberg’s preoccupation with the expansion of the middle class—and its increasing interest in art—in the late 40s and early 50s culminated in a long review of T. S. Eliot’s *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. (The two parts of “The Plight of Our Culture,” which was published in 1953 in *Commentary*, were subtitled “Industrialism and Class Mobility” and “Work and Leisure Under Industrialism.”) Arguing vigorously against what he referred to as the “ideologues of tradition,” Greenberg rejected the “confidence” with which Eliot declared the wholesale “decline of culture.” “Obviously,” he writes, “much has to be investigated and weighed before one can assert with *any* confidence that every present aspect of culture... bears evidence of a decline of cultural standards.” Decline might predominate in “most of the arts, in standards of taste, in some departments of learning, and many aspects of manners,” but Greenberg doubted whether this claim could be made about *all* the arts, *all* areas of taste, etc.⁷⁹⁶ For him, the “big question” was whether class divisions would “continue to be as necessary to high culture as in the past.”⁷⁹⁷

Five years before the publication of this review, Greenberg had attributed the rise of cubism to “a complex of attitudes that embodied the optimism, boldness, and self-confidence of the highest stage of industrial capitalism.”⁷⁹⁸ Now, he would go so far as to say that Eliot’s failure to “give more than a passing glance” to industrialism had prevented his discussion of modern culture from advancing “beyond the point at which Spengler left it.” Industrialism wasn’t going anywhere: humanity was as unlikely to “forget industrial

⁷⁹⁶ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3*, 128–29.

⁷⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 129–30.

⁷⁹⁸ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*, 213.

technology,” Greenberg argued, as it had been to forget the use of metal tools or the wheel. Not only had technological progress proven to be “irreversible” but there had been a “cumulative gain in our control of the material element.” The fact that industrialism was here to stay “in one form or another” was, therefore, the “largest single circumstance to be taken into account in any discussion of the future prospects of culture.”⁷⁹⁹

And if industrialism was destined to effect more “radical and comprehensive” changes in culture and civilization than any that had occurred since the Neolithic revolution, many “premises based on observation of the relatively recent past” had to be discarded. “Many of the conditions under which a flourishing culture again becomes possible,” Greenberg writes, “will therefore be different from those that made one possible in the past.” Instead of speculating “so exclusively” on the basis of past precedent, it made more sense to “examine more closely the situation of culture here and now, and try to ascertain its inherent tendencies and drift, to see what in the situation is so new that it cannot be understood in terms of anything we know from the past.” Underlying Eliot’s argument was the implied belief that “successful novelty” in the social and political structures that supported culture was impossible and, therefore, “as culture developed in the past, so must it in the future.”⁸⁰⁰ (Of course, Eliot had been a proponent of the “simultaneous order” of tradition for 30 years by the time he published *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*.) Greenberg was not only arguing for culture’s historical contextualization, he was also convinced that industrialism wasn’t standing in the way of its “future prospects.”

⁷⁹⁹ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3*, 130–31.

⁸⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 131–132; 129.

Adding a third term to the binary that he had identified in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Greenberg argued that culture was now “stratified on three main levels”—mass, or “lowbrow,” culture; “middlebrow” culture; and high or “highbrow” culture—although this stratification didn’t coincide as neatly as it had before with class lines, since the majority of the rich had “become definitely middlebrow, with only a small minority directly supporting highbrow culture.” The “revolutionary cultural phenomenon” of the recent past was not the spread of lowbrow culture, but, rather, the rapid expansion and diversification of middlebrow culture. Greenberg attributes this to the existence, for the first time, of “a middle class large enough to amount to a *mass*, if not a majority.” And this mass was in a material position—“thanks to industrial prosperity”—to aspire to the “kind of culture that used to be the exclusive prerogative of a small minority.”⁸⁰¹

The problem was the rapidity and scale of the growth of the middle class. Every generation since the Civil War had brought newcomers to the “social surface” and each new mass acted as a “drag,” culturally, on its predecessors. The traditional structure of culture had been able to assimilate these newcomers “as long as they arrived in limited numbers and at sufficient intervals,” but could not maintain itself once they started to come in “such steady and huge throngs.” Lowbrow culture was available to those for whom high culture was “too much of an effort.” But the new middle classes, “armed with their new wealth, their optimism, and their political power,” were now in a position to demand that “high culture be delivered to them by a compromise,” which had led to the emergence of middlebrow culture. The liberal and fine arts had been “democratized”—that is, “simplified, streamlined, purged of whatever cannot be made easily accessible, and this in

⁸⁰¹ Ibid., 132-34.

large measure by the same rationalizing, ‘processing,’ and ‘packaging’ methods by which industrialism has already made lowbrow culture a distinctive product of itself.”⁸⁰²

Because of the way it was produced, consumed and transmitted, middlebrow culture reinforced standardization and functioned “as order and organization but without ordering and organizing.” “In principle,” Greenberg writes, “it cannot master and preserve fresh experience or express and form that which has not already been expressed and formed. Thus it fails, like lowbrow culture, to accomplish what is, perhaps, the most important task of culture for people who live in a changing, *historical* society: it cannot maintain continuity in the face of novelty. But must always forget and replace its own products.” If middlebrow culture functioned in the same way as lowbrow culture, however, high culture would seem to be under a double threat. This is where the argument takes an unexpected turn. “But,” Greenberg writes, “I said ‘in principle.’” In a nutshell, middlebrow culture had some redeeming qualities: “some sort of enlightenment” was afforded by it and “certain avenues of taste” might even be opened up by it.⁸⁰³ The middle ground that it occupied meant that middlebrow culture could not be written off as easily as kitsch (which, Greenberg had admitted in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” was also not *all* bad).

In addition, things had changed for the avant-garde, the most important being that the bourgeois public “through the medium of middlebrow culture” had begun to make “conciliatory” gestures toward it. And a culture whose “main point” was anti-philistinism would receive less benefit (and, correspondingly, would have “less meaning”) the more ashamed philistinism became of itself. The avant-garde would have to “acquire a new

⁸⁰² Ibid., 135–36.

⁸⁰³ Ibid., 137.

content for itself” or it would degenerate into Alexandrianism—an eventuality that, “at this moment,” Greenberg did not find “so remote.” The cultural landscape had clearly changed. But, if, as Greenberg maintained, “the cultivated minority among the rich” seemed to “shrink steadily in proportionate numbers” (or, as he corrects himself, “their culture itself seems to shrink”), where did that leave (high) culture?⁸⁰⁴

Greenberg answers this question with a question: “[C]an it not be hoped that middlebrow culture will in the course of time be able to transcend itself and rise to the level where it will be no longer middlebrow, but high culture?” This hope assumed “that the new urban middle classes in America will consolidate and increase their present social and material advantages and, in the process, achieve enough cultivation to support, spontaneously, a much higher level of culture than now.”⁸⁰⁵ This is Greenberg at his most sanguine not only about industrialism but about the middle class (the essay is also Greenberg at his most sociological). What he was hoping for was that the majority would morph into a new, expanded minority (which would, of course, collapse this distinction) and middlebrow culture would disappear altogether by morphing into high culture. This would turn the middle class into something like a cultivated majority. In less than two years, however, Greenberg would publish “‘American-Type’ Painting,” which hints at none of this.

In my view, Greenberg’s argument in “The Plight of Our Culture” was driven by his fear that the cultivated minority was in imminent danger of disappearing or that “their

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid., 138–39.

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid., 140.

culture” would do more than *seem* to shrink.⁸⁰⁶ There was little to be done about the cultivated minority’s support for culture, but the “new urban middle classes” would not be able to rely on art journalism to achieve the cultivation needed to support a higher level of culture. This might not have been what motivated Greenberg to begin contributing to the art magazines, but he clearly understood that there was a new audience for art—and that that audience wasn’t reading *Partisan Review* or even *The Nation*.

In the end, of course, Greenberg remained committed to high culture, and as he lost sight of the “new urban middle classes” and middlebrow culture, he lost sight of the social and historical context that had produced them. One of the questions with which this essay leaves us is this: if avant-garde culture was *itself* under threat of Alexandrianism, how was it possible to produce “art and literature of a high order” now (i.e. in the period before middlebrow culture “transcended itself”)? Greenberg pulls back from declaring the demise of the avant-garde—if it was not “so remote,” Alexandrianism wasn’t yet too close—but the binary that was so clearly delineated in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” no longer existed (and, by the 60s, he would no longer use the term “avant-garde” to designate “art and literature of a high order.”) Abstract art’s “validity” had been necessary to keep (avant-garde) culture moving in 1939; now its validity would become an end in itself as Greenberg began to speak not of industrialism and culture but of art’s “modernization” and painting’s “expendable conventions.”

⁸⁰⁶ I think it was also driven by its polemic: I don’t think Greenberg was being disingenuous, but his optimism might owe something to his resistance to Eliot’s position.

Professionalization

Whereas producers produced for other producers in the little magazines (these producers were, increasingly, critics rather than writers and poets as Jarrell pointed out in 1952), the large-circulation monthlies and weekly news magazines were commercial publications that produced for the general public. As Frankfurter observed in 1950, these publications (*Life*, *Look*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Ladies' Home Journal*) had lately been “flourishing on a rich diet of material on thinking subjects.”⁸⁰⁷ Art was among these “thinking subjects” and it’s possible that the art magazines’ shift from “news” to “criticism” was spurred, in part, by their need to differentiate their coverage. Greenberg had included both *Life* and *ARTnews* on his list of publications that published the “art journalism” that “confirmed” the public’s philistinism in 1949, but the “journalism” published in the commercial press was different from the kind that was published by journalist-critics, since it consisted primarily of artist profiles. (*ARTnews*, which launched a series of pictorials of artists at work in 1949, tried to have it both ways by competing with these publications.)

The middle class would not move in the direction that Greenberg had hoped it would—or, rather, its movement in that direction didn’t produce the outcome he was looking for. As Lane Relyea writes,

It was in the ‘50s that the definitively ‘modern’ question of art’s audience gained new qualifications and a new tone, due in large part to the growing awareness of what Dwight Macdonald termed ‘midcult,’ a mass-marketed, ‘middlebrow’ culture that both spurred and exploited an interest in high art among members of an expanding middle class. The fear was often expressed that although advanced art was no longer being ignored, the new

⁸⁰⁷ Frankfurter, “Vernissage,” February 1950, 15.

audience it enjoyed was appropriating it according to terms set by such marketing efforts rather than by the art itself.⁸⁰⁸

Instead of “transcending itself,” middlebrow culture seemed to be setting the terms for the consumption of high art—a different way of having “high culture delivered to [the middle classes] by a compromise” (which might, ultimately, have been the tipping point for Greenberg). On the other hand, the mass marketing of advanced art prompted a backlash from what Rosenberg would refer to as “Community Critics,” who believed that art must “communicate” with the public. The middle class might have been “surging” toward culture, but, as Greenberg noted in 1962, “Abstract art was under renewed attack in the early 50s” (this is what prompted the comment about the latest abstract painting “offending” many people in the opening paragraph of “‘American-Type’ Painting”).⁸⁰⁹ As I’ve noted, the editors of the two leading art magazines were themselves ambivalent about abstract art at the time. In the mid-50s Rosenberg published a pair of articles in *ARTnews*, the first of which confronted what he called the New American Conservatism.

In this article Rosenberg took on “Community Critics,” a category that included a range of what might be called “concerned citizens,” from “the buffoons of city censorship councils” to Huntington Hartford—the heir to the A&P fortune who had taken out a full page ad in several newspapers to publish a screed denouncing the “current dehumanization

⁸⁰⁸ Lane Brad Relyea, “Model Citizens and Perfect Strangers: American Painting and Its Different Modes of Address, 1958-1965” (Ph.D., The University of Texas at Austin, 2004), 11, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.uh.edu/pqdtglobal/docview/305128251/abstract/B1CA77B92FF64BC3PQ/1?accountid=7107>.

⁸⁰⁹ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4*, 137.

of the arts”—as well as initiates like the critic Selden Rodman.⁸¹⁰ The issue, for Rosenberg, was the anti-modernist, purportedly “humanist” attack on “formalistic” art’s lack of “significant content” and its “snobbish refusal to communicate with the people.”⁸¹¹ Claiming that he wasn’t taking sides in the “Abstract vs. Realist art” debate, Rosenberg focused on the mythic “universal audience” that the Community Critics had constructed for contemporary art: “the ‘layman,’ who for this occasion has been outfitted free of charge with suitable tastes and emotions.”⁸¹² Whether it came from the left or the right, Rosenberg argued, this attack on “modern extremist art” was always propounded on behalf of The Community.

Hartford’s rant, “The Public Be Damned?,” had two principal targets: abstraction and the criticism that validated it. “It is quite impossible for me to believe,” he wrote, “that there can be any genuine artistry, any real truth, any individuality, yes, any self-expression—unless the artist is willing to accept the fact that a world which is reasonably recognizable to the public must be the basis of all his work.” If the world was not recognizable—if, as the critic Herbert Read argued, “the modern work of art is a symbol” and “the symbol, by its nature, is only intelligible to the initiated”—did that mean, Hartford asked, that people were “incapable of appreciating great art without professional assistance?”⁸¹³ (In the late 20s, Riding and Graves had referred to the literary critic as the “intermediary stage” between the modernist poet and the “plain reader” in a bid, perhaps, to avoid the hierarchical

⁸¹⁰ Hartford might have been referring to Ortega y Gasset’s essay “The Dehumanization of Art.” See José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968).

⁸¹¹ Harold Rosenberg, “Community Critics vs. Modern Painting,” *ARTnews* 54, no. 10 (February 1956): 33.

⁸¹² *Ibid.*

⁸¹³ Huntington Hartford, “The Public Be Damned?,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 1955, 13.

implications of this reader's need for "assistance.") Rosenberg didn't respond to Hartford's charge (he wasn't responding specifically to him in any case) but instead addressed the presumption that artistic content should or even could be dictated: "The various currents of Community Criticism converge in misleading the public into believing that an artist has a free choice as to what the true content of his painting shall be."⁸¹⁴ This argument derives from his understanding of the relationship between the experience and the consciousness of the hypothetical proletariat. Once again, Rosenberg found himself trying to dispel the apparently unshakable myth of the universal audience to which the artist was responsible, which had been cultivated by the left in the 30s and was now resurfacing on the right.

In "Everyman a Professional," which was published in November 1956, Rosenberg didn't imply that the intellectual had capitulated (it wasn't a matter of "treason"), but, rather, that the "modern" intellectual had "no myth that he shares with the community at large."⁸¹⁵ His was a world not "of the imagination, nor of society, nor of physical objects," but a world of "ways and means." (Rosenberg was contrasting the erstwhile social role of the "intellectual" with the "Community Critic's" claim to be speaking on behalf of the public.) Having rejected the "universal audience" illusion, Rosenberg argues in this essay

⁸¹⁴ Rosenberg, "Community Critics vs. Modern Painting," 59.

⁸¹⁵ Harold Rosenberg, "Everyman a Professional," *ARTnews* 55, no. 7, Part 1 (November 1956): 27. He might not have focused on the intellectuals' complicity in this essay, but in an article published in the little magazine *Midstream* the following year (nearly ten years after "Herd of Independent Minds"), Rosenberg complained about the careerism of "modern Left intellectuals," arguing that the younger generation was less concerned with social criticism than "with the imminent rewards of banding together." Given the increasing conformity of literary intellectuals, Rosenberg concluded that it was artists not the "literary element" who were the true successors to the revolutionary intellectuals of the 30s. "Young painters and sculptors," he wrote, "share a mood quite different from that of the paterfamilias of the universities, the quarterlies and the editorial offices; they neither look nor feel dull nor are they excessively 'mature.' It may be that many of them neglected to go to college or to look for signals to *The Partisan* or *Hudson Review*." Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 257; see also Irving Howe, "This Age of Conformity," *Partisan Review* XXI, no. 1 (February 1954): 7-33.

that there's no such thing as an "uncultivated mass," since the "public is not a single entity of high or low intelligence but the sum of unnumbered groupings, each with its own mental focus." In the event, everyone was already a member of some audience and "in the sense that they are literate, selective and self-conscious in their tastes, all audiences are audiences of intellectuals." What was new about the situation of the fine arts in the twentieth century was that, "no one is sure who the art audience is"—a fact that was attributable, in part, to the "transformation of the whole populace into professionals and semi-professionals," since the middle class was not only expanding, it was also professionalizing.⁸¹⁶

Professionalization meant that each profession's work was "conducted as a ritual demonstration of its inner laws," meaning that each *métier* was "moved to detach itself from the social will and to ignore every other form of thought except as it can absorb it into its own technical procedures." In the absence of a "shared myth" there was "no social body" to talk to outside each profession and, "apart from the forms in which the thought of the profession is embodied," there was "nothing to say." This resulted not only in the Balkanization of the professions but in the fragmentation of each individual profession. "The ritualization of the professions," wrote Rosenberg, "causes each to lead a double life: pure and applied, theoretical and practical, for 'its own sake' versus social utility."⁸¹⁷ Their pursuits ranged along a continuum from pure to applied or theoretical to practical, art professionals didn't constitute a fixed—much less cohesive—community, but an array of smaller groupings.

⁸¹⁶ Rosenberg, "Everyman a Professional," 26-27.

⁸¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 65; 27.

The professionalization of the arts (unlike the sciences, which had no need, much less an obligation, to remain accessible to the broader public or “community”) seemed to contain an inherent contradiction: while *professional* recognition resulted in detachment from the social will, *cultural* recognition required communication with the public, at least according to the Community Critics. As Rosenberg put it, “One of the effects of the ‘universal audience’ illusion is that while esoteric language is taken for granted in the sciences and in newer modes of study, its use in the arts is treated as if we were still in an age where all craftsmen bent silently over their tools.” Professionalization itself turned on the issue of language: “The essential mark of a profession is its evolution of a unique language or jargon in which its methods, purposes and relations to other arts and sciences are formulated. The more incomprehensible this lingo is to outsiders, the more thoroughly it identifies the profession as such and elevates it out of the reach of mere amateurs and craftsmen.”⁸¹⁸ This situation coincided with Jarrell’s lament of a few years earlier, or, as another writer put it, “One gets an uneasy feeling that some of these little magazine critics like a particular poem for the very difficulty it presents to the layman. In our broken world such a solitary or isolated pursuit of technical literary efficiency has come to resemble more and more a special kind of division of labor.”⁸¹⁹

Rather than an encounter between the artist and his or her materials in the struggle for self-discovery or self-creation, the artist focused on the medium’s inner laws encountered a different kind of struggle—a professional one. (The “dialectics of Hofmann’s morality,” Rosenberg would write the following year, derived from his “conflict against the

⁸¹⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁸¹⁹ Paul Bixler, “Little Magazine, What Now?,” *The Antioch Review* 50, no. 1/2 (Winter-Spring 1992): 84, doi:10.2307/4612493.

given,” his “struggle for the ‘creative’ as the sole reality,” which Rosenberg saw as the only way for the artist to thwart his ideological location and identification in the “world of ways and means.”⁸²⁰) Dialectical struggle—synonymous with the *work* in Rosenberg’s view—was now a function of the relationship *between artworks*. Art’s “status” (as a profession and in terms of its prestige) depended less on the kind of “vanguardism” that Rosenberg had written about in “The American Action Painters” than on paradigmatic conformity with—or as—professional practice: “It is the pushing forward of this development, rather than any reference to external social or historical progress, that is properly meant by the word ‘vanguard’ in art. Upon its demonstrations depends the status of the profession vis-à-vis the rest.”⁸²¹

Rosenberg recognized, however reluctantly, the necessity of art’s autonomy, since art in the service of anything, including (or perhaps especially) society, was always already instrumentalized. Because all the professions “save one” would be compelled to become “totally applied and ‘practical’” under totalitarianism—“no more ‘formalist’ art, no more theoretical science or education for education’s sake”—the preservation of the “separate nihilisms” of the professions ironically became “a condition for maintaining liberty.”⁸²² At the same time, because it’s impossible to construct a diachronic framework for art (or anything for that matter) without predicting where it’s going, the use of such a framework makes it impossible, *by definition*, not to engage in its (critical) instrumentalization. To understand changes in art as a trajectory narrows the discussion to a particular kind of change (in the absence of which change is just change). It goes without saying that the critic

⁸²⁰ Harold Rosenberg, “Hans Hofmann: Nature into Action,” *ARTnews* 56, no. 3 (May 1957): 56.

⁸²¹ Rosenberg, “Everyman a Professional,” 65.

⁸²² *Ibid.*, 66.

also decides the relative value of specific changes within that framework. In its most totalizing form, a diachronic framework is teleological; at the very least, it's functionalistic. Art, too, or at least its development, had to remain a "hypothesis" in order to separate it, like the proletariat, from a plan for it.

It's unclear whether Rosenberg wrote "Everyman a Professional" in response to "American-Type' Painting," but he's describing Greenberg's progressive narrative—and Greenberg—when he argues that, "Demonstrating the laws of his medium, the work of the vanguardist has the look of arbitrariness and inutility; its only definition is through its effects upon other practitioners, particularly when it arouses them to opposition. With regard to it, criticism becomes in essence polemical and has little to do with 'appreciation'; the critic either approves of or opposes the direction in which the work is pulling the profession."⁸²³ Part sociological report and part cautionary tale, "Everyman a Professional" offers no clues as to how or whether it might be possible to resist the professionalization that it describes, but instrumentalization was the threat contained in the progressive narrative that Greenberg had begun to theorize.

If anything, Rosenberg was more anxious about the "intercessors"—the "journalistic, institutional, critical and agitational middlemen" who "delivered" modern painting to the public "in the package of new design and better living"—than he was about professional critics, but the modern painter was clearly caught between the "vanguardist critic" who didn't "appreciate" and the "intercessor," who brought "to mankind the physical products of an invention and technology that it does not understand."⁸²⁴ As Rosenberg (and Hess)

⁸²³ Ibid.

⁸²⁴ Ibid.

understood it, the function of the art magazine as it was evolving in the mid-50s was to challenge—or displace—the “middlemen” (both the intercessors and the “middlemen intellectual journals”).

But if no one knew who the art audience was, we might ask who the audience for Rosenberg’s criticism was at this juncture. The “universal audience” myth, Rosenberg argued, was a political tool, since “one who speaks on behalf of the Public is trying to recruit one from existing publics.”⁸²⁵ Rosenberg might not have been trying to “recruit” a public in (or for) these essays, but there’s no question that they had begun to construct a different public for the art magazine. As I argued, Rosenberg’s mode of address differed in the essays that he was publishing in *ARTnews*: he wasn’t addressing the “universal audience” but he was no longer addressing the “band of comprehenders” (to borrow Bourne’s term) that made up the audience of the little magazine. Rosenberg had left *Partisan* in protest, convinced that the magazine had forgone its oppositional position (had in fact capitulated), but, publishing in the art press, he began to address (and to produce) the professionalized—or professionalizing—audience that he describes in “Everyman a Professional.” And this would contribute to the change that this site would undergo over the next decade.

Reviewers as Critics

Greenberg and Rosenberg were both concerned about the art public in the mid-50s, and they were clearly considering the proper critical response to the shift that was occurring. If Rosenberg took criticism as a profession—and it is not clear that he did—its

⁸²⁵ Ibid., 26.

professionalization was yet to come; clearly he was not talking about the critics who were writing regularly for the art magazines at the time. But a critical field was beginning to take shape as Kramer assumed the position of managing editor at *ARTS* and Hess began to forge an identity for *ARTnews*. Because fewer reviews now appeared in the large-circulation newspapers and the majority of the feature articles published in these magazines still dealt with historical topics (both published profiles of contemporary artists and *ARTnews* would begin to shift its focus by 1957), criticism of contemporary art was sometimes limited to their reviews sections, which began to take on more importance in the 50s for this reason.⁸²⁶ Whereas *ARTS* preserved the tradition of technical criticism that had been the hallmark of the art press (although Kramer promoted a less overwritten prose style), *ARTnews* adopted—and poetically adapted—the impressionism of writers like McBride. The “kernels of opinion” included in the box score during the 40s had exhibited a stylistic and rhetorical uniformity, but by the mid-50s, as their editors developed radically different views on the meaning of the term “criticism,” there was a growing disparity between both the form and the content of the reviews published in *ARTS* and *ARTnews*. By the end of the decade, some of the *ARTS* critics would expand on Kramer’s conception of technical criticism, narrowing the gap between the “reviewer” and the “critic” by turning the review into a critical vehicle, not by turning technical criticism into a critical

⁸²⁶ The focus on contemporary topics in the Summer 1957 issue of *ARTnews*, which included articles on contemporary culture and the avant-garde by Stuart Davis and Meyer Schapiro, respectively, in addition to Duchamp’s “The Creative Act,” Greenberg’s “New York painting only yesterday,” and de Kooning’s profile of Ad Reinhardt, “Pure Paints a Picture,” was anomalous. The magazine usually featured at least one profile and sometimes one or two features on contemporary art. By the end of the decade, the balance between historical and contemporary topics was beginning to even out. At *ARTS*, Martica Sawin published a series of profiles on contemporary artists before she left to become a contributing editor at *Art International* in 1959. Kramer wrote more frequently on contemporary topics than any other contributor until he turned the Month in Review column over to Tillim in December 1960.

position, as Kramer sought to do, but by incorporating positionality into the reviews themselves.

ARTnews

ARTnews, with Hess in the lead, was responsible for turning Rosenberg's reading of the new painting into something like a critical method. Judging "good from bad" was the key to technical criticism, but judgment was precisely what got elided in Rosenberg's essay. How, then, did Rosenberg's reading become employable by (or even relevant to) the critics who were writing in the back of the magazine? In some ways the "encounter" between cultural criticism and technical criticism in this magazine was more like a near miss. There had always been a split between the front and the back of the magazine, since "scholarly critics" wrote the feature articles and reviews were written by technical critics, but this split became more pronounced when Hess hired three of the New York School poets—Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler and John Ashbery—as reviewers in the mid-50s. Like Porter's, their criticism was impressionistic, but they tended to focus less on the mechanics of painting than on evocative writing or poetic analogy, to use Porter's term. Hess would champion the *belles-lettres* of these poet-critics (and others hired subsequently, like Parker Tyler) while pushing his own editorial agenda.

O'Hara left the Museum of Modern Art in 1953 to become an editorial associate, returning to MoMA at the end of 1955 to join its International Program as special assistant (he later helped organize the 1959 exhibition *The New American Painting*). The most knowledgeable of the three about modern art in general and contemporary art in particular (and arguably the best of the poet-critics), O'Hara often moved beyond impressionism into

the realm of judgment but, like Porter, he shied away from the issue of relative quality. He was more attentive to the contemporary context than the other poets: “The abstractions in [Robert Cowan’s] first one-man show represent his effort to “make the picture” in the New York School sense. Though not large in size, they have a large scale, juxtaposing dynamic values, altering them by linear definitions of masses and by independent linear introductions, in what seems to be the pursuit of absolute forms through current methods.”⁸²⁷ Even at his most impressionistic, he remained conscious of art historical precedents and connections (although this combination didn’t always lead to the most incisive observations): “Thus they relate more to the Futurists than to the Cubists,” he wrote in February 1955, “though their impulse is toward stasis rather than motion. They have an intimacy not often found in this style, as if flat rectangles and triangles of clear color were drifting like birds through an interior, or as if a doorway were viewed through corrugated glass.”⁸²⁸

Schuyler began reviewing shows the month O’Hara left the magazine and was added to the masthead as editorial associate in April 1956. Judging from his early reviews, he had had little experience writing about the visual arts. While the “parallel creation” of Porter’s short review was intended to be an analogy for “what was there,” Schuyler used poetic language to convey what the work evoked: “Philip Shumaker shows big marines in the grand style: the rocks are biting the sea and the sea is screaming and lashing back; one apocalyptic ray (or rather, spotlight) pierces the transpicuous gloom.”⁸²⁹ Poetic allusion wasn’t intended to compensate for a lack of precision (much less critical judgment); it was

⁸²⁷ Frank O’Hara, “Robert Cowan,” *ARTnews* 54, no. 7 (November 1955): 65–66.

⁸²⁸ Frank O’Hara, “Simpson-Middleman,” *ARTnews* 53, no. 10 (February 1955): 64–65.

⁸²⁹ James Schuyler, “Philip Shumaker,” *ARTnews* 55, no. 1 (March 1956): 55.

Schuyler's objective. His imagery was often mixed with a discussion of the formal aspects of a painting, which tended to result in passages like the following: "Harsh brushwork gives surfaces an atmospheric unity, many of the colors in [Rosalie Weingarten's] palette are those of roses; flatness and roundness make interest: in a still-life the painting of the lit sides of spherical pitchers describes volume while the flatness of a blue and white milk jug puts it absolutely in place, like a person standing still while the wind sways all other things."⁸³⁰

Ashbery, whose critical style was similar to O'Hara's, started writing in October 1957 and was added to the masthead as editorial associate in December of that year. He wrote for a shorter period than Schuyler, but his reviews were more straightforward and, in spite of their impressionistic character, exhibited a critical authority that Schuyler's lacked. His poetic sensibility was tempered by a more journalistic style. As David Bergman put it, "Like any good journalist, he wrote not as an expert but as an informed observer, and for a general audience interested in finding out what was worth seeing, and uninterested in esoteric squabbles over theory, practice and methodology. His role—as he conceived it—was to inform and explain rather than to propound and protest."⁸³¹

In the fall of 1957, Randall Jarrell inaugurated a "new series of modern poetry on art." Various called "poets on pictures" or "poets on painting," this series included poems by O'Hara and Ashbery, as well as Parker Tyler and Howard Griffin, who were also (or in the latter case had been) contributing editors, in addition to a roster of other well-known poets, among them Rosenberg, Kenneth Koch, Marianne Moore, and Dylan Thomas. A number of others—e.g. William Carlos Williams, Stanley Kunitz, Georges Duthuit, and

⁸³⁰ James Schuyler, "Rosalie Weingarten," *ARTnews* 54, no. 9 (January 1956): 67.

⁸³¹ David Bergman, "Introduction," *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1957-1987* (New York: Knopf, 1989), xii.

Nicholas Calas—published poems that weren't part of the series. The practice of excerpting short, descriptive passages from the reviews to caption the reproductions that accompanied them undoubtedly contributed to the magazine's growing reputation for *belles-lettres*: De Kooning's *Two Women in the Country* was captioned with Fairfield Porter's phrase "like a garden of tulips"; Jan Muller's *Bacchanalia* was "shuddering on the brink of thunder" according to Lawrence Campbell; and Parker Tyler wrote about the "fugitive mood and restless, rhythmic forms" of Theodore Stamos's *Kaaba I*.⁸³²

While the *ARTnews* reviewers were trying to render their impressions of contemporary painting (which is what they tended to focus on), Hess was busy defending the artists about whom they were waxing poetic (namely, second-generation Abstract Expressionists). In article after article published over the course of the next few years Hess argued that these were the artists "whose help the museum is 'responsible' for."⁸³³ In the late 50s, as artists and critics began to insist that Abstract Expressionism was moribund, he dug in his heels. "Abstract-Expressionism has died!" is the cheery cry from an increasing number of commentators," he wrote in 1957, but, refusing to concede this point, he steadfastly rejected the claim that "the situation of 1950-55 *should* have changed as drastically as it did in 1945-50. And by not changing, has stopped living." Instead, as Hess put it, "the future... has become actuality."⁸³⁴ Hess's advocacy of the artists he supported, which was laudable on its face, had become increasingly programmatic by the late 50s,

⁸³² Fairfield Porter, "Willem de Kooning," *ARTnews* 54, no. 7 (November 1955): 49; Lawrence Campbell, "Jan Muller," *ARTnews* 54, no. 10 (February 1956): 51; Parker Tyler, "Theodoros Stamos," *ARTnews* 54, no. 9 (January 1956): 51.

⁸³³ Thomas Hess, "Great Expectations Part I," *ARTnews* 55, no. 4 (Summer 1956): 36.

⁸³⁴ Thomas Hess, "Younger Artists and the Unforgivable Crime," *ARTnews* 56, no. 2 (April 1957): 46-47.

turning *ARTnews* into a kind of bully pulpit. Adopting Rosenberg's critical language, Hess construed it differently, consolidating a critical identity for the magazine based on a manifestly undialectical construction of Rosenberg's theoretical principles.

For Hess, a wholesale change, or indeed any change at all, was not only unnecessary, it was logically inconsistent. If the creative act involved a unique, individual gesture, there need not—in fact could not—be any kind of rejection by a younger generation. There was no movement, no style, no group against which to react. Abstract Expressionism's staying power, its capacity for change and growth within its established parameters, was crucial to the retention of its newly won position: it was the guarantor of American art's modernity. Hess evidently feared that if American artists abandoned this practice, they would either lose the hegemonic position they had gained for American art or revert to provincialism, or both.⁸³⁵

Hess oscillated between a hectoring advocacy for the work of the artists he championed (his editorializing might be compared to Forbes Watson's) and a *belles-lettristic* appreciation of it, neither of which amounted to a real critical engagement with it. The magazine would benefit from the change in and consolidation of its focus as it began to include more feature articles on contemporary art (it was considered the leading art magazine by the end of the decade), but in shifting to a new object of discourse the *ARTnews* writers didn't change the discourse itself—that is, they treated the new object (art) as though it were the old one (aesthetics). Meanwhile, *ARTS* was undergoing a different kind of transition.

⁸³⁵ Hess wrote in April 1957 that, "Americans are coasting downhill to the provincialism that, historically, has been their tradition in the visual arts." See *ibid.*, 46.

ARTS

Kramer became an associate editor at *ARTS* around the time that Hess began to hire the New York School poets, and was managing editor by the time Marshall left the magazine to join the staff of the Ford Foundation in September 1958. Taking over as editor the following month, Kramer promoted James R. Mellow to the position of associate editor (along with Francis Kloeppel, who was already serving in this capacity). In spite of Marshall's determination to update the magazine, it was slow to increase its engagement with contemporary art. Mellow, Martica Sawin, and Anita Ventura, all of whom contributed occasionally to the front of the magazine, were writing most of the reviews when Marshall left, but Kramer remained the most frequent contributor of longer reviews and feature articles on contemporary art until he stopped writing the "Month in Review" (which consisted of three or four longish reviews) in November 1960. In addition to hiring Helen De Mott and two unidentified writers with the initials "P.S." and "B.D.H.," he rehired Sidney Tillim (who had been fired in 1953 for reviewing shows in tennis shoes) as reviewers.⁸³⁶ All four began contributing to the magazine in November 1958. Donald Judd was hired the following year; Vivien Raynor and Lawrence Smith joined the staff in the fall of 1960.

In October 1962, in his review of *Art and Culture*, a collection of Greenberg's writings that was published the year before, Kramer praised Greenberg for his "commitment to ideas" and his "refusal to corrupt his style with that literary fancywork which has so degraded the practice of art criticism in this country." The "indispensable

⁸³⁶ Katy Siegel, "Critical Realist," *Artforum*, vol. XLII, no. 1 (September 2003): 208. Helen De Mott and Sidney Tillim became contributing editors in February 1959.

characteristics” of Greenberg’s writing were its “clarity,” “coherence” and “logical argument.” Although the technical critics who wrote for *ARTS* didn’t need to build a “logical argument” in their short reviews, Kramer valued the lucidity of their brief analyses. Since the most traditional form of technical criticism involved the “qualitative concentration on individual works of art,” as Frankfurter had put it, it’s no wonder that Kramer appreciated the critics who adhered most closely to this precept.⁸³⁷ Critical discourse, broadly speaking, was more important to Kramer than stirring writing, since writing was a means to an end rather than an end in itself. As he went on to say in his review of *Art and Culture*, Greenberg’s writing was “intellectual rather than verbal, a matter of ideas rather than of music.”⁸³⁸

By contrast, Hess wrote in 1958 that, “An ‘art critic’ is a writer who is writing about art. So when a writer brags that he is an ‘art critic,’ you know he has given up.”⁸³⁹ Kramer and Hess didn’t just disagree about action painting; they also had a fundamental disagreement about the nature of criticism. Their stewardship of the magazines they edited, like that of the little magazines of the 30s, represented a position not just on art but on criticism. But, whereas the critical positions held by the editors of the *New Masses* and

⁸³⁷ Alfred Frankfurter, “Vernissage,” *ARTnews* XLVIII, no. 9 (January 1950): 13.

⁸³⁸ Kramer, “A Critic on the Side of History: Notes on Clement Greenberg,” 60.

⁸³⁹ Thomas Hess, *It Is* (Autumn 1958). This was echoed recently by David Levi Strauss, who, writing about the graduate program in Art Criticism & Writing at the School of Visual Arts (of which he is currently the chair), stated that, “Some people that I run into think the whole idea of a graduate program in art criticism is absurd, since art criticism is not a discipline. I agree that it’s not a discipline. It’s a form of writing. We’re basically a writing program, in an art school.” See David Levi Strauss, “From Metaphysics to Invective: art criticism as if it still matters,” *Brooklyn Rail* (May 3, 2012). Accessed May 15, 2015. <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2012/05/art/from-metaphysics-to-invective-art-criticism-as-if-it-still-matters>. In September 2015, the SVA program changed its name. An announcement sent by e-flux reads: “We’ve shortened our name by two words, from ‘Art Criticism and Writing’ to ‘Art Writing,’ for clarity and brevity. We’re the same program, only better.” See e-flux announcement titled “Art Writing Fall 2015 Quijote Talks” dated 9/23/15.

Partisan had revolved around the relationship between art and politics, Hess's and Kramer's positions involved divergent views on the relationship between art (and criticism) and poetics. Hess, for whom criticism was clearly a literary form, had no desire to turn the New York School poets into "art critics," trying instead to infuse his own writing with some of the lyricism he found in theirs (not always, perhaps, with success). Focused on critical discourse, Kramer attempted to fuse or at least bring together cultural criticism and technical criticism.

While *belles-lettres* did too little, according to Kramer, there was another critical model that did too much. "The increased attention which American art now enjoys has clearly not brought with it a renaissance in art criticism," he wrote in October 1959, "On the contrary, criticism has been corrupted by it. As the public has intensified its interest in art, critics have either taken refuge in phony poetics or given themselves over to the most vulgar and condescending 'explanations.'" The "poetic" school of criticism (Kramer always made sure to include the scare quotes) was an "interesting sociological fact," but "add[ed] nothing to our knowledge of art."⁸¹⁰ On the other hand, as admiring as he was of Greenberg's writing, he rejected the "governing 'myth'" upon which his critical position was constructed. Indeed, he was suspicious of any kind of position-taking. The "French critic," for instance, was "expected" to take a position and, having taken one, his commentaries on artists were less an "elucidation of their styles and significance than an explication of his own esthetic philosophy." This critic, Kramer writes, "stands before the work of art and adduces evidence of his own theoretic formulations. He is a man in love with 'meaning,' which he carries around in his head like a well-tailored suit in a valise, always in search of

⁸¹⁰ Hilton Kramer, "Critics of American Painting," *ARTS* 34, no. 1 (October 1959): 26.

the manikin whose proportions will yield an exact fit.”⁸⁴¹ Kramer’s appeal to tradition didn’t amount to a “position”—since it was the *only* position that one could take in his view—and meaning therefore went without saying. His goal was to steer the magazine between the “phony poetics” of *ARTnews* and the criticism that substituted “explication” for “elucidation.”

The critics that Kramer hired in the late 50s eschewed the “literary fancywork” of the *ARTnews* writers, as a single comparison should suffice to demonstrate. Tillim and Schuyler reviewed an exhibition of Jane Freilicher’s work held at the Tibor de Nagy gallery in November 1958 for *ARTS* and *ARTnews* respectively. Here’s Tillim:

Meeting her subjects head on or plunging through them into ‘abstraction,’ Miss Freilicher would seem to be searching for a middle road between the two approaches. She is more secure with the act of painting than with a literal subject, and her difficulty lies in her uncertainty as to the content of the act. Thus some of her paintings are more realistic than others in proportion to her sense of security. In *Russian Landscape* the brushwork is characteristically different but retrieved from sloth by her success in realizing the subject in warm, exotic colors while still keeping the surface intact. In a few landscapes her gestures seem abandoned in conventional space that insists on receding from the surface—and hence from the all-important act of painting. At one time Miss Freilicher painted large, striking but stiff representational portraits distantly reminiscent of Renoir. Her most representational painting in this show, *The Mallow Gatherers*, stresses her relaxed style which is perhaps meant to be Impressionistic. But she relaxes into sketchiness that verges on affectation; one suspects her uncertainty boils down to a problem of drawing.⁸⁴²

Littered with digs about the “act of painting” (which, Tillim implies, might mask a technical problem), his review continues in the tradition of the technical criticism of the 40s.

Schuyler is clearly after something different:

⁸⁴¹ Hilton Kramer, “Month in Review,” *ARTS* 32, no. 10 (September 1958): 53.

⁸⁴² Sidney Tillim, “Jane Freilicher,” *ARTS* 33, no. 2 (November 1958): 57. It’s unclear what Tillim meant by “characteristically different.”

Jane Freilicher, a poets' painter who may yet become the public's painter, in her radiant new show comes close to by-passing the image altogether in her love of paint calling to brush. She is a natural: properties of the real world and of the imagined are casually linked in an intensity of color and of relaxed stroke. In *From a Volkswagen*, slices of sky descend into a beige from which a garden is escaping in beautiful curlings. *The Green Stripe* explodes a jungle memory of Mexico into high rich scrubbings; a low horizon establishes a personal relation to nature inscrutably denied by a stripe of green that inequally divides the face of the canvas and floats free of it. The impossible composed of the actual, it makes present the joy of an artist following her own unsubdued bent. A key work is *The Unstable Element*, so sensual, so demanding and uncalled for, it seems to be about the desirability of pink."⁸⁴³

Like Tillim, Schuyler deals with individual works of art, but the "desirability of pink" would have been irrelevant (at the very least) to the technical critic intent on "judging good from bad." More interested in offering an evocative impression of the work, Schuyler alludes to Freilicher's craftsmanship, but doesn't assess it. Even without this glaring omission, the florid prose would have made Kramer apoplectic.

Kramer managed to find a number of technical critics who were not "tempted to make rhetoric do the work of analysis" (as he wrote of Rosenberg) but who didn't stray into contemporaneous criticism (as Tillim and Judd did), including a reviewer with the initials "B.D.H." and Raynor.⁸⁴⁴ "B.D.H." might easily be mistaken for Kramer himself in passages like the following: "Instead of the sporadic strokes of the action painter in front of the unconscious, [Paul Georges] solidifies his creative impatience in the excitement of the earth or the light in a room. His free use of the loaded brush (carrying three or four colors) allows him to expand the fertility of trees and sensuality of flesh, and his (larger than life)

⁸⁴³ James Schuyler, "Jane Freilicher," *ARTnews* 57, no. 7, Pt. 1 (November 1958): 13.

⁸⁴⁴ Kramer, "A Critic on the Side of History: Notes on Clement Greenberg," 60.

vision restrains him from being irresponsible.”⁸⁴⁵ Raynor’s reviews amount to a stripped-down, no-nonsense technical criticism. Her exclusive focus on the “work itself” rarely allowed for references to, much less comparisons with, the work of other artists and Kramer seems to have appreciated her rather conservative taste. Writing in March 1961, Raynor argued that, “[Albert] Radoczy has a real grasp of form, really seems to understand the figure,” which made his drawings stand out. “As for the paintings,” she continued, “it seems better not to talk about them extensively, because the color and technique are too far out for this taste. Radoczy depicts his Venus in all her moods in such unattractive smears of browns, reds, or purples that everything except the voluptuousness is lost.”⁸⁴⁶ She seems to have taken no position or had any kind of program other than to describe the work in front of her and to “judge good from bad,” which is probably why Kramer was so supportive of her writing. Her criticism is “timeless” in the sense that these reviews, with some rhetorical adjustments, could easily have been written in the 30s or 40s. But, for precisely this reason, they are also somewhat airless, lacking the vitality and complexity of Tillim’s and Judd’s writing.

Judd had only been writing for *ARTnews* for a couple of months when he left (primarily because of the magazine’s practice of cutting reviews for space) to join the staff of *ARTS* in December 1959.⁸⁴⁷ He joined a large group of reviewers—Tillim, George

⁸⁴⁵ B. D. H., “Paul Georges,” *ARTS* 33, no. 3 (December 1958): 56.

⁸⁴⁶ Vivien Raynor, “Albert Radoczy,” *ARTS* 35, no. 6 (March 1961): 53.

⁸⁴⁷ See Donald Judd, *Donald Judd: The Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2005), 1. James Meyer claims that Judd’s decision to leave the magazine was related to his rejection of “the ‘purple prose’ of Frank O’Hara and others,” which Judd mentions in passing in his 1969 “Complaints I.” Judd himself gives the reason I cite here. Judd probably started out at *ARTnews* because of its focus on contemporary art—not, or not only, because it was the leading magazine.

Dennison, Hugo Munsterberg, Martica Sawin, Anita Ventura (then managing editor), Helen De Mott, Mellow (associate editor), Hugo Munsterberg, and Barbara Butler—who split the shows that Tillim didn’t review (he was reviewing the bulk of the shows) more or less evenly.⁸⁴⁸ (Beginning in early 1959, the number of shows reviewed in each issue had begun to increase, suggesting that Marshall’s selective reviewing policy had lapsed after his departure.⁸⁴⁹) Judd’s reviews stayed within the confines and conventions of technical criticism, except that, unlike the other *ARTS* reviewers, he sought to contextualize the work (not simply to cite precedents or trace influences), judging its success or failure according to what might be called “present possibilities.” It wasn’t a matter of the “direction in which pictorial art had to go” but of what was possible in the present given developments in the art of the recent past.

Judd would have gotten credit from Kramer for calling out painters whose work was “placed too neatly in the New York style,” as he once put it (referring to second-generation Abstract Expressionists): “A number of notable young painters given acclaim in recent years have begun to manufacture their work, merely repeating it with slight variation and with attendant progressive disinterest. [Michael] Goldberg is patently one of these. The space, structure and color of the large paintings are inert and ordinary and belie the Abstract Expressionism from which they are derived and which continues to give them

⁸⁴⁸ Tillim had only been at the magazine a couple of months when he surged ahead of the regular reviewers, Anita Ventura, James Mellow, and Martica Sawin, writing 33 of the 83 reviews published in the February 1959 issue (Sawin reviewed 12 and Mellow 7). Barbara Butler was made assistant editor when Kramer became managing editor in the fall of 1955; she became Paris correspondent in September 1956, but was dropped from the masthead in September 1957 (she was replaced by Annette Michelson in December 1957). Butler became contributing editor in April 1960. Munsterberg was added to the masthead as contributing editor in December 1957 and Anita Ventura had been at the magazine in various positions since the mid-50s.

⁸⁴⁹ In the winter and spring months, the number sometimes topped one hundred (in April 1960 the total reached 128).

superficial authority.”⁸⁵⁰ Judd’s concern, however, wasn’t that Abstract Expressionism wasn’t viable to begin with but that those who were acquiring it weren’t developing it. Judith Godwin’s paintings, for instance, displayed “a sound acquisition of much of Kline’s style”—“valuable knowledge for a young painter”—but they added “so little to it as to make doubtful a unique use in the future.”⁸⁵¹ But Tillim began to overshadow all the other critics as he was assigned more shows to review and began to contribute feature articles.

In December 1960, Tillim took over the “Month in Review” column and continued to write it until it was gradually phased out when he began to contribute more profiles and features in 1964. He was still contributing to the back of the magazine, publishing upwards of 30 shorter reviews in each issue.⁸⁵² Although he was more incisive than earlier exponents of technical criticism, Tillim, I would argue, was cast in the mold of the technical critic of the 30s and 40s. A painter himself, his geometric style of the early 50s had given way to figuration by the end of the decade—a fact that would certainly have raised Kramer’s estimation of him—and, as a critic, he became known as “the figurative guy.”⁸⁵³ (In Judd’s introduction to his collected writings, he implies, rather uncharitably, that he didn’t have to compete with Tillim for the shows he wanted to review because Tillim “wanted just enough modern art to qualify as a major critic”—which doesn’t mean there isn’t some truth to Judd’s claim.⁸⁵⁴) Tillim shared a number of concerns with Kramer, including his belief in the artist’s need to “keep the world of feeling in sight,” as he wrote about Giacometti, and

⁸⁵⁰ Judd, *Donald Judd*, 16; 55. Also, “Anthony Damato and Beulah Bassine show inexperience... in curiosity, being too faithful adherents of the New York School.” *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁵¹ Judd, *Donald Judd*, 18.

⁸⁵² He also published numerous “one-liners” in each issue.

⁸⁵³ Katy Siegel, “Critical Realist,” *Artforum*, September 2003, 209.

⁸⁵⁴ Judd, *Donald Judd*, vii.

his conservatism had as much to do with his traditional approach to criticism as it did to the work he championed (he was a proponent of pop art, for instance).⁸⁵⁵ That Kramer was a strong advocate of Tillim's criticism isn't surprising given that he was an empirically-grounded technical critic who, like Kramer, rejected overarching narratives and theoretical posturing.

Writing in a fluid prose style, Tillim cited influences and provided some context for contemporary art practices, but, like Porter, he refused to "estimate contemporaries' importance" and bristled at critical judgments that smacked of "historical necessity." In a review of an exhibition of Raphael Soyer's work held at the A.C.A. Gallery in 1961, he stopped short of asserting the belatedness of Soyer's style ("out of respect to tradition he has achieved the objective mastery that prevents his period affinity from making his work seem belated"), concluding that, "Soyer's art is in fact an art without a 'period'—which is one of the first things that tradition teaches."⁸⁵⁶ The year before, he had argued that, having painted figures, landscapes and still-lives "all his painting life," the septuagenarian Austrian-born artist Hans Boehler had arrived at an "acute historical position." Unlike the "much-discussed new realists" (Park, Diebenkorn, Bischoff), Tillim writes, "Boehler's *tradition* ratifies his contract with form and color" and his work belonged "at once to the past that

⁸⁵⁵ Sidney Tillim, "Month in Review," *ARTS* 35, no. 5 (February 1961): 47. See also "David Lund": "Sensitive and handsome his works are, but their measured taste leaves little room for feeling." ["David Lund," *ARTS*, January 1960, vol. 34, no. 4, p. 51]; "Sam Adler": "The single figure studies are particularly impressive, dispensing as they do with certain a priori ideas about painting, turning more to smoky color and a natural aptitude for scraped surfaces and nervous impastos that do not stand apart from feeling." ["Sam Adler," *ARTS*, February 1960, vo. 34, no. 5, p. 59]. Cf. Kramer: "This is a very gentle sculptural style, and one of the prices paid for this gentleness—and for the charm and humor too, I'm afraid—is a certain lack of tension, of compositional drama and incisiveness; one feels so relaxed in the presence of these figures that it is only later that one realizes how little demand has been made on one's feelings." ["Month in Review," *ARTS*, October 1956, p. 56.]

⁸⁵⁶ Sidney Tillim, "Month in Review," *ARTS*, January 1961.

nurtured Kokoschka, Klimt and Schiele in Vienna... and to the present that is drawn to Austrian and German Expressionism as a rationale for its renewed embrace of the phenomenal world (emphasis in the original).⁸⁵⁷ His appeal to tradition notwithstanding (and he invoked it with younger artists as well), Tillim shared a key trait with Judd: he remained focused on critical analysis of the work and was second only to Judd in his engagement with contemporary practices.

Some 40 years before Tillim and Judd began writing criticism, Bourne had predicted that an “absolutely contemporaneous criticism” would be arrived at “when the artist himself has turned critic.” Arguing that the “would-be literary artist” needed to be protected “not so much from his enemies as from his friends,” Bourne had called for a “new criticism” to meet “not only the work of the new artists but also the uncritical hospitality of current taste.” Bourne had attributed the younger writers’ refusal to “broaden their imaginative and intellectual horizons” to the lack of “social” criticism and the public’s hospitality.⁸⁵⁸ The writer of a letter to the editor of *Poetry* concurred, adding that contemporaneous criticism—in her description “the kind that is perfectly able to navigate in an uncharted sea, take soundings, and proclaim new depths and new shores”—was “the only criticism” that was “of value to the artist and to his contemporaries.”⁸⁵⁹ Looking back at the late 50s from the vantage point of the mid-60s, Judd would blame a similar “hospitality” for the fact that second-generation Abstract Expressionism, “failed or failing in various ways,” had nevertheless “overshadowed or excluded everything else”:

⁸⁵⁷ Sidney Tillim, “Month in Review,” *ARTS* 34, no. 5 (February 1960): 50.

⁸⁵⁸ Bourne, “Traps for the Unwary,” 278–79.

⁸⁵⁹ H., “Of Puritans, Philistines and Pessimists,” 229. I believe the initials “A. C. H.” refer to Alice Corbin Henderson.

Four years ago almost all the applauded and selling art was ‘New York School’ painting. It was preponderant in most galleries, which were uninclined to show anything new. The publications which praised it praised it indiscriminantly [sic] and were uninterested in new developments. Much of the painting was by the ‘second generation,’ many of them epigones. Pollock was dead. Kline and Brooks had painted their last good paintings in 1956 and 1957. Guston’s paintings had become soft and gray—his best ones are those around 1954 and 1955. Motherwell’s and De Kooning’s paintings were somewhat vague. None of these artists were criticized.⁸⁶⁰

Judd was convinced (as Greenberg had been in the early 40s) that criticism had a role to play, that the lack of critique had contributed to the fact that, “this painting was not doing well but was the only art for the time.”⁸⁶¹ Unlike their predecessors (George L. K. Morris) or their contemporaries (Porter, Elaine de Kooning), Judd and Tillim were both committed, each in his own way, to “intervening between the public”—Rosenberg’s professionalizing public now—“and the artist,” as Bourne had written, “with an insistence on clearer and sharper outlines of appreciation by the one, and the attainment of a richer artistry by the other.”⁸⁶² There was nothing programmatic about either critic’s approach, but each had a clear sense that there was something at stake.

But it was Judd, not Tillim, who would go on to play a crucial role in the critical debate of the 60s. This despite the fact that Kramer promoted Tillim unreservedly, devoting a large portion of each issue of the magazine to his writing. While the “tradition” that Judd was referring to (New York School painting) was nowhere near as entrenched—or pervasive—as the “genteel tradition” that Bourne had been writing against, Judd was equally convinced that a “new criticism” had been needed in the late 50s, one that “estimated

⁸⁶⁰ Judd, *Donald Judd*, 148.

⁸⁶¹ *Ibid.* Tillim would raise the question “of whether irresponsible criticism is related to irresponsible art” in another context. See Sidney Tillim, “A Critic Comments,” *ARTS* 34, no. 9 (June 1960): 5.

⁸⁶² Bourne, “Traps for the Unwary,” 278.

contemporaries' importance."⁸⁶³ The critical framework that he would develop in the 60s allowed for a "discussion of a larger scope" than the technical criticism that was promoted at *ARTS* (although it was not the kind of discussion that Bourne had envisioned). This, in any event, is what distinguished Judd's contemporaneous criticism from Tillim's.

Critical Art Discourse

For a "critical art discourse" to develop, not only did it have to be *critical* (not "aesthetic") but the object of which it spoke had to be *art* (not "aesthetics"). This didn't happen in the art magazines (at least not in any generalized way) until the early 60s. In the meantime, the cross-pollination of art discourse and critical discourse produced two different kinds of hybrid: *ARTnews* continued to speak the language of aesthetic criticism even as the object of which it spoke was no longer "aesthetics" but (contemporary) "art" while the object of *ARTS*'s critical discourse was not "art" but "aesthetics" (the magazine's critics, with the exception of Judd and, in a more limited way, Tillim, focused on the work's conformity with "aesthetic standards" not on the discipline of art). Unlike the critical practice that Ransom had promoted, which occupied a discrete position (and a separate site), the discursive shift that took place in the pages of the art press in the 50s involved the transformation of a discourse (or a change in the order of discourse) within a site that was evolving in numerous ways.

⁸⁶³ As Judd wrote in the same essay, "The artists were responsible for eventually making it all look pretty much alike, but writing about it, which failed to differentiate it sufficiently, helped this along. The failure to criticize and evaluate the various artists was even more serious." Judd, *Donald Judd*, 150.

Kramer believed that critics had “taken refuge” in spurious forms of criticism as a result of the “increased attention which American art now enjoys.”⁸⁶⁴ He asked sardonically in October 1959, “Why has art—not paintings as such, not particular works or individual artists necessarily, but the *life of art*—become so irresistibly attractive just now to a lot of ‘nice’ people, who, until the other day, felt they could get along very well without it?”⁸⁶⁵ Given his belief that critics should focus on “particular works,” it’s not surprising that Kramer found the public’s interest in the “life of art” somewhat suspect. As I argued, painting’s identity was linked not to the work’s disciplinarity but to the timeless traditions that he associated with it—easel painting, the “authority of the brush,” “painterly sensibility,” etc.—which meant that a particular painting either lived up to the aesthetic standards of “titans” like Rembrandt or it failed. But Kramer was correct about art’s “irresistible attraction,” which had only increased in intensity since Greenberg had first commented on it. In an article published on the front page of the *New York Times* in February 1957, Clarence Dean stated that, “A boom of unparalleled dimensions” had come to the art galleries of New York. The number of “active galleries” had increased “more than five times” in the past decade and “estimates of the rise in the number of pictures sold run as high as 500 percent.”⁸⁶⁶

More important, public opinion of contemporary (abstract) art had changed, and, when the editors of *ARTnews* posed the question “Is there a new academy?” to a dozen or so artists in the summer of 1959, George Sugarman not only responded in the affirmative,

⁸⁶⁴ Kramer, “Critics of American Painting,” 26.

⁸⁶⁵ Hilton Kramer, “Editorial: Looking for Salvation,” *ARTS* 34, no. 1 (October 1959): 15.

⁸⁶⁶ Clarence Dean, “Art Galleries Are Enjoying Boom Here, But Artists Are Not Prospering,” *New York Times*, February 25, 1957, 1.

but added, “[T]he artist with no roots but his own subconscious, the cult of the primitive, of the immediate, of anything that will shock, of the need to be different... Once so frightening, [these] values are now so domesticated that even the best homes will admit them. Indeed, the best homes will admit none but them. They are tried and true. They are safe.”⁸⁶⁷ And Rosenberg had argued in “Everyman a Professional” that, “The famous ‘alienation of the artist’ that middleman intellectual journals find so much relish in discussing is the result not of the lack of interest of society in the artist’s work but of the potential interest of *all* society in it.”⁸⁶⁸

The art press had contributed to this “domestication.” Having changed its focus from “the classics” to contemporary art and left behind its intention to “*make* art news as well as reflect it,” *ARTnews* had become the leading art magazine by the end of the decade.⁸⁶⁹ It was able to occupy this position for several reasons: first, its support of abstract expressionism both coincided with and augmented the growing interest in contemporary art; second, its only real competition was *ARTS*, which remained conservative not only in its approach to but in its coverage of contemporary art; and, finally, its *belles-lettristic* writers had a broader appeal than the technical critics that Kramer promoted. *ARTnews* had essentially evolved into a new entity. No longer a “news magazine,” it was committed to

⁸⁶⁷ Amy Newman notes the following reasons for the explosion of media attention and audience in the 60s: “the aggressive promotion of American culture by a Cold War government; a corresponding sense of American strength and leadership in an international context; widespread educational opportunities which produced well-trained professionals and an informed and curious public; a strong economy which encouraged collecting.” Newman, *Challenging Art*, 7-8.

⁸⁶⁸ Rosenberg, “Everyman a Professional,” 67.

⁸⁶⁹ Frankfurter announced in September 1962, the month that The Washington Post Company purchased the magazine’s owner (The Art Foundation Press, Inc.), that circulation had increased twenty-fold since 1941. See Alfred Frankfurter, “Editorial,” *ARTnews* 61, no. 5 (September 1962): 19.

contemporary art and had articulated a position on both art practice and criticism.⁸⁷⁰ While *ARTS* had also made the shift from “news magazine” to “art magazine” over the course of the decade, it was marginalized by its historical focus and promotion of more conservative contemporary practices. By the mid-60s, when *Artforum* challenged the hegemony of *ARTnews*, what it meant to be the “leading art magazine” had shifted as both art and the art public had become increasingly professionalized and a critical field had fully emerged.

Kramer was more committed to a certain kind of critical writing than he was to a particular critical position—in fact, his aversion to position-taking meant that the magazine’s “position” was defined more by its opposition to action painting and the poetic school of criticism than by a specific critical position—and many of the critics he hired didn’t share his deep-seated traditionalism, making the magazine more eclectic (Tillim, for example, wrote that Ben Benn was “a very fine painter indeed,” but he “cannot give us what we want *now*.”⁸⁷¹) In some ways, this mirrored the situation of the 30s, when critics rejected Craven’s position without positioning themselves *critically* in relation to it. Kramer’s “position” on tradition wasn’t articulated as such; he simply critiqued painters who ignored the aesthetic standards to which he believed they should adhere or ignored them.

In 1959 Kramer expanded on his earlier claim that, “[T]he basis of criticism remains above all in the visual fact of the work itself,” writing that “the classic critical task” was the “elucidation of the work of art itself, and the placing of it in a coherent context of

⁸⁷⁰ By 1955, not only had the magazine begun to designate a “*most important modern picture acquired by an American public collection*” but the work chosen for the previous year was de Kooning’s *Woman I* (1950).

⁸⁷¹ Sidney Tillim, “Month in Review,” *ARTS* 37, no. 6 (March 1963): 59.

experience and history.”⁸⁷² He could rehearse—and mostly accept—a quasi-formalist history of post-Cubist painting practices up to and including those of some of the Abstract Expressionists, but he refused to ratify the rejection of easel painting, effectively collapsing the (critical) distinction between “history” and “tradition.” Gorky, whose importance Kramer didn’t understand exclusively in terms of his “closeness to the old masters,” remained, as Greenberg pointed out, “a late Cubist to the end, a votary of French taste, an orthodox easel painter.”⁸⁷³ But if painting was no longer identified with or defined by the easel picture, Kramer didn’t consider it to be “art.” Although he would attempt to “impose” his modernist-traditionalist definition of the artist within the pages of *ARTS* and beyond, Kramer was unable to build a constituency for his views, and he became increasingly frustrated with contemporary art practices as they moved farther away from the tradition of easel painting. In spite of this—and, in some ways, in spite of himself—Kramer’s focus on technical criticism can be credited with sowing the seeds of the critical art discourse that would begin to emerge by the end of the decade, which substituted “estimates of contemporaries’ importance” for consideration of the “work itself.”

Shortly after *ARTnews* asked if there was a new academy, Sonya Rudikoff published “Language and Actuality: A Letter to Irving Sandler” in *ARTS*. Writing in response to the publication of *School of New York: Some Younger Artists*, an anthology to which both she and Sandler had contributed, Rudikoff admitted that there seemed to be “something wrong” with most writing on contemporary art, arguing that the “act of painting” had become an *idée reçue* that had not only begun to “lose its reference” but had

⁸⁷² Hilton Kramer, “Month in Review,” *ARTS* 31, no. 1 (October 1956): 51; Kramer, “Critics of American Painting,” 26.

⁸⁷³ Greenberg, “‘American-Type’ Painting,” 182.

become “a ghostly presence whirling in the dank air of art ideology.” Making a point of questioning whether poets were the best writers on art (Baudelaire, she argues, didn’t write as a poet when he wrote on art), she turns to the issue of “actuality,” stating that, “art is one of the few domains of life where actuality counts” and that criticism’s “abstracting, idealizing tendency of mind can be destructive of actualities.” She believed that criticism had to deal with “the thing itself” rather than seeing things “in other terms” (i.e. metaphorically). “Out of experience itself,” she writes, “come works of art which exist as themselves in the way natural objects exist, with no rationalized purpose or meaning, but, as is so often said, are simply *there*.”⁸⁷⁴ For Rudikoff, like Kramer, the “act of painting” was not only irrelevant but would seem not even to have happened.

In his response Irving Sandler pinpoints the central assumption of the critical model that had been the mainstay of the art press since the 30s, local judgment. “To accept your idea of actuality,” he writes, “would reduce us to a primitive state of experiencing in which every picture would become an object-in-itself to be viewed wholly in its own terms.”⁸⁷⁵ Although this is an apt description of the kind of criticism that was promoted at *ARTS*, Kramer would have rejected this characterization, since he believed that his own critical approach took both the work’s reception and its context into consideration (Ben Benn’s “modern” easel painting, he had written, didn’t “deny its historical context”).⁸⁷⁶ It’s important to recall, however, that, while Frankfurter had no problem with critics who saw things “in other terms,” he had called for a similar emphasis at *ARTnews*: “We believe

⁸⁷⁴ Sonya Rudikoff, “Language and Actuality: A Letter to Irving Sandler,” *ARTS* 34, no. 6 (March 1960): 23; 25.

⁸⁷⁵ Irving Sandler, “An Exchange on Art Criticism,” *ARTS* 34, no. 8 (May 1960): 29.

⁸⁷⁶ Kramer, “Ben Benn,” 24.

emphatically that subjective, qualitative concentration on individual works of art, or at the very most on single exhibitions, is the one way to work toward standards of excellence within our own contemporaneity.”⁸⁷⁷ Although Rosenberg had departed from this singular focus on the “work itself,” the poet-critics had reintroduced it (albeit in a different form) in their attempts to produce a kind of poetic analogy for the work or what Frankfurter would refer to as “parallelism.”⁸⁷⁸ Both magazines called for consideration of the “work itself” either in the context of Hess’s “traditions of the present” or Kramer’s “reciprocal relation with the past.”

This is not to say that “the work itself” didn’t matter to other critics. The concept of “validity” had operated in Greenberg’s criticism since the 30s. Abstract art that didn’t imitate the “processes and disciplines” of art might have been *viable* as art, but it was not aesthetically *valid* avant-garde art. By the 60s, the work would need to be able to establish its artistic validity as modernist painting or sculpture. Kramer’s “particular work of art” didn’t have to establish its identity—that is, to count—*historically* “as painting” as it did for Greenberg and Michael Fried; it had to fit the *traditional* definition of “painting.”⁸⁷⁹ Painting was a tradition, not a category or medium that had a history. For Greenberg, and even more urgently for Fried by the mid-60s, what counted and how it counted were related both to the individual work and the category as a whole. The “work itself” counted insofar as it adhered to the (historicized) conventions of a particular medium. As Fried wrote in

⁸⁷⁷ Frankfurter, “Vernissage,” January 1950, 13.

⁸⁷⁸ See Alfred Frankfurter, “Editorial,” *ARTnews* 61, no. 2 (April 1962): 68.

⁸⁷⁹ Kramer shared at least one view with Rosenberg: the “particular work of art” wasn’t simply ignored by what he called “avant-garde criticism” but instrumentalized by it. “[F]or the most part,” he wrote, “avant-garde criticism has not been very interested in that fragile thing, the particular work of art, and its particular reality, but rather in what operations could be performed on it for the purposes of future art.” Hilton Kramer, “Month in Review,” *ARTS* 33, no. 8 (May 1959): 50.

1967, “the concepts of quality and value... are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts.”⁸⁸⁰

In Kramer’s view, following Eliot, the “work itself” needed to be both “individual” and conform to the standards of the past (otherwise, as Eliot wrote, “it would not be a work of art”). Artworks were evaluated on their own terms. It was in this sense that Kramer focused on the “particular work of art.” Comparison with contemporaneous works was unnecessary because the “particular work of art” either lived up to past standards or it didn’t; comparison with the “art of the recent past” was also unnecessary, since Kramer rejected the notion of historical change, which was precluded by the “simultaneous order” of tradition. And validity, to the extent that Kramer might have thought in those terms, could only be gauged by the “integrity of the artist’s craft,” since that was the only way that the past could be “transmitted as a vital force to the present.” Another way to put this is that there was simply no way, from Kramer’s perspective, for painting that wasn’t grounded in the traditions of the past to “become articulate” as art. He thought in terms of “painting,” not in terms of something having to count—historically, categorically, and individually—“as painting.”

Although Kramer understood that younger artists who challenged tradition were in earnest, he believed that it was the critic’s task to call them out. As he wrote about Allan Kaprow’s 1958 show at the Hansa Gallery, “Now this exhibition should not be regarded as a hoax, no matter what it sounds like. Kaprow is serious. Indeed, only out of an idea could

⁸⁸⁰ Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1998), 164.

something so completely pointless emerge.”⁸⁸¹ The implication was that artists shouldn’t get “ideas” about what art was or might be. Critics were obligated, in Kramer’s view, to censure—or simply ignore—artists who flouted tradition. Kramer would stop writing for the art press when it became clear that artists had abandoned the traditions that he believed needed to be preserved.

“Modernist Painting”

Greenberg can’t be said to have “followed” Rosenberg from the little magazines to the art magazines—since he was actually invited to publish in *ARTnews* before Rosenberg was—but he, too, stopped contributing to *Partisan* in the mid-50s.⁸⁸² It was around this time that the art press, which had contracted at the beginning of the decade, began to expand. In the mid-50s *Art in America*, which remained a quarterly into the 60s, expanded its coverage to include contemporary art; *Art International*, formerly *European Art This Month*, began to cover American art in 1959; *Artforum* was launched on the West coast in the summer of 1962; and *Art Voices* began publication in October 1962.⁸⁸³ Critics for these publications

⁸⁸¹ Hilton Kramer, “Month in Review,” *ARTS* 33, no. 4 (January 1959): 50.

⁸⁸² Described as “the best-known and one of the ablest champions of avant-garde American art,” Greenberg contributed an article titled “Cross-breeding of modern sculpture” to the 50th anniversary issue (June-July-August 1952). Greenberg published his first article, on Renoir, in *ARTnews* in 1950.

⁸⁸³ The editor of *Art International*, James Fitzsimmons, left *Art Digest* the month that Kramer was added as associate editor. Dore Ashton replaced him as contributing editor. According to a farewell note printed in the September 15, 1954 issue of the magazine (which had just changed its name to *Arts Digest*), Fitzsimmons had “left the art world” and was “studying in Zurich and New York to become a psychologist.” See “Spectrum,” *Arts Digest*, vol. 28 no. 20 (September 15, 1954): 4. By 1956, however, Fitzsimmons had launched *European Art This Month*, which, as the title indicates, focused exclusively on European art. The following year the magazine’s name was changed to *Art International* and it steadily increased its engagement with American art. By 1959, William Rubin, E.C. Goossen and Martica Sawin were contributing editors and Sawin was writing the New York Letter. *Studio International* would also be reorganized in 1964.

would abandon the aesthetic criticism of the technical critic, taking up positions in relation to the ones that were coalescing into a critical field.

In the late 50s Greenberg contributed a handful of articles and book reviews to both *ARTS* and *ARTnews* (and, later, to *Art International*) in which he introduced the term “modernist reduction” and began to focus on the issue of quality, culminating with the claim he made in “Modernist Painting,” which was first published in the 1961 *ARTS Yearbook*: “The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered ‘pure,’ and in its ‘purity’ find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence.”⁸⁸⁴ In this essay, art discourse and critical discourse converged in a text that retained elements of both: Greenberg not only *theorized* “Modernism” (capital “M”), but incorporated critical principles that were rooted in the art discourse of the interwar period.⁸⁸⁵

“Modernist Painting” is famous, or infamous, for codifying the “essence” of Modernism, which lay, as Greenberg had it, “in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.”⁸⁸⁶ Although Kramer would take issue with the “governing ‘myth’” of Greenberg’s critical position the following year (in his review of *Art and Culture*), Greenberg’s stance on “tradition” had shifted since the publication of “‘American-Type’ Painting” in a way that Kramer is bound to have appreciated. Tradition

⁸⁸⁴ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4*, 56; 86.

⁸⁸⁵ I would argue that he capitalized it in order to emphasize the importance of his theoretical construct and to differentiate it from the historical meaning of the term.

⁸⁸⁶ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4*, 85.

was no longer being “dismantled” by the avant-garde; now, Modernism *stood for*—and guaranteed—continuity with the past. (Greenberg had, of course, made it clear that that dismantling had “its own continuity and tradition,” but the idea that the avant-garde had *its own* tradition would have given Kramer pause.⁸⁸⁷) Had the theory of modernism that Greenberg offered in “Modernist Painting” not been grounded in—or, as I’m arguing, had it not grounded—tradition, it’s unlikely that Kramer would have been so eager to publish this piece. Greenberg was speaking the critical language of the *ARTS* critic, although the “governing myth” of his criticism would become increasingly problematic for Kramer. “Modernist painting,” Greenberg writes, “shows, precisely by its resistance to the sculptural, how firmly attached it remains to tradition beneath and beyond all appearances to the contrary.”⁸⁸⁸

Greenberg also addresses the issue of criticism in this essay. Joining the long list of critics who had distinguished between criticism and journalism, he adds a third term: “Most of the things that get written about Modernist art still belong to journalism rather than to criticism or art history.” We don’t find out what “art history” is doing in this sentence until Greenberg explains that “each new phase” of Modernist art, rather than making “a decisive break” with the past or heralding a new epoch in art, “takes its place in the intelligible continuity of taste and tradition.”⁸⁸⁹ Kramer equated art history with tradition; Greenberg equates it with Modernism. The essay ends with a sentence that, but for its crucial term (modernism), could almost have been written by Mather or Cortisoz: “Lacking the past of art, and the need and compulsion to maintain standards of excellence, Modernist art would

⁸⁸⁷ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3*, 217.

⁸⁸⁸ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4*, 88.

⁸⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

lack both substance and justification.” Modernism might lack “justification” without the “past of art,” but, as Greenberg argues, the meaning of that past depended on this theory: “[T]hough the past did appreciate [Leonardo, Raphael, Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt, Watteau] justly,” he writes, “it often gave wrong or irrelevant reasons for doing so.”⁸⁹⁰

Whereas tradition “stabilized judgment and purified taste” according to Cortisoz, tradition itself was now guaranteed by (Greenbergian) Modernism. Kramer collapsed modernism into traditionalism; Greenberg inverts this formula, collapsing tradition into modernism.

Maintaining “standards of excellence” was, of course, a crucial aspect of the aesthetic criticism of the interwar period, but Greenberg’s standards apply to the discipline of “art,” or, more precisely, the medium of painting, rather than “aesthetics.” The change in the order of art discourse that was taking place in the art magazines—its convergence with critical discourse—was both reflected in and produced, in part, by this text. With this “position paper” Greenberg sought to impose his “definition of the artist” within the space of the art press, which means he now occupied a clearly delineated position within the art critical field. Just as Ransom had not intended to offer an *alternative* to the other positions in the field, Greenberg’s position-taking was an “attempt to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the artist,” as Bourdieu put it, since the critical construction that this essay offered wasn’t simply a framework for understanding artworks, it was a theory for determining what counted as an artwork. Kramer clearly felt that the bigger threat to his traditionalist view of the “work itself” came from work that was blurring boundaries (Kaprow) than from Greenberg’s attempt to define the boundaries. This essay (and the publication of *Art and Culture* later that year) would have an enormous impact on

⁸⁹⁰ Ibid., 93; 92.

younger critics, like Fried, who began writing the London Letter for *ARTS* in December 1961 (the month after Kramer left the magazine).

“Modernist Painting” is, in fact, an essay about criticism. Because Kant “was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism,” Greenberg writes in the opening paragraph, he was “the first real Modernist.”⁸⁹¹ But Modernism, as Greenberg theorizes it in this essay, is not the modernism he had referred to in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” In the first chapter I argued that “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” was produced within a different discourse and for a different public. In 1961 Greenberg was no longer writing for the “band of comprehenders” who had praised his earlier essay (Louise Bogan, Delmore Schwartz, et al.); rather, he was writing for a rapidly professionalizing art public that included artists who knew “more about the history of our field, the infinity of its alternatives, than artists ever knew before,” as Allan Kaprow would put it three years later.⁸⁹² I argued, as well, that Greenberg’s concern in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” was not the producers or consumers of culture, but culture itself. While Greenberg argued for the criticality of the avant-garde (or avant-garde culture) in the earlier essay, he focuses here on the immanence of Modernism’s criticality, its “criticism from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized.”⁸⁹³ This is what Clark was referring to when he objected to the idea that “the arts could be their own justification.” What was at stake in this essay was not

⁸⁹¹ Ibid., 85.

⁸⁹² Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 46.

⁸⁹³ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4*, 85. We’re a long way from the statement Greenberg made in the opening paragraph of “Towards a Newer Laocoön”: “It is quite easy to show that abstract art like every other cultural phenomenon reflects the social and other circumstances of the age in which its creators live, and that there is nothing inside art itself, disconnected from history, which compels it to go in one direction or another.” Clement Greenberg, “Towards a Newer Laocoön,” *Partisan Review* VII, no. 4 (August 1940): 296.

the “survival of culture” but the “purity” (Clark is right about that here) of the medium, which was the guarantor of the work’s “quality.”⁸⁹⁴

Before I move on, I want to revisit Rosenberg’s “Everyman a Professional,” which described the professionalization of art and criticism in the terms laid out by Greenberg’s essay. “Modernist Painting” was not only a position paper; it also offered a “technical basis” for the profession of criticism. In 1964 Harold Wilensky published an article titled “The Professionalization of Everyone?” in the *American Journal of Sociology*, which addressed the “recurrent idea” that “the labor force as a whole is in one way or another becoming professionalized.” Wilensky argues that, “any occupation wishing to exercise professional authority must find a technical basis for it,” and that, “the job of the professional is *technical*.”⁸⁹⁵ I argued that the reviews that Greenberg published in *The Nation* represented an attempt to fuse cultural criticism and technical criticism, but these reviews had not

⁸⁹⁴ Although Clark quotes “Modernist Painting,” I would argue that he is actually referring to Fried’s reading of Greenberg. In the fall of 1964, Fried published “Modernist Painting and Formal Criticism” in which he argued that, in spite of Greenberg’s essays, the “fundamental character of the new art” had not been adequately understood. He goes on to say that, “In a sense, modernist art in this century finished what society in the nineteenth began: the alienation of the artist from the general preoccupations of the culture in which he is embedded, and the prizing loose of art itself from the concerns, aims and ideals of that culture. With the achievements of Cubism in the first and second decades of this century, if not before, painting and sculpture became free to pursue concerns intrinsic to their respective media.” Fried qualifies this statement slightly in his 1965 introduction to *Three American Painters* (which is adapted from the earlier essay) by acknowledging both that, “the change in question cannot be understood apart from a consideration of economic and other non-artistic factors” and (in a footnote) that “this is dangerously over-simplified,” but still concludes that “the tendency of ambitious art” has been “to become more and more concerned with problems and issues intrinsic to itself.” See Michael Fried, “Modernist Painting and Formal Criticism,” *The American Scholar* 33, no. 4 (October 1964): 646; Michael Fried, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella* (Cambridge, Mass: Fogg Art Museum, 1965), 7; 50.

⁸⁹⁵ Harold L. Wilensky, “The Professionalization of Everyone?,” *American Journal of Sociology* 70, no. 2 (September 1964): 138. In addition to finding a “technical basis for it” the “exercise of professional authority” included several elements that would be addressed by critics in the mid-60s. The full sentence reads: “Any occupation wishing to exercise professional authority must find a technical basis for it, assert an exclusive jurisdiction to standards of training, and convince the public that its services are uniquely trustworthy.” Also see Michael Fried in *Art Criticism in the Sixties* (New York: October House, 1967), n.p.

offered a theory or methodology that would have allowed them to serve as the technical basis for the profession of criticism (at least not explicitly). This was provided by Greenberg's theorization of modernism.

But the "technical" criterion was not enough: professional status was also governed, Wilensky writes, "by the degree to which the practitioners conform to a set of moral norms that characterize the established professions."⁸⁹⁶ Fried understood modernist art (and formalist criticism) in precisely these terms. As he wrote in the introduction to *Three American Painters*, which was published in 1965, "[W]hile modernist painting has increasingly divorced itself from the concerns of the society in which it precariously flourishes, the actual dialectic by which it is made has taken on more and more of the denseness, structure, and complexity of moral experience."⁸⁹⁷ And, just as Ransom had linked the professionalization of literary criticism to its disciplinarity, Phil Leider, who edited *Artforum* in the 60s, would later speak of Fried's practice as a "discipline." Critical practice became fully professionalized, I would argue, not in Greenberg's practice but in Fried's (Leider alluded to this, arguing that Fried "knew that he was creating a serious discipline of art criticism in America that did not exist prior to him, whose only previous source was maybe [Greenberg]").⁸⁹⁸ Greenberg might be said to have provided the "technical" basis for the profession, but Fried supplied the moral component.

The "transformation in a practice" (or "change in the order of discourse") that had begun in the 50s with the development of a critical field would culminate in the professionalization of criticism. Criticism would become fully professionalized—in Wilensky's

⁸⁹⁶ Wilensky, "The Professionalization of Everyone?," 140.

⁸⁹⁷ Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, 219.

⁸⁹⁸ Newman, *Challenging Art*, 150.

terms—with the codification by Fried of what came to be known as “modernist formalism” (or “formalist modernism”). Although the generation of formalist critics for whom Greenberg’s criticism served as a model were trained as art historians, there was no push (in the 60s at least) to move criticism into the academy, as Ransom had sought to do. This would not happen until the 70s. The site of the critical art discourse that developed in the 60s was the art magazine. As Mel Bochner put it in 1973, “A critic has a ‘job,’ a historian has a ‘post.’”⁸⁹⁹

From Aesthetics to Art

Several months after “Modernist Painting” appeared in the yearbook, Kramer announced a new reviewing policy at the magazine. Two of the magazine’s “best writers,” Tillim and Raynor, would now select and review the shows that would appear in “In the Galleries,” which would therefore represent “the selective results, rather than the comprehensive history” of these critics’ monthly rounds. With the steady, indeed “drastic,” increase in the number of galleries that had occurred over the last two or three years, Kramer complained, the number of exhibitions “purporting to be serious” had increased exponentially. The work shown in these exhibitions—“student work, amateurism, psychotherapy, and sheer unclassifiable junk”—didn’t warrant the attention of serious critics since it was “beyond the reach of meaningful discussion.” Claiming that this situation had caused “widespread (and we believe, justified) feelings of disgust with the whole spectacle,” Kramer desperately hoped that neglect of this work by the two critics would dissuade the magazine’s readers from paying attention to it. He believed, in other words, that Tillim and Raynor weren’t just the “best writers,” but were also the most discerning critics. Like Marshall before him,

⁸⁹⁹ Mel Bochner, “Review of Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972,” *Artforum* XI, no. 10 (June 1973): 74.

Kramer argued that the new policy would make for “a more vital, more committed and more interesting department.”⁹⁰⁰

This policy was duly implemented—and three contributing editors were summarily dismissed—but the real problem turned out to be that Kramer himself was unable to swallow his “disgust” with the “spectacle” of contemporary art, and he ended up leaving the magazine two months later (although he continued to contribute articles until he was hired by the *New York Times* in 1965). James Mellow, who took over as editor, kept Kramer’s policy intact but promptly rehired Judd.⁹⁰¹ As a result, Tillim, Raynor and Judd would write all the reviews published in the magazine for the next three years (Jane Harrison joined them for about six months in 1964). This series of events might have changed the course of postwar criticism, since it’s not clear whether Judd would have continued to write criticism had he not been rehired.⁹⁰²

Kramer’s position on critical discourse initially led him to hire Judd—and, ultimately, to fire him. This is not to say that Kramer developed the new policy *in order* to fire Judd, but I would argue that he was as interested in getting rid of Judd as he was in promoting Raynor and Tillim. In any event, things were already headed in this direction by the time Kramer made his announcement: not only were Raynor and Tillim reviewing more shows than the other writers (up to twice as many), but the number of reviewers had been shrinking steadily since Kramer took over as editor. Of the three other regular

⁹⁰⁰ Hilton Kramer, “Editor’s Notes,” *ARTS* 35, no. 10 (September 1961): 6.

⁹⁰¹ See Donald Judd, “Introduction,” *Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Nova Scotia, Canada: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975): vii.

⁹⁰² He might have returned to *ARTnews*, although it’s not clear that that would have been an option. Irving Sandler was writing the New York Letter for *Art International* and *Artforum* was still some months away from being launched. *Art in America* was still a quarterly.

contributors—Judd, Helen De Mott, and Lawrence Smith—Judd was the only one whose criticism might have posed a problem for Kramer. Smith was not only a less fluent writer than his peers (“The portraits... usually have the head jammed up full-face into the picture plane, with the lines of the jaw and hair making a frame”), but he sometimes shaded into the kind of rhetorical excess that Kramer could not abide (“Spiky projections and projecting forms... make each piece as friendly and caressable as an old lawnmower”).⁹⁰³ And, in De Mott’s case, even when the magazine was publishing a hundred reviews per month, she was only contributing a handful to each issue.

The reason for Judd’s dismissal wasn’t simply that he was reviewing work that Kramer deemed to be “beyond the reach of meaningful discussion” (the shows were assigned by the assistant editor, Esta Leslie); it wasn’t even that he was reviewing some of this work favorably. It was, I would argue, Judd’s contextualization and “explication” (or critical construction) of the work that posed the biggest problem for him at *ARTS*—the real issue was that his critical approach represented a challenge to Kramer’s traditionalist “definition of the artist.” Judd had not yet theorized the “specific object” at this point and his critical position didn’t have a “governing ‘myth,’” but he rejected the “current misconception” that “art is free of its history and capable of being reused in a fairly recognizable form,” as he put it in the issue of the magazine that preceded Kramer’s announcement.⁹⁰⁴ For Judd, who did graduate work in art history at Columbia in the late 50s (he studied under Meyer Schapiro and Rudolph Wittkower), criticism required the work’s historical contextualization.

⁹⁰³ Lawrence Smith, “Jan Muller,” *ARTS* 35, no. 7 (April 1961): 51; Lawrence Smith, “Reuben Kadish,” *ARTS* 35, no. 5 (February 1961): 51-52.

⁹⁰⁴ Judd, *Donald Judd*, 39.

Kramer's rejection of a book review that he commissioned from Judd might provide a clue about Judd's departure. Judd notes that he was asked to review Bryan Robertson's *Jackson Pollock* (Thames & Hudson) for the February 1961 issue of the magazine, but that Kramer rejected the text he submitted. It seems unlikely that the harshness of the review would have bothered Kramer; however, in addition to the fact that Judd was convinced of Pollock's importance, Kramer might have taken issue with Judd's contention that the author made no effort "to establish new categories, oppositions, and purposes within the work, and comparisons and results outside of it, all of which are urgently needed for an estimate and understanding of Pollock."⁹⁰⁵ Of course, there's no knowing why Kramer rejected the review, but it's not hard to imagine him disapproving of the "new categories" that Judd called for (or the need for "comparisons and results outside of it"). This would have been the first piece Judd published in the front of the magazine (and he wasn't invited to write any other book reviews or features while Kramer was editor).

Judd would not have claimed, as Tillim had, that an artist's work could belong "at once to the past... and to the present." Indeed, he argued (about Tillim's work no less) that, "The paintings from 1953 to 1957 are strong geometric ones; during the course of 1957 Tillim began a representational style which he has continued to the present. The change was a serious mistake. Previously he could advance; currently he is in a historical cul-de-sac." And, in contrast to Tillim's reluctance to conclude that Soyer's style was "belated," Judd wrote that most of Tillim's "realistic works" had "the necessary contradictions of any belated style."⁹⁰⁶ Judd was also quick to point out historical "confusion": "A decade less,

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁹⁰⁶ Ibid., 23.

little fault could be found with the development of [Abram Schlemowitz's] welded sculpture... The linearity and florid color are Lassaw's or at best public domain"; "[Edward] Dugmore is a fairly good painter as the world goes. But he is confused historically and stylistically, and so formally and finally, in expression." On the other hand, he found James Weeks's composition "historically respectable."⁹⁰⁷

Describing the work carefully and thoroughly in his earliest reviews, Judd focused on "judging good from bad." He would not fully develop either his laconic writing style or his critical vocabulary until he had been writing for a couple of years, but he was already using the terms "credible" and "interesting"—the term that would trouble Fried so much in the late 60s—to gauge the critical value of the work. His understanding of the art of the recent past guided his judgments of the originality of new work: he recognized the "importance" of Johns and the "possibilities" opened up by Chamberlain's colored sculpture.⁹⁰⁸ But he had not yet begun to encounter the work that he would later describe as "something of an object," much less the "specificity" that would characterize many of those objects.⁹⁰⁹ What distinguished him from the other *ARTS* reviewers was his belief that the work's historical context mattered (and that current work built upon the art of the recent past). Judd agreed, in the broadest sense, with Greenberg's claim, in "American-Type Painting," that, "To produce important art it is necessary as a rule to digest the major art of the preceding period, or periods," but the critical framework that he would develop after a few years of reviewing derived from the work ("the similarities are selected from the

⁹⁰⁷ Ibid., 39; 43; 44.

⁹⁰⁸ Ibid., 10; 14.

⁹⁰⁹ Ibid., 183.

work”)—not from any kind of “working hypothesis.”⁹¹⁰ Despite his adherence to the principal convention of technical criticism (“judging good from bad”), Judd rejected its “strictly aesthetic standard,” refusing, as well, the traditionalism that Kramer believed to be the foundation upon which criticism itself was based.

I want to return, once more, to Eliot’s essay on tradition, since this was the issue that undergirded the editorial (and career) decisions that Kramer was making in the early 60s. Following the traditionalists (Mather and Cortisoz), Kramer believed that art needed to change, but only within the bounds of its established traditions. Criticism was not a response to what artists were doing; instead, it worked to enforce the “laws inherent in the making of a good picture.”⁹¹¹ Judd, like Bourne and Greenberg before him (i.e. the critic Greenberg had been in the early 40s), was convinced that critics had an integral role to play in cultural production—in part by critiquing artists who were “acquiring” styles without adding anything to them or “manufacturing” their work by “repeating it with slight variation.” He might not have thought of it this way (and certainly never used this term), but Judd was as worried about Alexandrianism as Greenberg was. Tradition fused the “timeless” and the “temporal” into a “simultaneous existence,” according to Eliot, but Judd would have rejected the notion of “timelessness.” The “radical” position that he took at *ARTS* was that it was art’s history—not the traditions that Kramer believed should be preserved—that mattered. As he wrote in 1962 (in spite of Weeks’s “historically respectable” composition),

[James] McGarrell’s and [James] Weeks’ idea of art is based on a few techniques and qualities much praised in art-survey books, which seldom

⁹¹⁰ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3*, 218; Judd, *Donald Judd*, 181.

⁹¹¹ Kramer, “Hartley’s Lonely Vigil,” 23.

make it clear that these techniques occurred as necessarily at a given time as social or scientific events, that they were radical inventions at the moment and that the few stereotyped ‘great’ virtues are hardly the only ones which have existed or can exist. There is also the point that the Western tradition is finished—and hence its parts.⁹¹²

The work that Judd found “interesting” in the late 50s and early 60s didn’t conform to the aesthetic standards that he associated with a tradition that he believed to be “finished.”

Instead, this work might be said to have been “historically aware.”

Judd’s “interest” is analogous to Greenberg’s “quality” in the sense that it’s also a term that operates within a critical framework, but this doesn’t make Judd a kind of minimalist Greenberg, as James Meyer argues (precisely because these terms aren’t interchangeable: it wasn’t just a matter of *what* these terms meant but *how* they meant). What made these critics different from their peers—and similar to each other—in the early 60s was not their mutual “obsession” with Greenbergian quality, but their historical understanding of art, including, most crucially, their belief that abstract art was the most advanced.⁹¹³ (This is how I would interpret Judd’s 1991 claim that he thought he and Greenberg “wanted the same thing.”⁹¹⁴) Although they didn’t share the same understanding of it, history, not tradition, was a determining factor in their criticism (for Judd it was a determinant in and of itself while for Greenberg it was the determining factor *for* tradition). Judd didn’t develop the “teleological, historicist model of Greenberg that he otherwise criticized,” *pace* Meyer; rather, in the mid-60s he would espouse a decentered (and therefore plural) model of art history whose various strands (or “categories after the fact”)

⁹¹² Judd, *Donald Judd*, 44.

⁹¹³ James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 140.

⁹¹⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*

developed at different rates and in different directions.⁹¹⁵ “Although it is true that one form may be better, more advanced, than another,” Judd wrote in 1964, “it is also true that art isn’t so neat as to be simply linear. There isn’t even one line anyway, since the kinds of art are so various.”⁹¹⁶ If there were “various kinds of art,” there couldn’t be a single (formal) response to any given development; the “present possibilities” were manifold even if certain possibilities were historically foreclosed (“right now,” he wrote in the same essay, “things are fairly closed for Abstract Expressionism.”)⁹¹⁷ This is why he could argue that, “The only reason [John] Chamberlain is not the best American sculptor under forty is the incommensurability of the ‘best’ which makes it arbitrary to say so,” and, further, that, “criticism [of Chamberlain’s work] based on admiration for the part-to-part articulation, the linearity and planarity of David Smith’s sculpture is not relevant.”⁹¹⁸

We don’t think of Judd as sharing a historical consciousness with Greenberg—both because he didn’t share Greenberg’s particular historical consciousness and because we think of him as Greenberg’s antithesis. And then there’s his famous statement that, “Linear history has unraveled somewhat.”⁹¹⁹ That’s Judd writing in 1964, not long before he would suspend his critical practice. But, if he could claim that it had (recently) become unraveled, it means there was something to unravel (and, more to the point, this statement doesn’t

⁹¹⁵ Ibid. The full sentence reads: “Adopting the teleological, historicist model of Greenberg he otherwise criticized, Judd asserted that the achievement of formal quality comparable to that of the great art of the past was a significant aspiration for an artist.” I would also argue that “Specific Objects” is not “an altogether original narrative of modern art that leads, with a seeming inevitability, from the essentially Cubist art of ‘Europe’ to the non-relational ‘American’ work of Judd and his contemporaries.” (Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, 134).

⁹¹⁶ Judd, *Donald Judd*, 150.

⁹¹⁷ Ibid.

⁹¹⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁹¹⁹ Ibid., 181.

signal a rejection of history altogether). It was these two critics, I want to argue, who shifted the terms not only of the critical debate but of criticism itself. Rosenberg had pinpointed the shift that was taking place in the 50s, from the general (cultural criticism) to the specific (criticism of the individual arts)—and the professionalization that this entailed. And specificity would be a crucial term in the critical debate of the 60s. But whether that specificity applied to a particular medium or to the general category of three-dimensional work, it would be understood historically. What the professionalization of both art and criticism pointed to was an artistic field that had reached an “advanced stage” of its history, as Bourdieu put it, which meant that history itself was becoming “immanent in the functioning of the field.” To meet the “objective demands” of this field, Bourdieu argued, producers and consumers must “possess the whole history of the field.”⁹²⁰ This is what Kaprow meant when he wrote, in the line that I quoted before, that artists knew “more about the history of [their] field” than they had ever known before—and what the critical practices of Greenberg and Judd both reflected and performed.

Responding to the exchange between Rudikoff and Sandler, Tillim wrote in a letter to the editor of *ARTS* that, “These two people don’t really understand each other; their ‘disciplines’ do not correspond because they expect different things from art... [W]ithin the broadest limits of their mutual sympathies for abstract art, there is nothing like a common understanding as to what it is roughly about.”⁹²¹ In the 50s, the critics writing for the two principal art magazines were committed to different enterprises: “writing” and “(technical) criticism.” However, it wasn’t only their disciplines that didn’t correspond; the object of

⁹²⁰ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 60–61.

⁹²¹ Tillim, “A Critic Comments,” 5.

their respective discourses differed as well. Having rejected the traditional object of art discourse (aesthetics), Judd might be said to have “shared a common understanding” as to what art was “roughly about” with Greenberg (the historical discipline of art). The intensity of the struggle over the definition of the artist that ensued was related, in some ways, to the *common ground* shared by the formalist critics and the artist-critics of the 60s. The definition that each of these critics would attempt to impose in the early 60s shared a history even if their understanding of the way history functioned differed. Modernism is what Greenberg meant by the term “history”; for Judd, art had a history but lacked a trajectory.

While Greenberg had feared for the “survival of culture in general” in 1939, what was at stake for both Judd and Greenberg two decades later was art itself. On one hand, as Relyea argues, the new audience was appropriating high art according to the terms set by “marketing efforts” rather than by the art itself. On the other hand, as Kaprow argued in 1964 in “The Artist as a Man of the World,” “[I]f artists were in hell in 1946, now they are in business.”⁹²² Art’s increasing professionalization and the growing interest in it of the middle class meant that the discipline itself was under threat. If the galleries were “uninclined” to show anything other than New York School painting in the late 50s, part of the problem, as Judd saw it, was that, “None of these artists were criticized.” In the 40s the little magazine might have been an agent for “stirring up the good writing of the future,” but Judd believed that the (contemporaneous) critic could shape the art of the present and help determine its cultural value. In the interwar period, critics like Mather, Watson, and

⁹²² Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, 47; “Society nowadays—at least a rapidly growing part of it—pursues artists instead of exiling them. Unconsciously, it sees them as societal representatives; consciously, it is looking for diversion and status.” See *ibid.*, 49.

McBride, among others, believed that criticism's function was to "facilitate and heighten appreciation," but for Judd, the discourse on the work was "not a simple side-effect, designed to encourage its apprehension and appreciation, but a moment which is part of the production of the work, of its meaning and its value."⁹²³ In Greenberg's case, since avant-garde art had not managed to "acquire a new content for itself," as he'd written in 1953, something else would need to keep culture moving (now that he had given up on the prospect of a cultivated majority), and it wasn't a very big step from the self-reflexivity that abstract art had depended on for its aesthetic validity to the self-criticality of modernist painting—except that in the former case, the work's actual historical context still counted. That link was lost with the formalist narrative that Greenberg began to adopt in the mid-50s; the loss of this link was also what enabled Greenberg's turn to tradition.

Greenberg wrote in the early 40s that if younger poets were going to "insist on wondering what's going to happen to us all," they could at least try to understand history. "If they do this," he argued, "they will have ideas, and if they have ideas they will have programs, and if they have programs they will take sides."⁹²⁴ The artwork's historicity was central to the convergence of art discourse and critical discourse in the art magazines of the 50s and the temporality of the work itself would dominate the art discourse of the 60s. "Taking sides" in the 60s would have everything to do with (art) history.

⁹²³ Clark, *Forbes Watson*, 30; Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 170.

⁹²⁴ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1*, 47.

Conclusion

“To cultivate and to argue,” James Mellow wrote in an editorial published in 1964, “somewhere between these two activities lies the function of a magazine.”⁹²⁵ Cultivation, or some notion of it, had been a goal of the editors of *ARTS Magazine*, as it was now called, dating back to the 40s. The “primary function” of art critics, Peyton Boswell Jr. had argued in 1941, was “to establish for their public a standard of aesthetic values.”⁹²⁶ By the mid-60s, critics (and art magazines) were expected to fulfill a different function. Mellow went on to say that he thought *ARTS Magazine* had “helped raise the level of writing about art to one of responsible, if argumentative discussion.”⁹²⁷ Similarly, when *Artforum* began publication two years earlier, it had contained a brief mission statement that read, in part, “*Artforum* presents a medium for free exchange of critical opinion. [The ‘Forum’ section] will contain a lot of divergent and contradictory opinion.”⁹²⁸ The idea that an art magazine might constitute a “medium for free exchange” or offer “argumentative discussion” would have baffled the editors of *ARTnews* or *ARTS* as recently as the early 50s.

What Mellow’s claim acknowledges, of course, is the emergence of the critical field. Kramer had argued for the “elucidation” of the artwork, and the *belles-lettrism* of the *ARTnews* reviewers provided something closer to its “illumination.” Either way, the critical construction (or explication) of the work was avoided. By 1962, when *Artforum* was launched, a transformation had occurred in the practice of art criticism and the art magazine itself had become a different site—one in which the goal was no longer to “*make art news*” or to “interpret the already much-interpreted classics” but to critically position

⁹²⁵ James Mellow, “Editorial,” *Arts Magazine* 39, no. 2 (November 1964): 6.

⁹²⁶ Boswell, Jr., “On Critical Kindness,” 3.

⁹²⁷ Mellow, “Editorial,” 6.

⁹²⁸ “Unsigned Statement,” *Artforum* 1, no. 1 (June 1962): 2.

contemporary art practices. The critical position-takings that made up the critical field that had emerged differed from the critical positions that Buck's diagram had mapped, offering "a construction of the intelligibility of the art of their time."

In this dissertation I have attempted to understand the discursive shift, or change in the order of discourse, that occurred in the practice of criticism in the U.S. between the 30s and the early 60s. In the process, I have historicized Greenberg's use of the term "modernism," which originally meant something like what Bourdieu referred to as the "consecrated avant-garde" (artists and writers like Picasso and T. S. Eliot). Greenberg would not propose a formalist narrative of contemporary art until the 50s. That Greenberg's theorization of modernism in the early 60s played an important part in the professionalization of criticism—giving this profession the "technical basis" that it required—is no coincidence. But the shift that criticism underwent in the 60s is not reducible to the emergence of formalist criticism. The change in the order of discourse involved a larger change in the practice of criticism itself, producing what I have called a critical art discourse. Greenberg and Judd would take up different positions within the critical field, but Judd's practice emerged in tandem with Greenberg's theorization of modernism, not in response to it. And these critics shared an understanding that art's historical context mattered.

Finally, there's the issue of the shift in the object of discourse. At the moment when art became the object of critical discourse, discourse began to construct that object. Judd's "specific object" was dependent on its historicity—"the singleness of objects is related to the singleness of the best painting of the early 50s" and "the sense of singleness also has a

duration”—but the specific object could be said to have emerged *as art* “only in discourse.”⁹²⁹ Which is not to say that the objects that this term comprehended weren’t art to begin with, only that this “category after the fact” emerged in relation to discourse, offering the critic a way to judge the value of what Judd called “three-dimensional work” without having to have recourse to a traditional (Kramer) or conventional (Greenberg) standard. Foucault argued that it was necessary to understand discourse as “a practice that systematically forms the object of which it speaks” and to do this it was necessary to jettison “the enigmatic treasure of ‘things’ anterior to discourse” for the “regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse.”⁹³⁰ In the 30s and 40s, art discourse had assumed—and depended on—the existence of “things” (paintings and sculptures) anterior to discourse. Greenberg attempted to naturalize the formation of the object of which modernist discourse spoke by grounding modernist art in the specificity of its medium (retaining, in the process, the appearance of its anteriority), since in order to call what one was judging “art,” one had to assume a definition of art that presupposed its proper judgment. While Judd could have chosen another “common element” to focus on—“These categories are categories only by the common presence of a single very general aspect,” he wrote, “A person could select other common elements which would make other groups”—it’s no coincidence that specificity is the attribute he seized on.⁹³¹ By demonstrating that the medium’s defining property—specificity—had itself emerged “only in discourse,” the specific object revealed the constructedness of the “object of which modernist discourse spoke” (i.e. the formalist art object).

⁹²⁹ Judd, *Donald Judd*, 152; 182.

⁹³⁰ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 47-48.

⁹³¹ Judd, *Donald Judd*, 151.

By the mid-60s discourse would become central not only to the critical construction of art objects but to art practice itself, and, as Relyea argues, it would become “the dominant medium in art” by the late 70s.⁹³² In the interim, artists like Robert Smithson and Mel Bochner extended the challenge that Judd posed to formalist criticism by refusing to separate their art and criticism in some cases. Both fusing and confusing the discourse and the work, these artists’ critique was leveled at the discursive framework within which the work’s value was produced and not only took the form but the place of criticism. The fact that it’s often difficult to characterize their writing definitively—as criticism, or artwork, or some kind of hybrid—accounts for its effectiveness in subverting what had by then become the critical norm (formalism) as well as its neglect in discussions of the criticism of this period.⁹³³ But that is a subject for another dissertation.

⁹³² Lane Relyea, “All Over and At Once,” in *Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of Their Practice*, ed. Raphael Rubinstein (Lenox, MA: Hard Press Editions, 2006), 50.

⁹³³ A great deal has been written about conceptual art’s “escape attempt” from the gallery and its attendant relocation in art magazines. Stephen Melville, Robert Hobbs, Gary Shapiro, Craig Owens, Suzaan Boettger, and Ann Reynolds have discussed the relationship between Smithson’s work and writings; Pamela Lee has dealt with another aspect of his writings. Eric de Bruyn published an article on one of Bochner’s essays. James Meyer has discussed these artists’ more conventional criticism of minimal art; however, neither he nor any of the aforementioned writers discusses the texts that function in the liminal space between critical essay and artwork as criticism.

Illustrations



Figure 1: **Umberto Boccioni**
Unique Forms of Continuity in Space, 1913
Bronze
47 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 35 x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990.38.3
Bequest of Lydia Winston Malbin, 1989
Retrieved December 17, 2015 from
<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/485540>

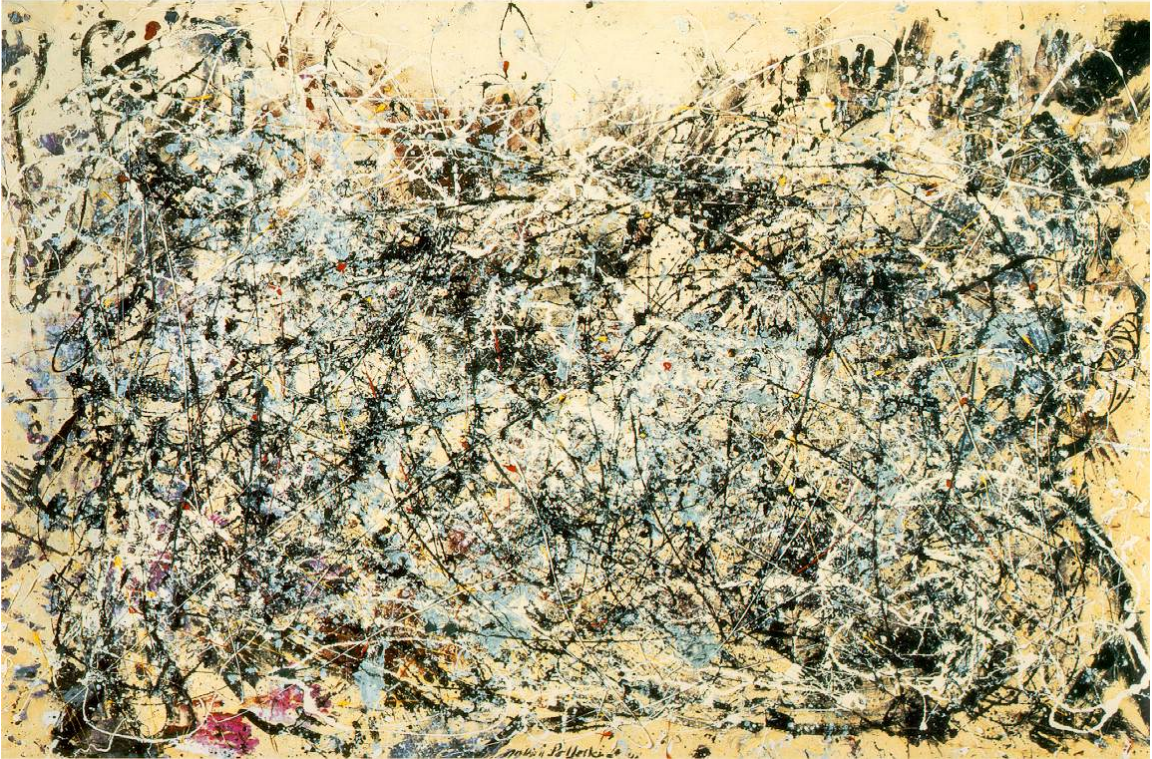


Figure 2: **Jackson Pollock**
Number 1A, 1948
Oil and enamel on canvas
68 x 96 x 8 inches
Museum of Modern Art, New York, 77.1950
Purchase
Retrieved December 17, 2015 from
<http://www.wikiart.org/en/jackson-pollock/no-1-1948#supersized-artistPaintings-185270>

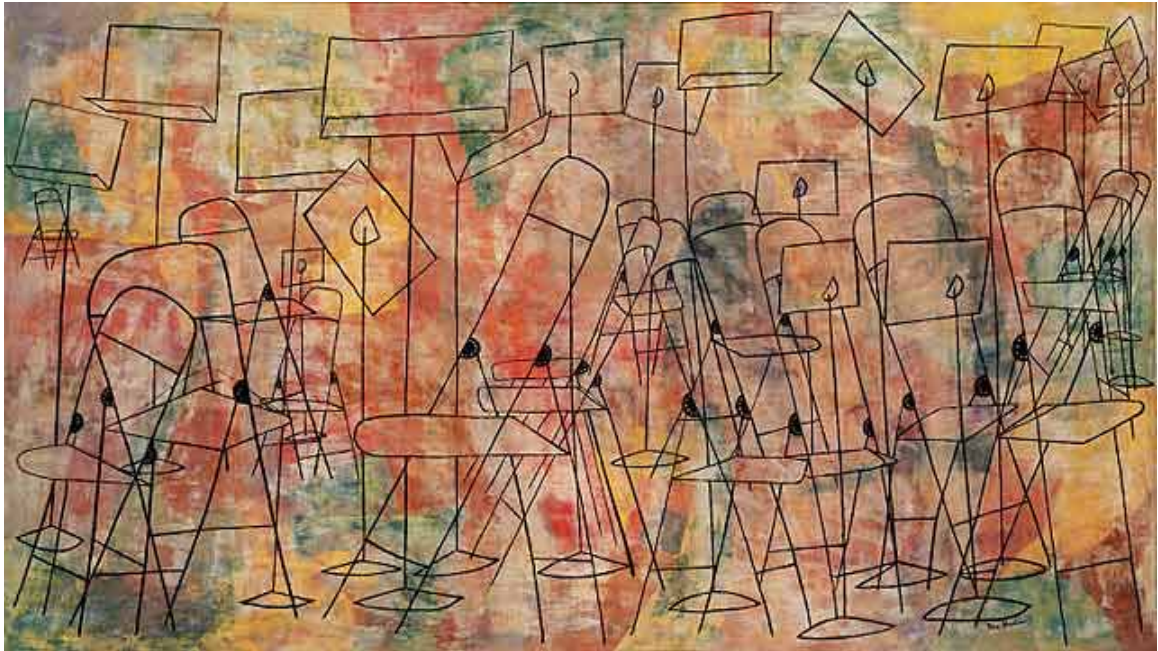


Figure 3: **Ben Shahn**
Silent Music, 1948
Casein on fabric on plywood panel
48 x 83 ½ inches
The Phillips Collection, Washington DC
Retrieved December 21, 2015 from
http://www.phillipscollection.org/research/american_art/artwork/Shahn-Silent_Music.htm



Figure 4: **Jackson Pollock**
Number 7, 1950
Oil, enamel, and aluminum paint on canvas
23 1/16 x 105 3/4 inches
Museum of Modern Art, New York, 719.1993
Gift of Sylvia Slifka in honor of William Rubin
Retrieved December 17, 2015 from
<http://www.moma.org/collection/works/80310?locale=en>



Figure 5: **Arshile Gorky**
Summation, 1947
Pencil, pastel, and charcoal on buff paper mounted on composition board
79 5/8 x 101 3/4 inches
Museum of Modern Art, New York, 234.1969
Nina and Gordon Bunshaft Fund
Retrieved December 17, 2015 from
<http://www.moma.org/collection/works/79222?locale=en>



Figure 6: **Jackson Pollock**
Shimmering Substance, 1946
Oil on canvas
30 1/8 x 24 1/4 inches
Museum of Modern Art, New York, 6.1968
Mr. and Mrs. Albert Lewin and Mrs. Sam A. Lewisohn Funds
Retrieved December 17, 2015 from
<http://www.moma.org/collection/works/78376?locale=en>



Figure 7: Jackson Pollock
Easter and the Totem, 1953
Oil on canvas
82 1/8 x 58 inches
Museum of Modern Art, New York, 425.1980
Gift of Lee Krasner in memory of Jackson Pollock
Retrieved December 17, 2015 from
<http://www.moma.org/collection/works/79678?locale=en>

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