"The Deep Ludicrousness of Lyric": The Poet in T. J. Clark

ELLEN LEVY, PRATT INSTITUTE

Our brief for this issue of *Genre* was to trace some part of the process of learning to read poems, but I seem to have taken a wrong turn somewhere, having ended up choosing for my subject not a literary critic, but an art historian. Or perhaps not so wrong a turn after all, since, as I will discuss a little later, in swerving away from the subject of poetry and toward that of visual art, I am following what is by now a well-marked path in the literary field. Still, one might ask, am I thereby trying to avoid addressing the question of how one learns to read poems? A question, I will admit, that seems to me an increasingly vexed one, both in my field and in the culture at large, for reasons that I will also touch on in what follows. And yet I nonetheless hope that this seeming swerve away from the subject of poetry may bring me back to it in the end, since I see this particular art historian, T. J. Clark, as the natural heir of the kinds of literary critics who have taught me most in the past, and what's more, I think that Clark sees himself this way. For Clark, I will argue, the question of whether it is still possible for us to go on learning to read poetry is an urgent one. "Lyric cannot be expunged by modernism, only repressed," he declares toward the end of his critical summa, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, although it must be said that neither Clark nor his art-world readers would claim that what he means here by *lyric* is *poetry* (1999, 401). I will test the plausibility of this claim nonetheless, on the hunch that the question of what Clark means by *lyric* has a crucial bearing on the question of what it means to be able to go on learning to read poems.

First, though, let me briefly retrace the steps that led me to think of Clark in this context. For me, as for many who will read this, "learning to read poems"

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meant learning to close-read poems according to protocols prescribed by the New Critics—or rather, a version of those protocols that had been progressively reduced over a couple of decades of classroom use until the many and varied sociocultural investments of that many and varied critical cohort had been pared away and all we had left to contemplate was the poem itself. Of course, I knew nothing of this history at the time, nor, I think, did Mr. Steele, the teacher of my high school class Terse Verse, a very eccentric man, not trained as an English teacher but passionately attached to Emily Dickinson, William Blake, and a handful of *New Yorker* poets, especially Richard Wilbur and May Swenson. Mr. Steele's tastes, that is, were orthodox, as was his way of reading line by line, word by word, until the total meaning of each poem neatly, beautifully, added up. But as others have remarked, the paradox of New Critical constraints on what and how to read was that these could prove liberating for new readers of poems, like me and my classmates, and autodidacts like my teacher, insofar as they disburdened us of the anxious sense that we did not yet, and might never, know enough to fully grasp what we were reading. Thus, there was nothing orthodox about Mr. Steele's *style* of teaching, which was highly partial, more instinctive than methodical, and clearly driven by the love of the thing, with troubling and exciting glimmers of other urgencies behind that love.

For good and ill, the outlines of my readerly *beau idéal* were fixed for some years to come; a certain wildness licensed by New Critical constraints distinguished such subsequent critical models as Randall Jarrell, William Empson, R. P. Blackmur, and (at the outer limits) Harold Bloom. Then, two developments, one personal, one cultural, made me feel pressed to supplement this canon. First, somewhere in my mid-twenties, I learned to read again from Freud and Marx, and so began to seek for ways of locating the social text in the poem that could nonetheless prove consistent with my earlier commitment to close reading. ("Better," counsels John Ashbery, "to stay cowering / Like this in the early lessons, since the promise of learning / Is a delusion" [2008, 186].) Second, somewhere in the last decades of the last century, poetry, never central to culture in the United States, seemed to fall off our map altogether; which is not, of course, to say that it disappeared, simply that it lost what hope had remained to it of attracting a nonspecialist audience. And along with this hope went the kind of poetry critic whose style is literally and figuratively "undisciplined," that is, personal and nervy because it is designed to attract readers from beyond the bounds of the discipline, even as it signals to those within the discipline that some disciplinary constraints

might yet serve to liberate new energies. For someone with an unabated taste for the nervier sort of close reader, the question was then, where to turn.

In my case, one answer was to critics of visual art, since visual art still attracts a relatively large nonspecialist audience and so can foster a critic like Clark, who has, for good and ill, all of the characteristics of the self-consciously undisciplined reader. As Gail Day, another skeptical admirer of Clark's, puts it, his is a "very particular haunting voice," marked by "the lilting rhythm of self-unraveling ruminations, elliptical thoughts, and his extensive use of the first person, a mode of address that enthralls or irritates his readers in equal measure" (2011, 29). The extravagances of this style, at once doubled back on itself and theatrically outward-turning, derive to some extent from what Day calls Clark's "doubling of address," his sense that he is accountable to two antithetical audiences, "the academic mainstream of art history" and the "political Left and . . . social historians." In Clark's own writing, the art historian's commitment to close reading, or as Day terms it, "particularity," and the Left social historian's commitment to mapping art's relation to "social totality" come into confrontation, and the violence of the struggle between these two aspects of the critic's persona keeps roiling the surface of his prose (44). This internal struggle at once reflects and serves as a prophylactic against the frequent attacks against Clark from without, from those on the left who accuse him of "theoretical inconsistency" and "neoconservatism," and the kind of art historian who finds his "thumbnail analysis of the sociopolitical content of modernism both crude and demeaning."[1]

The latter phrase comes from art historian Michael Fried's response to Clark's assessment of the legacy of their mutual precursor, Clement Greenberg. Fried's attack on Clark on Greenberg is the second of three entries in a much-discussed debate that has had a strong shaping effect on the reputations of all three critics involved. In his rejoinder to Fried's response, Clark concludes that at the core of their argument lies a disagreement about what he calls "close reading." Fried himself doesn't use that phrase; rather, he suggests that Clark is insensitive to the specific properties of individual artworks. In Fried's words, Clark has "shirked the critic's first responsibility," which is to nurture an "intuition" of "the sheer rightness of all the relevant relations at work in" a great painting or sculpture (1986, 75). Clark hears an echo of the New Criticism in the totalizing

1. Rifkin 1985, 492; Fried 1986, 71. For the views of Clark from the cultural right and left at their most extreme, see on the left, Werckmeister 2002, and on the right, Kramer 1985.

formalism of such language, and signals as much, first, by conceding that Fried is right when he "insists on close reading," and then, doubling back on this concession, by implying that Fried has a mistaken "notion of what close reading *is*." A critic like Fried may think, Clark says, that close reading requires "an exclusive and intensive focus, a bracketing of knowledge" that holds aesthetic experience well apart from its social context, but, Clark contends, "In the critics whose close reading I most admire (and my preferences are not eccentric; I have in mind T. S. Eliot or F. R. Leavis, or for that matter Diderot or Coleridge) objects are attended to as instances of a certain history. They are construed from a political point of view" (1986a, 85). Eliot and Leavis: these names serve to dispel any lingering doubts that Clark means to reframe his debate with Fried as a struggle over the legacy of the New Criticism. Fried, as Clark must know but doesn't say here, has cited R. P. Blackmur, his undergraduate advisor at Princeton, as a major influence on his critical thinking.[2] Clark's claim that his own way of thinking derives from Eliot and Leavis and that moreover, "his" New Critics are, like him, committed to thinking through the dialectical relation between "sociopolitical content" and aesthetic form is thus a very precise piece of one-upsmanship.

So this skirmish in the Clark-Fried debate may be taken as evidence that these art historians' ways of reading derive in part from the sort of critics from whom I also learned to read. While this is a point likely to be lost on Fried's and Clark's readers in the art world, where Blackmur and Leavis are not names to conjure with, it is hardly controversial in itself; critics take up methodologies from other disciplines all the time. However, as I have implied, I want to go farther than this, and say that for Clark, New Critical ways of reading remain indissolubly linked with the reading of *poems*. To members of the art world, this claim would, I suspect, sound not merely counterintuitive but frankly preposterous. For them, literature appears to have little, if any, remaining cultural purchase, a fact that became vivid for me over years of reading critical accounts of the development of artistic modernism written by art historians side by side with those written by literature professors. Many current specialists in literary modernism—Charles Altieri, Mieke Bal, Marjorie Perloff, Lawrence Rainey, Wendy

2. Fried speaks of Blackmur as a "mentor" in the preface to *Art and Objecthood* (1998, 29; see also 28, 34). Blackmur is also an implicit presence, I think, in Fried's one substantial piece of literary criticism, the startlingly close reading of *The Red Badge of Courage* that takes up the second half of his *Realism, Writing, Figuration* (1987). Here, Fried explicitly takes his cue from John Berryman's study of Crane (1987, 179), an ill-fated project that the poet struggled to finish while he was under Blackmur's patronage at Princeton.

Steiner, to name a few of the most prominent—have staked their careers in large part on the ground between literature and visual art. When Clark's *Farewell to an Idea* was published in 1999, Charles Altieri called it "clearly the best book ever written on modernism," and Lawrence Rainey announced, still more pointedly, that "the most important book on modernism in the last year was produced not by a literary critic but by an art historian" (Altieri 2000, 127; Rainey 2000, 16). Visual art and art history, in short, have become central to the thinking of those in the field of literary modernism, indeed, to the thinking of those in the literary field as a whole. Meanwhile, in art history, quite the opposite situation holds: no publisher or writer in that field would see the point of devoting much space or attention to literary topics.

I have puzzled over this disparity at greater length elsewhere, in the context of a discussion of the implications of the wider cultural shift whereby visual modes of representation have come, over the course of the past century, to take precedence over verbal ones (Levy 2011, 1–34). That discussion took as its starting point Clement Greenberg's 1940 essay "Towards a New Laocoon," in which the critic argues that the development of artistic modernism has been driven by the struggle for cultural dominance between literature and visual art (1988, 23–38). Because, as Clark says in the debate with Fried and elsewhere, Greenberg's essay also provides a crucial starting point for his own thinking about modernism, I will rehearse a few salient moments from my previous argument about it here. My aim, in particular, will be to trace the influence on Clark of certain remarks that Greenberg makes about poetry in "Laocoon." The fugitive role that poetry plays in Greenberg's essay, I want to suggest, at once prefigures modern poetry's subsequent disappearance from most art historical accounts of modernism, and its haunting reappearance in Clark's later writing. "Lyric cannot be expunged by modernism, only repressed": before I can consider what it might mean for an art historian to teach me how to read poems, I must retrace the path by which the repressed made its return.

Greenberg, who came of age at the beginning of the New Critical era, started out with the ambition to make a career for himself as a poet and cultural critic on the model of T. S. Eliot, although his initial efforts along this line met with little success. Finally, at the end of his twenties, he fell in with the *Partisan Review* crowd, an acquaintance that led to a series of writing assignments. The most substantial of these pieces, "Laocoon" and "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939; both in Greenberg 1988) had two significant consequences for Greenberg: they instantly

established him as a major critical voice, and they ultimately served to turn him in the direction of writing about visual art. My sense, however, is that at the time this turn did not seem inevitable to Greenberg himself, and that "Laocoon" is on one level an argument about the relative value of literature and visual art for him going forward. Thus, it is not only cultural but also personal history that Greenberg has in mind when he announces at the essay's outset, "There can be, I believe, such a thing as a dominant art form; this was what literature in Europe had become by the end of the 17th century" (1988, 24). On Greenberg's account, literature's dominance began to be seriously challenged toward the end of the nineteenth century, at a moment when it began to seem that art, as the critic explains in a famous passage,

> although indeed it had to originate in bourgeois society, could only come in the guise of a denial of that society, as a turning away from it. It was not to be an about-face towards a new society, but an emigration to a Bohemia which was to be art's sanctuary from capitalism. 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. (28)

Modern art's social function, on this telling, is to seem to have no social function; its form of political opposition is to steer clear of politics ("ideological divisions") altogether. Therefore, Greenberg continues, "As the first and most important item upon its agenda, the avant-garde saw the necessity of an escape from ideas, which were infecting the arts with the ideological struggles of society. Ideas came to mean subject matter in general." And once the need to expunge subject matter from art became clear, "it was the signal for a revolt against the dominance of literature, which was subject matter at its most oppressive" (28).

In Greenberg's story of the war between the arts, the leader of the revolt against literature is visual art, which, by the mid-twentieth century, had shown itself to be capable of achieving a level of abstraction unavailable to verbal art. In Greenberg's view, then, literature must lose the battle for dominance over the sphere of art as art strives to assert its autonomy vis-à-vis society because literature can never quite purify itself of subject matter, and subject matter always has an ideological dimension. Or to put this in terms closer to those used by Theodor Adorno, whose account of the autonomy of modern art in some ways parallels that of Greenberg, literature must always remain implicated in the realm of instrumental rationality, while visual art at its purest effectively resists being instrumentalized for political purposes. And yet, Greenberg notes,

as he moves toward the close of "Laocoon," not all literary genres are equally "oppressive": poetry is like painting, he says, in that it "had also to escape from 'literature' or subject matter for its salvation from society." Thus, he decides, "It would be well to consider 'pure' poetry for a moment, before going on to painting." Poetry, it suddenly appears, is *in the way* of Greenberg's move in the direction of art criticism. After a paragraph's consideration, though, this never-to-be-published poet and soon-to-be-famous art critic concludes that despite modernist poets' best efforts to "free words from logic" and maximize their suggestive power, the notion of detaching words from "referents outside the poem" remains for poets "an impossible ideal." But abstract visual art, he adds, can be said to attain this nonreferential ideal insofar as it "exhausts itself in the visual sensation it produces" (1988, 33–34). Having thus disposed of poetry as a possible competitor for the title of purest art form, Greenberg can turn in earnest to the discussion of abstract painting that will occupy him for the last few pages of the essay.

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Sixty years after "Laocoon," in an essay titled "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam," Clark unhappily contemplates the end of modernism, a story he frames in terms of a Greenbergian struggle for dominance between expressive modes (2002). Postmodernism, Clark posits, begins with "the conviction that some kind of threshold is being passed, or maybe has been passed, from a bygone world where the Word was the ultimate structure of knowing to one ruled by the image or the shifting visual array." It seems, that is, that Greenberg's war is finally over, and visual modes of representation have won out decisively over verbal ones. However, whereas Greenberg had hoped that the triumph of the visual over the verbal might secure art's autonomy, preserving it as a "sanctuary from capitalism," Clark sees that triumph as implicated in "a new form of visuality spreading like a virus through the culture at large" which is itself a crucial "means of production of subjects" under the current form of capitalism. For a moment, Clark entertains the more optimistic thought that the "tipping of the social balance from a previous regime of the word to a present regime of the image" might "offer visual art a special opportunity," in that it is "uniquely placed to enter into a dialogue with what has now emerged as the central means of production of a newly imagined Life." But this thought is followed by the worry that visual art's special relation to the society of the spectacle may "turn out to be not closeness

but identity," leaving no room for the critical dialogue that modern art's distance from society was supposed to make possible (161).

The logic of Clark's argument here might make us wonder: if visual art has come fatally close to the center of cultural power even as literature has grown distant from it, does that mean that literature may now be seen as the "purer" art form in Greenberg's sense? Clark himself seems to consider this possibility only to reject it in a book published a few years after the essay on postmodernism, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (2006). As its subtitle suggests, the book is a somewhat eccentric exercise, an act of sustained close reading of two paintings by Poussin that were hanging in the Getty Museum during a semester when Clark was a fellow there. It is diaristic in form, recording the art historian's shifting responses to the paintings as he returns to view them on a nearly daily basis over the course of three months. What makes the writing here feel "experimental" relative to Clark's practice, however, is not so much the length at which the readings are sustained, as it is the degree to which Clark restricts himself to focusing on the paintings' formal qualities, theatrically holding off his usual critical imperative to "construe them from a political point of view."

At the rare moments in the book when Clark does directly raise "the question of my project's politics," he frames those politics in terms of "an argument with the present regime of the image—in particular with the notion that some kind of threshold has been passed in our time between a verbal world and a visual one." Without mentioning that he himself has recently espoused this very notion, Clark now says that "our present means of image-production strike me as still utterly under the spell of the verbal"—that in fact the visual and the verbal have now *merged* to produce such thoroughly instrumentalized forms of expression as "the logo . . . the product slogan . . . the t-shirt confession . . . webpages, and video games." Clark here comes especially close to the Greenberg of "Laocoon," who had warned against just such a merging of the arts, on the assumption that the "purity" of the various arts could only be maintained by strictly observing the distinctions between them. In the face of the late-modern collapse of the visual into the verbal, Clark therefore hopes that it may be still possible to hold the two apart, if only just, "to keep alive a notion," as he says, "of a kind of visuality that truly establishes itself *at the edge of the verbal*" (2006, 175–76). Like Greenberg, Clark explicitly associates "the verbal" here with ideology, while imagining that "visuality" still lodges a salutary silence at its heart that "represents the possibility of resistance" to ideology (122–23).

But *Sight of Death* also contains another argument about the relation of the verbal to the visual, although one that operates entirely by implication. This argument is conducted via a series of poems, written by Clark himself, that appear sporadically throughout the book. While these verses, like the prose that surrounds them, take Poussin's paintings as their starting points, their relation to the ongoing discussion—their very presence in the book itself—is never really explained. In his one brief reflection on what the poems might be doing there, their author can say little more than, "The poems cropped up unexpectedly: having stumbled into them, I'll try to bring them to a finish, though I know I am out of my depth" (53). Indeed, despite Clark's avowed intention "to make poems, not poetical exercises," the poems are, it must be said, mostly flat and prosaic (53). Yet I would argue that what makes them poetic nonetheless is the silence that attends them: they are abstract, in the sense of being so thoroughly out of context that they seem to have come from nowhere, to have been "stumbled into" rather than made. In their abstraction, then, the poems in *Sight of Death* may be said to represent the Word at its purest, as far removed from ideology as possible. This thought, too, brings Clark close to that other poet manqué, Greenberg. However, Clark, unlike Greenberg, has never dreamed that art could provide a genuine "sanctuary" from politics; as he puts it, in the essay on Greenberg that kicked off the debate with Fried, he parts company with Greenberg at the point when the latter begins to believe that "art can substitute *itself* for the values that capitalism has made valueless" (1986b, 59).

At his best, Clark has managed—to borrow his phrase—to keep alive the notion of an art that establishes itself *at the edge of politics*, which is to say, he maintains the distinction between art and politics, if only just, the better to keep them in dynamic relation to one another. Like Greenberg, he associates the politics from which art must be distinguished with verbal modes of expression, but holds poetic language in reserve as a kind of exception. To some extent, the poems in *Sight of Death* represent a return of the idea of "pure" poetry that Greenberg himself had repressed in an effort to clear the way for painting's rise to dominance. It is, however, a ghostly return: in *Sight of Death*, the poems are sheerly uncanny presences, haunting Clark's discussion but never intervening in it. One might say the same, for that matter, about the political concerns that usually play such a central role in Clark's thinking about art, but are shunted to the margins of that book. These concerns, by contrast, are on full display in *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in the Age of War* (2005, published a year

before *Sight of Death*), a jeremiad on the state of the world post-9/11 that Clark coauthored as part of his work with the political action group Retort (Retort 2005). In these two books, art and politics face one another across an unbridgeable gap. Clark's critical enterprise so far has depended on his capacity (to borrow Greenberg's carefully balanced phrase) "to perform in opposition to bourgeois society the function of finding new and adequate cultural forms for the expression of that same society." Were the dialectical relation between art and politics to devolve for him into mere static opposition, the game would be up. Thus, viewed in the shadow of *Afflicted Powers*, the poems in *Sight of Death* look less like experiments, openings out into a new way of writing about art, and more like aporia, melancholic refusals to accept the death of modernism. For the remainder of this essay, therefore, I want to turn back to *Farewell to an Idea*, a work in which the double dialectic of painting and politics/ painting and poetry still drives Clark's argument forward.

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In *Farewell to an Idea*, poetry is a—literally—marginal presence: the epigraph for and title of the book as a whole are taken from Wallace Stevens, and six of its nine chapters also bear epigraphs from various poets. At the end of his introduction, though, Clark cautions us not to mistake the marginal for the insignificant. There the critic defends himself against the accusation, which is also a self-accusation, that since "many, maybe most, of my chapters come to bad ends," his view of modernism might indeed be characterized as unrelievedly "melancholic." And so he counsels us instead to "trust the beginnings, then; trust the epigraphs. Trust Freud, and Stevens, and Frank O'Hara" (1999, 13). Once again, Clark never really explains what he means by this; here as in *Sight of Death*, the connection between poetry and art history remains implicit. But the poets who hover at *Farewell*'s edges write with a conviction that Clark-the-poet shows himself to lack in *Sight of Death*. Not coincidentally, the work of most of these poets—Charles Baudelaire, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Frank O'Hara—was strongly shaped by their awareness that they were writing in the shadow of image culture. Their sense of loss at the prospect of the end of modernism was necessarily keener than that of the painters, since they suspected they might be the losers in the struggle between the arts, and thus would, like all historical losers, become invisible, ghostly, to the eyes of the winners.

Insofar as Clark's enigmatic gestures in the direction of poetry have a politi-

cal significance, it derives, I think, from this inequality between poetry and painting. It *does* matter, that is, contra Clark's claims in *Sight of Death*, that literature is no longer the dominant art form, and that within literature, poetry is no longer a dominant genre. To ally oneself closely with painting as a genre, as Clark has, is now to declare oneself in the rear guard of art history. Nonetheless, Clark still wields considerable power as one of the dominant exponents of our culture's still-dominant art form. Were he to ally himself with poetry, he would have to relinquish that power, a power which, as he himself suggests, is derivative of "the actual present instrumentation of power" by our political and economic rulers. "Trust the epigraphs," Clark says. That is, trust them in some sense more than the text they frame, insofar as that text may be read as the account of an historian allied with the victor in the struggle between the arts; since, as Walter Benjamin reminds us in another context, "empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers" (1969, 256). My sense is that Clark does empathize with the poets insofar as they are historical losers. He does not, however, let them speak, except at the edges and in the gaps of his texts. How might his account change, then, if the poets *did* speak? With that question in mind, having at last come to my object lesson in learning how to read poems, I will conduct that lesson not in the form of a close reading, but of a dialogue.

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When I first saw the poems in *Sight of Death* I was reminded of a page from another art historical monograph by a critic who was also a poet, Frank O'Hara's book (the first ever) on Jackson Pollock. On that page, as in *Sight of Death*, a poem "crops up unexpectedly," breaking the flow of the prose, and like Clark, O'Hara fails to offer any explanation that might help us to bridge the gaps between the poem and the critical discussion that precedes and follows it. The poem's lack of connection to the prose is, however, obliquely referred to in its title, "Digression on 'Number 1', 1948" (1995, 23–24). The object of O'Hara's digressive impulse is thus the artwork that Clark, in the first of the two chapters on Pollock that cap *Farewell to an Idea*, calls "the painting of Pollock's [he] would choose over any other" (1999, 314). Although Clark never mentions O'Hara's poetic "Digression," either in *Sight of Death* or *Farewell*, I think he may have had it somewhere in the back of his mind nonetheless. For not only does Clark refer to O'Hara's book on Pollock in the second of his two chapters on the painter in *Farewell*, he also uses a quotation from another O'Hara poem, "About Courbet," as his epigraph for that

chapter—an epigraph that he cites in his introduction, in turn, as one of the texts we should trust.

"Poetry was declining / Painting advancing / we were complaining / it was '50": O'Hara scrawled these words at the top of the first of a series of lithographs, *Stones*, on which he collaborated with painter Larry Rivers. Then, a little further down: "*Poetry* / belongs to me, Larry, and / *Painting* to you / THAT'S what G [writer Gertrude Stein] said to P [her painter friend, Pablo Picasso] and / LOOK WHERE IT GOT THEM" (O'Hara and Rivers 2010, iv). Friend of artists, art critic, curator at the Museum of Modern Art, O'Hara was perhaps more deeply implicated in the art world than any poet before or since, and so was painfully conscious of the conflicted nature of the relationship between poetry and painting, and of poetry's unequal position in this relationship. As he states flatly at the beginning of one of his best-known poems, "Why I Am Not a Painter," "I am not a painter, I am a poet. / Why? I think I would rather be / a painter but I am not" (1995, 261). Clark subtly signals his awareness of O'Hara's unique relation to the art world in *Farewell to an Idea* by citing as the source for his O'Hara epigraph not O'Hara's *Collected Poems* but *ArtNews*, the place where "About Courbet" was first published, in a special section called "Poets on Painting." And when Clark refers to O'Hara in the chapter itself, he identifies him as an art critic, not a poet. This mention comes toward the close of Clark's discussion of the quality in abstract expressionist painting that he names "vulgarity":

> Vulgarity is gendered, of course. At the moment we are looking at, the attribute belonged (as a disposable property) mainly to men, or, more precisely, to heterosexual men. Not that this meant the art done under vulgarity's auspices was closed to reading from other points of view. What Beaton and Alfonso Ossorio and Parker Tyler and Frank O'Hara did to Pollock, with or without Pollock's permission, is clearly part—sometimes, I have said, a central part—of any defensible history of the New York School. It seems important that, apart from Greenberg, the strongest early readings of Pollock's work (the strongest, not necessarily the best) all came from gay men. (1999, 394)

This passage raises many interesting questions, none of which Clark goes on to address. For instance: What *was* important about the relation of gay male critics to straight male painters in this period? And what might their views on "the art done under vulgarity's auspices" have to do with their sexuality?

But before touching on these questions we should perhaps ask first what Clark means by *vulgarity*. This word points to what Clark thinks of as an essential quality of abstract expressionist painting; and yet, over the course of the chapter, *vulgarity* reveals itself to be such a dangerously loaded term that he himself

comes to worry that "the word is opaque" (383). At the same time, this opacity seems to derive from what Clark likes best about the word, the way it enables us to couch judgments about class in terms of judgments of taste and so functions as a juncture between aesthetics and politics. Thus, on one hand, Clark buries the concept in blizzard of adjectives: vulgarity as it appears in painting is "the gaudy and overwrought," "cheap vehemence, or easy delectation," "empty intensity," "a ludicrous bigness and lushness and generality," "tawdriness, idiot facility, overweening self-regard" (376, 380, 393). On the other, he explores what Fried might call the term's "sociopolitical content," speaking of vulgarity as "a terrible cocktail of class ascriptions and bodily disgust," which slides between "a handy form of class racism and general sense of class doom" (383–84). After offering the latter description, Clark also obliquely links the class aspect of vulgarity to gender, via Ruskin's remark that "the black battle-stain on a soldier's face is not vulgar, but the dirty face of a housemaid is" (384). If vulgarity *is* gendered, that is, it is gendered female. "The black battle-stain on a soldier's face," like the straight male painter's vulgarity, may appear (as Clark says in an odd parenthesis) to be a "disposable property," but the dirt on a housemaid's face, like the feyness of the painter's gay critics, is a sign of her inherent character.

But "Is it dirty," wonders Frank O'Hara, thinking of just this sort of imputation:

> does it look dirty
> that's what you think of in the city
>
> does it just seem dirty
> that's what you think of in the city
> you don't refuse to breathe do you
>
> someone comes along with a very bad character
> he seems attractive. is he really. yes. very
> he's attractive as his character is bad. is it. yes
>
> that's what you think of in the city
> run your finger along your no-moss mind
> that's not a thought that's soot
>
> and you take a lot of dirt off someone
> is the character less bad. no. it improves constantly
> you don't refuse to breathe do you (1995, 327)

Dirtiness and bad character—in this brief lyric O'Hara mixes the very cocktail of class ascriptions and bodily disgust Clark has in mind. Yet precisely because he is someone whose desires lead him to violate sexual norms and cross class boundaries, O'Hara has to distance himself from the implication that vulgarity is,

as Clark seems to think, a "terrible," toxic brew. For from a certain point of view, O'Hara himself "looks dirty," looks *vulgar*; he can't absolutely reject vulgarity without crawling out of his own skin. The poem's second-person address, which sets us at one remove from the speaker, suggests that he might be tempted to try nonetheless, although at the same time, the "you" is also the reader. If called on to repudiate your own nature, the poet implicitly asks us, what would *you* do? since, as he reminds us more than once, "you don't refuse to breathe do you."

Clark, for his part, doesn't *mean* to reject vulgarity; having introduced such a volatile concept into his discussion, he works hard to maintain a tough-minded attitude toward it. Thus, he insists, he is pleased "not to be certain for once, that the negative term brought on by a modernist artifact can ever be made to earn its positive keep" (1999, 375). But this detachment in the face of vulgarity's powerful negative charge keeps giving way to a more unstable set of emotions. In the following passage, for example, Clark may think he is merely ventriloquizing someone else's contempt toward the vulgar, but the performance is too convincing: "Abstract Expressionism, I want to say, is the style of a certain petty bourgeoisie's aspiration to aristocracy, to a totalizing cultural power. It is the art of that moment when the petty bourgeoisie thinks it can speak (and its masters allow it to speak) the aristocrat's claim to individuality. Vulgarity is the form of that aspiration" (389). From the aristocratic height that Clark assumes here, the petty bourgeoisie appears as a mere puppet in the hands of a master class struggling to legitimate its power. But what class is this, exactly? In the United States of the fifties, as Clark himself makes clear, the aristocratic position is untenable, and "the petty bourgeois has to stand in for a hidden—nay vanished—bourgeois elite" (389). In other words, there is no position of mastery from which to view this historical scene, and so when Clark recoils from vulgarity he leaves himself no place to stand.

O'Hara works to situate himself in this same scene in the 1955 poem "My Heart," one of several writings in which the poet, too, uses the word *vulgar* to mark the switch point between aesthetics and class politics. "I want to be at least as alive as the vulgar," he declares, and to see "the vulgar" this way, as enviably "alive," is to cast it as an agent, not a puppet (1995, 231). More specifically, O'Hara sees vulgarity, which he, like Clark, identifies with the petty bourgeois class shifter, as an agent of *transformation*. "*As* alive *as* the vulgar": this is the language of simile, of something in the process of becoming something else. That O'Hara does come, if only provisionally, to assume the role of the shifter is suggested by the ambiguity that inheres in all the poem's tokens of class.

> I'd have the immediacy of a bad movie,
> not just a sleeper, but also the big,
> overproduced first-run kind. I want to be
> at least as alive as the vulgar. And if
> some aficionado of my mess says "That's
> not like Frank!," all to the good! I
> don't wear brown and grey suits all the time,
> do I? No. I wear workshirts to the opera,
> often. (231)

The suit O'Hara sometimes dons is the uniform of both the petty bourgeois salaryman and the high-bourgeois curator, just as the proletarian workshirt he changes into doubles as studio wear for the poet's painter friends. "Bad" movies might be seen as a vulgar taste and opera as an aristocratic one; but for the gay man, both of these cultural phenomena may also be viewed through the prism of *camp* taste, which sees the low in the high and the high in the low. "I'm not going to cry all the time / nor shall I laugh all the time," the poet vows at the poem's outset. As he shifts among opposed perspectives, rapidly shuttling between empathy and distance, O'Hara shows an equanimity in the face of the vulgar to which Clark can only aspire.

Like Clark, O'Hara suspects that the petty bourgeois position may be the only one available to an artist of his time, but he manages his ambivalence about this fact by way of the lessons he has learned in the course of coming to terms with two other roles he has found himself compelled to occupy, those of the gay man and the poet. What the petty bourgeois, the gay man, and the poet have in common is that they are all, from certain points of view, embarrassments, that from which we avert our eyes. But when and if they do become visible to us, they also make visible the divided character of what might have seemed unitary categories. A figure like O'Hara reminds us, then, that the bourgeoisie, masculinity, and modernist art are all riven by internal conflicts. In some respects he represents the losing side in such conflicts, yet as a man, and an artist, he is still relatively powerful; his words may be confined to the margins of the history of the dominant art, but they still resonate. Clark tacitly acknowledges the residual power of poetry like O'Hara's at the very end of the chapter that begins with O'Hara's words, when the critic comes to realize that "what [he has] been defending all along" is not "vulgarity," exactly, but "lyric." He goes on to define *lyric* as "the illusion in an artwork of a singular voice or viewpoint, uninterrupted, absolute, laying claim to a world of its own" (Clark 1999, 401), that is, a version of what he earlier called "the aristocrat's claim to individuality." This claim, Clark

says, is at once "deeply ludicrous," a last-gasp attempt to hang on to a romantic individualism whose time has long passed, and "ineradicable." Thus, he declares, "lyric cannot be expunged by modernism, only repressed" (401).

And yet Clark cannot bring himself, even here, to state the obvious, that *lyric* is a term we associate first and foremost with poetry, not painting. Instead, he insists, "the deep ludicrousness of lyric is Abstract Expressionism's subject, to which it returns like a tongue to a loosening tooth" (401). Lyric belongs to *painting*? To the victors go the spoils, I suppose. Still, Clark's tone here is anything but triumphal; rather, painting's assumption of the burden of lyric provokes shame and bodily disgust, "deep ludicrousness" and the "loosening tooth." That burden consists of the need to go on believing in the fiction of bourgeois individualism, the fiction that stands back of the embodied "I" that lends Clark's own sentences so much of their verve and force: "It seems I cannot quite abandon the equation of Art with Lyric. Or rather—to shift from an expression of personal preference to a proposal about history—I do not believe that *modernism* can ever quite escape from such an equation" (1999, 401). From one angle, the unaristocratic—and thus groundless, or "ludicrous"—individualism from which Clark strives to distance himself here appears simply as the obverse of an instrumental rationality that effaces distinctions between people, the better to exploit them. And if it were only this, only the human face of an inhuman system, the claim to individuality would be thoroughly discredited. From another standpoint, though—the one that Clark "cannot quite abandon"—the ludicrous position in which the "I" finds itself appears as the last bastion of resistance to the collapse of certain crucial distinctions, such as that between art and ideology, or between persons and things.

Personism is the name that O'Hara gives to this individualism on the verge of collapse in his 1959 essay "Personism: A Manifesto" (1995, 498–99). Like the poems I have been discussing, this brief piece seems tossed off, yet has proved sturdy enough to sustain repeated reading by a series of skillful critics.[3] In "Personism," O'Hara reframes the direct address of lyric as a "kind of abstract removal," whereby a poem may "address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet's feeling toward the poem while preventing

3. It seems obligatory in discussions of "personism" to remark on the essay's apparent unseriousness before affirming that "beneath the bravado, O'Hara is quite serious" (Perloff 1998, 126). *Personism* is cited en passant all over the O'Hara literature; two more extended considerations may be found in Herring 2002, 414–27, and Silverberg 2010, 47–56.

love from distracting him into feelings about the person" (499). The poem here establishes itself, as Clark might say, *on the edge of vulgarity*; the distinction between the two must be maintained, if only just, the better to keep them in dynamic relation to one another. In O'Hara's poems, the lyric drive toward immediacy, toward the collapse of the distinction between "I" and "you," is pressed to the point of becoming palpably ludicrous—here, he says, I am handing you my heart on a platter. But just as one is about to object that this is an offer only a vulgar reader could take at face value, the poet makes it clear that what the reader has before her is not an "I," but an "it," a set of words. Personism's aim, after all, O'Hara says, is to "[sustain] the poet's feeling toward the *poem*" (499); or, as he puts it still more plainly in "My Heart," "you can't plan on the heart, but / the better part of it, my poetry, is open" (O'Hara 1995, 231). At such points in O'Hara's work, then, the drive toward immediacy turns into its opposite, the emphasis on *medium*. Which brings us back to Greenberg, whose central axiom, as first formulated in "Towards a Newer Laocoon," is that "purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art" (Greenberg 1988, 32). Thus, when O'Hara claims that his way of framing the lyric "I" "is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry," he is reading Greenberg slightly against the grain in order to bring his poetic practice into alignment with the kind of painting he most admires (O'Hara 1995, 498).

"We shall have everything we want and there'll be no more dying on the pretty plains or in the supper clubs / for our symbol we'll acknowledge vulgar materialistic laughter over an insatiable sexual appetite," O'Hara sings, at the beginning of his "Ode to Joy." "No more dying," he repeats a few lines later, and again at the poem's end (O'Hara 1995, 281). This is the note in modernist poetry that Clark, in speaking of the epigraphs to his *Farewell*, calls "so cold and optimistic" (1999, 13). Can the poets afford to be more optimistic than the painters because, having already lost the struggle for dominance, they have that much less to lose as modernism approaches its end? I know I have suggested as much, but then again, the kind of end-of-the-line painting that Clark and O'Hara find so persuasive can also provoke a strangely chilling exhilaration in its viewers. Here is Clark, to take one last example, on the unearthly pleasures of Pollock's *Lucifer*:

> Its throws reach out toward weightlessness: they are lacy, nebulous, blown by a horizontal current of air: that applies even to the staccato, straight-line ejaculations of purple, blue, and orange which were evidently put on last. These have the

> look of a peculiar material thrown to the limit of thinness, and therefore caught up in the general lateral flow. The background of grays and red-browns has an unapologetic emptiness, like a glimpse into deep space, with the black foreground silhouetted against it. The canvas has been primed, meticulously, with a wash of pale limestone cream. The green and aluminum are cold as ice.
>
> And Satan there
> Coasting the wall of Heav'n on this side Night
> In the dun Air sublime, and ready now
> To stoop with wearied wings, and willing feet
> On the bare outside of this World.
>
> A terrible, strictly *performative* beauty takes place on this side Night. And the shape of the Air, the pull of the empty horizontal, bends everything (gently) to its will. There is something of Malevich's elation in this, something of Milton's foreknowledge of the Fall. (1999, 338–39; emphasis in original)

Clark's bravura description of a painting that does everything it can to resist description takes us to "*the edge of the verbal*," where the atmosphere grows unbearably cold. It then stops short; and when, after a brief interval of silence, the art historian speaks again, he does so not in his own, but in a poet's, voice. Where painting reaches its limits, that is, poetry begins. And beyond that, politics press at the edge of the sphere of art as such, in the person of Milton's daemonic revolutionary who hovers between spheres, just this side Night; although were he to cross the boundary that divides the two worlds, it would be the beginning of the end. A "strictly *performative* beauty" distinguishes the high-wire acts of artists like Pollock and O'Hara, a something on the verge of being nothing. But not quite nothing, not yet at least; it seems we are still learning how to read.

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