

The Huge Effort of Art: Five Essays

. . . the Byronic fallacy – that one who is full of turbid feeling *about himself* is qualified to be some sort of an artist.

- Charles Ives, *Essays Before a Sonata*

Can the soul of a formalist be the subject of a painting?

Art is an act of communication: I want you to see what I saw, hear what I heard. *What* I saw – a comprehensible shape, a visual form. Art cannot be formless, because form is synonymous with intelligibility. We cannot fall back on content where form is lacking: we respond only to formed content. If the words of this paragraph were scattered randomly on the page, it would not be the case that the content is present but still in a nascent or immanent state. There would be no content in any meaningful sense. ("Meaningless content" is an oxymoron. We need another term – "raw data" perhaps – for a situation where the molecules of content are present but have not coalesced into any recognizable substance. In linguistic analysis, if my words were haphazardly distributed on the page, or spoken piecemeal, we might say that there were phonemes and morphemes, but few semantemes, and no meaningful semantic content.)

All art, even the worst, has content: colors on a canvas, words on a page. What motivates the selection and forming of this content, so that it becomes intelligible, is the subject matter, which is logically prior to both content *and* form. The subject matter *generates* the formed content.

In representational painting, the subject matter is manifest, and we tend to judge the form and content in part by whether it fully expresses, or "does justice to," the subject. Another part of our evaluation is directed at the subject itself. What happens to these critical functions when painting becomes wholly abstract?

In everyday thought, an abstraction is a distillation of what several concrete objects or real instances have in common. In the visual world, a blueprint is an excellent example of an abstraction: following the meaning of the Latin verb, we "draw out of" an object its essential qualities; we reduce it to its rudiments. In the case of the blueprint, the subject is a house.

All painting involves *some* degree of abstraction: Kandinsky was impelled toward his own radical break with representation by contemplating Monet's "Haystack." But can there be an abstraction of *nothing at all* – such that, when we ask for a concrete example of what the speaker is talking about, we are told that there isn't any?

By the 1920s, many abstract painters had wholly abandoned any *thing* in the real world from which they could be said to be abstracting. At this point, commentators began to speak of an art that was non-referential, non-representational, or non-objective.

Well, then, *what* are we looking at, and what does *it* mean? To reply, as some do, that we are looking at a flat painted surface and that it means only itself, begs the question. It is as if I said, "Hipple dun lorkom" and then said, "My sounds mean only themselves." No. They *are* only themselves. They *mean* nothing at all.

When painters abandoned, not only representation but also abstraction in the original meaning of the term, and began to create so-called "non-objective" art, they abandoned subject matter. Raw content, or pictorial data, naturally remained, insofar as paint was applied to canvas; and some have insisted that the content *is* formed. But no one can answer the question, "Formed into *what*?" Or this question: What is the

subject, or idea, that has instigated the formed content? What *in the world* is being tracked by the painting? Where this cannot be answered, we viewers are denied any means of judging the outcome. A blueprint can be pronounced successful or not, but a painted visible object that stands in no known relationship to any other visible object cannot be compared to what it is supposed to be.

Immediately an outcry: "It mustn't be compared to anything else; it isn't supposed to be anything other than itself. It does not mean; it is." But this is gibberish. Once, in the middle of a World Series game, the baseball pitcher Dizzy Dean was hit in the head by the ball while running between first base and second base. He had to be carried off the field. After the game, reporters asked his brother Paul if Dizzy had been conscious. Yes, said Paul, he was talking the whole time. "What was he saying?" asked a reporter. "He wasn't saying anything," replied Paul. "He was just talking."

It doesn't look like anything; it is just paint on a canvas.

In fact, there is plenty of evidence that the New York school of abstract painters thought they were rendering emotional states. But they alone knew what the emotional states were. Where they deigned to use universal symbols to at least convey some generalized sense of dread, or repose, we were still given no clue as to why these emotions were being invoked and how, exactly, we were to be edified by the invocation. The painter was in the position of a diarist who creates a private language to express private sensations: the reader of the diary is cut off from even the possibility of making any contact with the thought of the diarist. Nothing is *communicated*. We may fall back upon our admiration of the way the pages of the diary *look*; we may say that, looking at

them, we think all kinds of things and experience many interesting emotions of our own. This is well and good; no one has a right to take from us any pleasure we may choose to enjoy in this life that hurts no one else. But we cannot call our mode of enjoyment *art*. For 2500 years, *that* word designated a type of communication. For just as long, audiences understood that a good sunset may engender far deeper emotions than a bad poem; yet no one entertained any confusion as to whether a sunset could be called a work of art.

Toward the end of the 20th Century, a new wave of abstract artists renounced their control over the subject matter of the painting and said forthrightly that each viewer should see whatever he or she wishes to see. It was suggested by some that the imposition of a communicated meaning upon a viewer is a form of imperialism. Let us respond that, if this is the case, it is impossible for the viewer to misunderstand the painting. It follows from this that it is also impossible for the artist to *fail*.

I have no right to call such art invalid by definition: artists are free to create in this "open" spirit, and viewers to enjoy the work and buy it. I am only interested in understanding the aesthetic import of such art objects. And right about here, the canny reader may have already noticed a gigantic hole in my argument that is directly pertinent to this aesthetic import. What about *decoration*? What about the repeating patterns and motifs of decorative art? Can they not be both entirely abstract and at the same time valid as art? The answer is certainly yes, and it gives us the clue to how abstract painting is able to give any pleasure at all: it is actually even *more* "non-

objective" than those wave-like curlicues that have adorned vases and friezes from time immemorial; it functions *purely* as decoration. It is high-priced wallpaper. So it is no wonder Mark Rothko outranks Franz Kline today – so much easier on the eyes. But the joke, as any art aficionado must know, is that Rothko, no less than Kline, positively *sneered* at decoration:

There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. . . .

Consequently, if our work embodies these beliefs it must insult any one who is spiritually attuned to interior decoration; pictures for the home; pictures for over the mantel; pictures of the American scene; social pictures; purity in art; prize-winning potboilers; the National Academy, the Whitney Academy, the Corn Belt Academy; buckeyes; trite tripe, etc.

This is taken from a statement by Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb in 1943. I hope it is obvious that these assertions amount to pure drivel. Let me ask a few questions. Why is a tragic, timeless subject the *only* valid subject? Why would a subject that is timely but droll be invalid? If I do have a taste for the timely and droll, why would I necessarily be "insulted" by a painting that is tragic and timeless? Why may I not enjoy different types of art? How exactly are we to use the word "tragic" in relation to *any* painting, much less a non-representational painting? What, precisely, does the word "timeless" *mean* in relation to subject matter? Name one timeless subject. What is so reprehensible about a mantel, that no painting should ever be displayed above one? What is it about the American scene that precludes it from partaking of the tragic and timeless? Granted that there might be people who are "spiritually attuned to interior

decoration," is it really worth the while of a serious artist to insult them?

But let us, for the sake of the argument, grant that Rothko went on to produce work in which the tragic and timeless subject matter was the determining factor.

According to *Time* magazine (June 3, 1996) the following card had to be inserted in copies of the Guggenheim Museum catalog for an exhibit devoted to abstract art:

Erratum Please note that on page 124 of *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*, Mark Rothko's *Black, Ochre, Red over Red*, 1957 (fig. 124) is reproduced upside down.

It may well be that the curators at the Guggenheim Museum are more "spiritually attuned to interior decoration" than to depictions of the tragic and timeless – in fact, to this proposition some would say "yes" and some would say "absolutely" – but the error does raise interesting questions about how the tragic and timeless values in Rothko's paintings manifest themselves.

However, the title of this ill-starred catalog interests me even more than the misfortune attaching to Figure 124. I am curious how the honorifics of risk, freedom, and discipline apply to abstract art – or to any art at all.

I know it is tendentious of me, but I can't help pointing out that an artist takes no risk of any kind, much less a total risk. Gallery owners take risks; demonstrators in Tiananmen Square take total risks.

The word "freedom" is silly in discussions of art – if the previous generation wrote sonnets and I choose to write a poem that is not a sonnet, it makes no sense to celebrate my "freedom." But I might go farther and say that it is morally offensive to

imply that Rothko showed exceptional courage in staking his claim to the freedom of abstraction on the island of Manhattan during the same decade when a Russian artist might have paid for such freedom with his life. The worst thing that ever happened to Rothko as a direct result of his courage was the put-down of the philistine who said "My four-year-old kid could have done that."

As for discipline, I suppose we can say that the act of writing, or painting, is itself a discipline; but then we may as well speak of "Total Risk, Freedom, and Painting." The author of our catalog means that there is a *further* discipline in abstract art: that of painting in accordance with newly developed aesthetic principles. But since the artist makes the principles up, it is doubtful whether the viewer should be overly impressed by this feat.

It is a notorious fact that an entire rehearsal of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* was conducted with the clarinetist playing in Bb instead of A. In other words, every note he produced was off by half-a-step. No one noticed. Apologist Charles Rosen has frankly admitted that the exact pitches make no difference to the aesthetics of the piece. But it makes a difference to the inflated claims of the theorists who insist that atonal "harmony" is just like Classical tonal harmony, but more advanced. Likewise, it is probably the case that it makes little or no difference to the values of a Rothko painting whether it is hung right side up or not. But it makes a difference to the claim that a subject is depicted in all its tragedy and timelessness.

Decoration is a legitimate art that can give immense pleasure to its consumers. Therefore *formalism* is a legitimate artistic stance – toward decoration. But the yoking

of formalism to high seriousness about the subject matter is not so much illegitimate as logically impossible. If we think we can say that *it* is "tragic and timeless," while saying in the next breath that we can't say what *it* represents, looks like, symbolizes, or even *is* – if we think we can say that *form* is the salient quality of the painting but there is no *thing* that is formed (and yet that no-thing is tragic and timeless) – then we are terribly confused. We must think that there can be qualities that adhere to no objects, adjectives that apply to no nouns. If we fall back upon the near-nullity that it is the canvas, or the virtual space of the canvas, that is formed, we must explain what it is that is timeless and tragic about a canvas or a space, or how it is that timelessness and tragedy quicken into existence during the act of formation but without ever attaching at the end to anything more definite than a formed canvas or formed space.

The manifesto by Rothko and Gottlieb is a choice document, but no more outlandish than most other theoretical justifications of abstract expressionism. There are semantic riches everywhere:

We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.

I might agree with Rothko here that perspective in a painting is a type of illusion, and that flat forms destroy this illusion: but what am I to make of his naive equation of perspective with *falsity* and of flatness with *truth*? If artistic license means we get to talk like this, we might as well throw out the dictionary and gabble like gibbons.

Perspective in 19th Century painting is not a *lie*; and *truth* is not a synonym for

whatever is supposed to be going on in a nonobjective painting.

Such laxity with ordinary language was a terrible affliction for the abstract expressionists, because they, unlike most earlier artists, could not shut up about the theories that were driving their paintings – partly because viewers could not understand how to look at the paintings if the artists did not instruct them; mostly because empty mannerism and strident formalism will always require a load of palaver to make it go down. The artists had lots to say and were eager to say it, but their misconception about the very nature of art as communication naturally tied them up verbally as surely as it marred their paintings. Here is John Ferren in 1958:

I remember that around the Club in the late 'forties the word "evaluation" was taboo. We looked, and we liked it or did not: we did not give it a value.

You have to be semantically challenged to an extraordinary degree to say, *in the same sentence*, that you *liked* something you looked at, but did not *evaluate* it. (Such double-talk by the self-appointed elite did trickle down to the masses, incidentally: in the 1970s I got drearily accustomed to hearing the refrain that we shouldn't call anything good or bad, but just say what we personally "prefer.")

Well, if a painting does not communicate anything of value – I am not twisting Ferren's words, just making them intelligible – what *does* it do that invites any of the rest of us to respond to it? Ferren again:

We faced the canvas with the Self, whatever that was, and we painted. We faced it unarmed, so to speak. The only control was that of truth, intuitively felt.

But why should *I*, the viewer, be as interested in Ferren's Self – the subject of the painting – as he is? If his prose is a window on his soul, I must say that I am definitely *not* interested.

One possible answer is that our job, as viewers (and buyers!) is to pay homage to a spiritual struggle, as if we were buying tickets to watch a monk on a fast. We are witnesses to the heroism of those who face a dangerous canvas armed only with a commitment to truth. Of course, we must not assign a *value* to this heroism.

My interpretation receives indirect support from a statement by Willem de Kooning in 1951:

If there is agony, other than the agony of painting, I don't know exactly what kind of agony that would be. I am sure external agony does not enter very importantly into the agony of our painting.

The agony of our painting! And you thought *your* life was hard. Yet de Kooning sought out this agony almost every day of his life, well into his senility in the 1990s, when some critics became touchy over their inability to detect any differences in the paintings that he did before and after he lost the use of his cognitive faculties.

Such statements of self-congratulation are so endemic to the movement, and occur so often, and so openly, that their makers must have been unconscious of any possible offense:

To us art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks.

Thus Rothko on risk-taking, giving utterance to the buzzword that showed up years later in the title of the catalog that printed his painting upside down. Concomitant with his admiration of his own bravery was his sorrow about his own persecution:

The unfriendliness of society to his activity is difficult for the artist to accept. Yet this very hostility can act as a lever for true liberation.

Oh, the courage. You got to walk that lonesome valley, you got to walk it by yourself. The only idea harbored by these painters more fatuous than their belief in their own suffering was their belief that the world cared enough to bother to resent them. In point of fact, however, while most people paid these painters no mind – why should they have, when Rothko admits he set out to insult them? – many of the abstract expressionists lived to be richly rewarded by the handful of wealthy collectors who accepted them at the rate they set for themselves.

As for that other buzzword "liberation": we may set it down as an amusing irony that the artist who says, "I am unconditioned, I belong to no school, I struck out on my own path," is the most socially conditioned artist of all – he has imbibed deeply the Romantic idea of the artist and is slavishly conforming to it. Here is the testimony of Clyfford Still, complete with lonesome valley:

I held it imperative to evolve an instrument of thought which would aid in cutting through all cultural opiates, past and present, so that a direct, immediate, and truly free vision could be achieved, and an idea be revealed with clarity. . . .

It was a journey that one must make, walking straight and alone. . . .
. Until one had crossed the darkened and wasted valleys and come at last into clear air and could stand on a high and limitless plain. . . .

Yet, while one looks at this work, a warning should be given, lest

one forget, among the multitude of issues, the relation I bear to those with "eyes"

Therefore, let no man under-value the implications of this work or its power for life; – or for death, if it is misused.

These are the thoughts of a man who must have been, at the moment of writing them down, almost clinically psychotic. But like many inmates of asylums, he was crazy like a fox. The words quoted here are taken from his letter in 1959 to a gallery director who had had the effrontery to propose an exhibition of Still's paintings. Our artist knew that, in order to stay in character, he had to treat such an offer with contempt. When asked by an interviewer if he was concerned that his art reach an audience, he had replied, "Not in the least." So in his letter, he forthrightly addresses the "paradox" that would result if he permitted "the appearance of this work in an institution whose meaning and function must point in a direction opposite to that implied in the paintings – and my own life." We turn the page with eager anticipation, waiting for our boy to tell this art trafficker, born of the devil and his dam, to go back to hell; to tell him that, as Beethoven put it, "the brain is not a saleable commodity."

Right. In fact, the paradox "was accepted" and Still's paintings, which look like something your four-year-old kid could do, were exhibited for life or for death at the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy from November 5th through December 13th, 1959. The letter was printed in the catalog, where patrons of that corrupt institution could applaud Still's attack on them and relish his diatribe against the "whimperings and insolence of the venal," the "impudence and sterility which so hypnotically fascinate the indifferent," the "self-styled intellectuals with the lust of immaturity for leadership," and the crimes

"of that ubiquitous old harridan called Art."

Perhaps, in light of Still's dealings with the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, we are at least in a position to understand in a psychological sense the persecution delusion of modern artists – it is a textbook example of what is technically termed *projection*. The "unfriendliness" deplored by Rothko goes in the opposite direction – from artist to society. While Still proclaims himself unmollified by anything the gallery can do for him, the gallery is not in the least dissuaded from exhibiting his work anyway. The notion that society is hostile to the artistic innovator is the brazen lie at the center of the Romantic myth – a piece of canting nonsense contradicted by all of history, but most of all by recent history, when galleries funded largely by philistines have competed with each other to exhibit the latest outrage to philistine sensibilities, and the public-at-large has been cowed by nothing more than the abstract expressionists' assertions of their own greatness. But that the abstract artist was hostile to society, and never left off abusing it with every dirty name in the book, is hardly to be doubted.

In closing, it is important for the reader to realize that I have not said anything here that was not said just as well at the time. But sadly, it is not the case that good ideas drive out bad in the intellectual marketplace: no, stronger than all the armies is a fad whose time has come. The abstract expressionists, the serial composers, and the modern poets did not feel the need to respond to the complaints of their opponents – they were riding high. It sufficed merely for them to say that their critics did not understand them. I hope the quotes that I have marshaled here will make at least one thing clear to any

disinterested person: the ideas of the avant-garde were never difficult to understand; it was only difficult to understand how they could be taken seriously. But to return to a theme that has been present throughout this essay: fanaticism, ignorance, and arrogance are natural allies; when an artist is narcissistically sure of himself, your disagreement with him will always strike him as your failure to comprehend. We need not wonder how he might acquire such habits of thought – without a strong component of confidence, he can hardly begin his work. But we still await the sociologist who can fully explain why we were so eager to be imposed upon by artists whose narcissism was almost their most marked characteristic. Is certainty in others so seductive to us that we will follow those others wherever they wish to take us? These are sobering thoughts with which to conclude, and ones that remind us not to be too smug about anybody else's susceptibility to humbug, unless we are absolutely sure that we are free of it ourselves.

The thoughts of Chairman Robert

The Buddha set forth his entire spiritual program in Four Noble Truths: There is suffering; the cause of suffering is graspingness; suffering can end; the way to end it is to engage in right conduct based upon an understanding of these truths.

Robert Motherwell gives us the Four Noble Truths of Abstract Expressionism: To an *artist*, life is suffering (everyone else, he seems to think, is as happy as a pig in slop); the cause of this suffering is bourgeois philistine incomprehension of the artist's nobility of soul; this suffering can *not* be ended; but the way to conduct yourself is to paint the truth about your lonely moral stand against decadence.

I trust the reader will acknowledge the judiciousness of my choice of Motherwell as a spokesman for the abstract expressionists – he was acclaimed throughout his life both as a painter and as a pitchman for modern art. The reader can judge for himself whether the quality of thought justifies Motherwell's reputation as an "intellectual." I cannot read him without embarrassment. But he could, at least, write intelligibly – no small matter, when we compare his writings to those of his colleagues. For all their puerility, Motherwell's statements do stand out as models of clarity and direct assertion – as such, they shine an unambiguous light upon the nature of abstract painting.

At the time his career flourished (roughly 1940-1970), there were two enthusiasms that tended, all by themselves, to certify a man as an intellectual – Marxism and Freudianism. Motherwell, to judge by his writings, embraced both. He believed that the bourgeois "property-loving" world is bleakly hostile to the human

spirit; he believed that Freudian "free association" is the quickest door to the inner psychological workings of the self, which is the subject matter of abstract expressionism. But beyond these superficial allegiances, there is no evidence that he engaged in any further hard thinking about socialism or psychoanalysis. What readers of today ought to be able to see clearly is that, above all else, Motherwell is a High Romantic.

By the way, is there anyone alive today so naive as to think that the *aesthetic evaluation* of Picasso's "Guernica" would have been the same if – painted as it was at the time of the Great Terror – it had been titled "Ukraine"? Or that Motherwell did not cannily increase the market value of his canvases tenfold by titling them "Elegies to the Spanish Republic"? – the joke here being that among his casual confessions is this dropped remark, referring to these very paintings, that "I am not much interested in politics." Indeed not. These paintings, like all his paintings, are a record of his neuroses. Or at least they try to be. But just as he knew better than to title them "Elegies to the Victims of Socialism," he also knew better than to call them, more honestly, "Inkblots of my Inner Terrain."

(To the lay person who has never seen a painting by Motherwell, I do not think I can improve on the artist's own description of the Elegies as a "series of pictures with black ovals and stripes on white grounds.")

I wish to begin by allowing Motherwell himself to render a comprehensive account of his overall aesthetic. Here, from his article, "The Process of Painting," is the clearest

statement of how he worked and what he thought he achieved:

I usually begin a picture with a "doodle," or with a liquid puddle like a Rorschach image (but not pressed together), or with a line and a dot, or a piece of paper dropped at random on what will be a collage. Then the struggle begins, and endures throughout in a state of anxiety that is ineffable, but obliquely recorded in the inner tensions of the finished canvas. The struggle has inexorable moral values – no nostalgia, no sentimentalism, no propaganda, no discourse, no autobiography, no violation of the canvas as a surface (since it *is* one), no clichés, no predetermined endings, no seduction, no charm, no relaxation, no mere taste, no obviousness, no coldness; or, oppositely, for me, it must have immediacy, passion or tenderness, *beingness*, as such, detachment, sheer presence as a modulation of the flat picture plane, true invention and search, light, an unexpected end, mainly warm earth colors, and black and white, a certain stalwartness.

As is usual with these painters, there is a great deal of chopped logic. How can he say "no autobiography" when the state of his anxiety is "recorded in the inner tensions of the finished canvas?" What could be more nostalgic and sentimental than this pictorial celebration of the artist's struggle? What could be more propagandistic than his implied assault on the comfortable bourgeois world?

But what is unmistakable about this account is the heroic narrative: the anguish, the effort, the integrity, the truth of feeling in the finished product. In his article, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," it comes out this way:

One of the most striking aspects of abstract art's appearance is her nakedness, an art stripped bare. How many rejections on the part of her artists! . . .

The need is for felt experience – intense, immediate, direct, subtle, unified, warm, vivid, rhythmic.

Everything that might dilute the experience is stripped away. The origin of abstraction in art is that of any mode of thought. Abstract art is a true mysticism – I dislike the word – or rather a series of mysticisms that

grew up in the historical circumstance that all mysticisms do, from a primary sense of gulf, an abyss, a void between one's lonely self and the world. Abstract art is an effort to close the void that modern men feel. Its abstraction is its emphasis.

Purity, asceticism, mysticism, feeling, loneliness, effort, triumph – the entire panoply of virtues, *attributed by the artist himself to his own art*, thank you very much.

This much is clear – he and his friends are morally superior people, and the subject of their art is themselves:

What really distinguishes an artist from other people – for many other people are creative – is an extraordinary sensitivity to his medium, a sensitivity so accurate and intense that I think perhaps that people who don't have it can scarcely imagine it.

The question of objects in painting is unimportant because the real subject of painting is moral attitudes.

One might say that the triumph of modern artists in our society has been the capacity to protect one's own modes of being.

Yet these highly evolved people intensely crave recognition . . . from the cultural Neanderthals! They are revolutionaries –

Modern art, like many other things in modern life, is a revolt against some crushing aspects of the nineteenth century.

and ascetics –

Abstract expressionism guards the effort to keep art pure, free from false sentiment, and it also is involved in the truth at any cost.

and lovers –

In this historical situation, a few artists try to protect the purity and truthfulness of art, *simply from love*. To love painting is perhaps irrational to begin with, but I suppose there is something irrational in all love, though I for one delight in it.

who nonetheless want the politically reactionary businessmen whom they despise and the passionless philistines whom they insult to *buy their paintings!*

"I love painting the way one loves the body of a woman . . ." I quote this simply to show you that Motherwell had no judgment and no shame. There are certain things you might say to yourself, and tell other artists when drunk, but never, *never* say in an article for publication. But when you believe that your art is important because everything about *you* is important, self-censorship is not likely to be your strong suit.

Now let us take up the aesthetics of Robert Motherwell in a more orderly fashion.

Following his four noble truths, we begin with suffering:

First of all, you have to get used to the room. And in a new studio, this takes from four to thirty weeks. In an old one, that you have not used for a month or two, a few days. Days of hell.

And you think *your* days – up at 5 a.m., the commute, the overtime, the quick trip to the grocery, the dinner, the kids, the layoff, the lost health insurance – you think *your* days are hell. But of course you do – *you* only care about yourself and your paycheck, and never stop to think about the people who have to live in Greenwich Village, teach painting at universities, write articles for intellectual journals, and exhibit their work at galleries.

But fortunately, not everyone *is* like you – some are willing to atone for your sins:
"So, after days or weeks of suffering, finally I just pick up a tool and make marks . . ."

Now the second and third noble truths are that *you* are the cause of this man's suffering, and he cannot assuage it, but must endure it:

The modern artist's social history is that of a spiritual being in a property-loving world. . . . The consequence is that the modern artist tends to become the last active spiritual being in the great world.

The fourth noble truth, on which we shall spend the remainder of our time, is the code by which this last spiritual being *conducts* himself in the great world.

First, inasmuch as it is a world that is inimical to all honest emotion, the painter must forgo the comfortable tradition of painting the visible, material realities that appeal so to the property-loving chowderheads, and paint *feelings* instead:

The function of the artist is to express reality as *felt*.

To express the felt nature of reality is the artist's principal concern.

This entails the complete abandonment of objects:

The external world is totally rejected as the painter's model.

In this, nonobjective art differs fundamentally, differs epistemologically, one might say, from other modes of art . . . [Motherwell's ellipsis]

This latter point is not always conceded by apologists for abstract expressionism. To sum up so far:

So long as modern society is dominated by the love of property – and it will be, so long as property is the only source of freedom – the artist has no alternative to formalism. . . . Until there is a radical revolution in the values of modern society, we may look for a highly formal art to continue. We can be grateful for its extraordinary technical discoveries, which have raised modern art, plastically speaking, to a level unreached since the earlier Renaissance.

Here again we have the kind of self-praise that Motherwell would have been well advised to leave to others to make. But never mind: what is fascinating to me is that he thought *formalism* was the only possible response to the ugliness of the bourgeois world – this at a time when the *real* revolutionaries in the Soviet Union were calling formalism the bourgeois art *par excellence* and imposing the values of "socialist realism" on their painters. (Did Motherwell ever pause over the irony that, had he exhibited his paintings in the only nation of that time that had abolished bourgeois property, he probably would have been executed?)

Well, how does the artist go about his task of creating a formalism without forms? His content is now *feeling*: his painting will be the visual analogue of an invisible sensation. Already we might suspect that the project is in trouble, but there is an even more dangerous question confronting our artist: how can he *reliably* tap into his feelings? How can he access his truest, deepest feelings, while making certain he does not dredge up his *false* consciousness, his merely social self? What if he accidentally paints his repressed *counter-revolutionary* feelings, his secret longing for the easy answers embraced by the bourgeoisie? What if he mistakenly accesses *the ideas of the ruling class*? What if he excavates only as far down as the socially conditioned ego, and never reaches the pay *dirt* of the unconscious? Here Freud

rescues him from Marx:

The essential thing was to let the brush take its head and take whatever we could use from the results.

In other words, paint *without* a thought in your head.

The essentially creative principle of contemporary painting I employ is what psychiatrists would call "free association," and what the surrealists, who essentially discovered a systematic use of the principle, called "psychic automatism." And from this standpoint figure painting is impossible now. . . . My *Spanish Elegies* are also free-association. Black is death, anxiety; white is life.

We should welcome his admission that the symbolism is this simple and obvious. It does not make the painting any better, but it acquits us of failing to do justice to its subtlety.

I begin a painting with a series of mistakes. The painting comes out of the correction of mistakes by feeling. . . . My pictures have layers of mistakes buried in them – an X-ray would disclose crimes – layers of consciousness, of willing. They are a succession of humiliations resulting from the realization that only in a state of quickened subjectivity – of freedom from conscious notions, and with what I always suppose to be secondary or accidental colors and shapes – do I find the unknown, which nevertheless I recognize when I come upon it, for which I am always searching.

Here we have the quasi-Freudian view that the true man is the unconscious man. But Freud would not necessarily have agreed that what we find in the unconscious will be *artworthy* – he would have been more likely to say that it will be appalling, and to call upon art to *sublimate*, rather than reveal, the contents of the id. But as I have

indicated, Motherwell does not appear to have read Freud and Marx themselves, but more likely *Reader's Digest* versions of them.

To put it very simply, I don't know how to paint on purpose. So, after days or weeks of suffering, finally I just pick up a tool and make marks, then the internal dialectic takes over, and I can truthfully say that quite often I'm more astonished than anybody else could be at what comes out.

This bit about spontaneity, about being surprised at the outcome: Did Motherwell really not know that this is a chestnut? – that this is exactly what every other artist of his generation said, and *had* to say?

So, by means of free association, he produces a non-objective but nonetheless visible rendering of reality as invisibly felt. Felt by *Motherwell*, not *you*. Felt by the last active spiritual being in the world, not by a property-loving moral imbecile.

Thus we come to the last important aesthetic question about abstract expressionism: *What's in it for you?*

The shocking answer separates abstract expressionism from all earlier art stretching back to the cave paintings: there is *nothing* in it for you; you have been uninvited; communication is not the point.

Painting is a medium in which the mind can actualize itself; it is a medium of thought. Thus painting, like music, tends to become its own content.

The medium of painting is color and space: drawing is essentially a division of space. Painting is therefore the mind realizing itself in color and space. The greatest adventures, especially in a brutal and policed period, take place in the mind.

Painting is a reality, among realities, which has been felt and formed.

It is the pattern of choices made, from the realm of possible choices, which gives a painting its form.

The content of painting is our response to the painting's qualitative character, as made apprehendable by its form. This content is the feeling "body-and-mind." The "body-and-mind," in turn, is an event in reality, the interplay of a sentient being and the external world. The "body-and-mind" being the interaction of the animal self and the external world, is just reality itself. It is for this reason that the "mind," in realizing itself in one of its mediums, expresses the nature of reality as felt.

As Motherwell tries to sort out form and content here, his thought becomes uncharacteristically muddy. Reality is "felt and formed." *What* reality? *Which* reality? Formed into *what*? A "pattern of choices . . . gives a painting its form." Of *course*, now tell us something we didn't already know. The content is "our *response* to" the form; our response to the form is our "feeling body-and-mind"; our body-and-mind is "just reality itself." The words chase themselves.

Translating him into English – no easy task – I believe Motherwell is repeating the mantra that "form is content." This was the slogan of all the prestigious aesthetic movements of the 1920s, from the New Criticism to Stravinsky's "aesthetic emotion" to Clive Bell's "significant form." The emptiness of this motto is proven by Motherwell's inability to make it make sense.

But the solipsism of abstract expressionism ought to be clear in spite of the cloudy rhetoric. The painter is not painting anything to do with *your* feelings, *your* body-and-mind. Frankly, my dear, he doesn't give a damn about you. He is investigating his own sentience, by discovering how he might use paint to articulate the empty space of a canvas on a given day. It is easy to see how this might be an "adventure" . . . for him. Given the nature of the human mind, the result is almost sure to evince *some* sort of "pattern," which will indeed give the painting "its form." And

unless the artist puts on a blindfold, this pattern will bear *some* relationship to "the nature of reality as felt" . . . by *him*; and you will have a glimpse of *his* mind "realizing itself in color and space."

What Motherwell can't tell us is why *we* should be interested in *his* body-and-mind. But perhaps the answer to this question is implicitly given elsewhere in his writings: we should be interested because he is a moral exemplar for our times – a man more sensitive, more loving, more attuned to matters of the spirit, than we are – and we can profit spiritually from any contact that we are fortunate enough to have with him.

But how are we to come up to his level? How can philistines see the values in a painting that is a record of one man's anguished protest against philistinism?

I want to drive home this point with a nail. Motherwell is not in the least concerned to communicate *anything* to *me* – whether an object, or an idea, or an emotion:

A modern painter may have many audiences or one or none; he paints in relation to none of them, though he longs for the audience of other modern painters; and if the modern painter should have a relation with any audience, it is because that audience has somehow found *him*, and managed to approach the center of his being, i.e., the character of his painting.

It is *my* responsibility to seek *him*, to seek the center of his being, there to *witness* his investigation of himself, and, if I understand it, to be *moved* by it. The painting is not a message to me, in pictographic form, showing me what Motherwell has seen; he has not bothered to organize it in such a way that I will comprehend it. It is a diary entry in the private language of his own emotions; and my ability to make it out is not a matter

that Motherwell has deigned to care about. But I will be permitted to peruse his diary, learn his language, and then be inspired by the depths that a great-hearted suffering soul is still able to feel in a property-loving world.

The essay I have just quoted continues with yet another catalog of the abstract virtues, reminding us that these virtues, in Motherwell's mind, are ethical, not technical. Abstract expressionism is, finally, not a matter of color, draftsmanship, and composition, but – he tells us – of morality:

Venturesomeness is only one of the ethical values respected by modern painters. There are many others, integrity, sensuality, sensitivity, knowingness, passion, dedication, sincerity, and so on, which taken altogether represent the ethical background of judgment in relation to any given work of modern art. Every aesthetic judgment of importance is ultimately ethical in background. It is its unawareness of this background that is an audience's chief problem. And one has to have an intimate acquaintance with the language of contemporary painting to be able to see the real beauties of it; to see the ethical background is even more difficult. It is a question of consciousness.

The narcissistic *coup de grace*: the audience *does not understand*.

I hope the reader agrees with me that these doctrines of abstract expressionism are easy to understand – they are only hard to agree with. To a narcissist, however, your disagreement can only be founded on one of two things: incomprehension or malice.

All of my quotes come from *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*, edited by Stephanie Terenzio. The book includes a number of charming photographs of the artist taking his ease as an undergraduate at Stanford University; painting in his studios in

New York City, suburban Connecticut, and Long Island; teaching at Black Mountain College; and summering in Provincetown with one of his four wives. I do not say that a petted pampered affluent educated attractive white American male cannot suffer. I say only that he ought to be very circumspect about how he talks about his suffering when other people can overhear him. If it was hellish to paint, I suggest he could have switched jobs with a Salvadoran immigrant and mowed lawns for a living – a low-stress occupation. The immigrant would have been glad to throw cans of black paint at a canvas and go to gallery openings.

There are a few other elements to add to the mix of qualities whereby we identify abstract expressionists: alcohol, cigarettes, and talk. These fellows all hung out with each other and smoked, drank, and shot the bull at levels five to twenty times the national average. They also committed suicide, or drank themselves to death, at roughly *fifty* times the national rate – although probably not fifty times the rate of self-pitying white guys.

If the reader is uncomfortable with some of these remarks, let me hasten to say that I have compassion for people who kill themselves. But I don't have compassion for people who get their values from the people who kill themselves. It isn't exactly a novelty in human history that a bunch of boozed-up self-absorbed self-appointed art revolutionaries proclaim themselves the last best hope of mankind; in *every* generation you can probably find a bar where such a clique has gathered and theorized. But the post-war American generation of art consumers will deserve a special place in cultural history for having so eagerly believed the blarney and so richly rewarded the producers

of it.

Recapitulation: The Four Noble Truths according to abstract expressionism

1. Life is suffering, to a sensitive, artistic soul. *Days of hell.*
2. The cause is the world – *the unfriendliness of society* – brutal, philistine, uncomprehending. (The Marxist version favored by the abstract expressionists themselves: in a bourgeois society, property is valued over persons. The capitalist libertarian version favored by some of their buyers: in a collectivized society, there is no place for the individual spirit.)
3. This suffering can *not* be ended. But in this debased world, the artist is a moral avatar: a lamp to guide us spiritually. We are inspired when we bear witness to his lonely, heroic, passionate struggle. *The agony of painting.*
4. The right conduct of the artist in such a world is his painting of the Truth about himself and his struggle – he paints his felt experience of standing before the canvas in a state of anxiety and suffering. *We faced it unarmed.* The work that eventuates is a record of his suffering and of his triumph over suffering. It is not intended as an act of communication; but after it has come into existence, the audience that has sought it out is allowed to view it and to be spiritually edified. In a world of compromise, clutter, consumerism, the death of feeling and indeed the death of the human spirit, the painting gives us purity, truth, and passion. It was the pursuit of *ethical* goals that drove artists to abandon the objects of the visible world as their subject matter and instead to treat the canvas itself as an object, there to paint, by means of free association, an account of their own spirituality. All the technical elements of abstract expressionism were discovered as solutions to ethical problems. Every such painting is stripped of all the false sentiments and illusions of representation, and finds its way to an authentic statement of reality as felt. *The subject must be tragic and timeless . . . the only control is truth.*

Let me counterpoint against this:

The Four Ignoble Truths about art and artists

1. When asked what he was thought he was doing with his cartoon strip "Pogo," Walt Kelly replied that he was trying to have fun and make money. These are the two most important motivations that actuate the serious artist. If you want to be a holy man, you should join an ashram.
2. In creating art objects that will be paid for and enjoyed by art audiences, the serious artist may aspire to create a "profound entertainment," to borrow a phrase from the composer John Hilliard. The materials of the work may touch upon our most intensely spiritual concerns. We may experience a transcendent "time out of time" while attending to it. That is as it may be. The main equipment the artist needs to create his work, whether it is of this sort or the lightest of diversions, is a clear head about how to use his chosen medium most effectively to communicate his vision to the audience. The vision is embodied in the *subject matter*. The *formed content* puts across the subject matter. Technique is everything that serves to adequately express the vision. If the subject matter is the spirituality of a holy man, and this is expressed in pictorial form as the unmediated record of the holy man's struggle with the emptiness of the canvas and of his suffering effort to fill it with color and shape, most likely the resulting work will *not* be entertaining.
3. As Charles Ives said, the belief "that one who is full of turbid feeling *about himself* is qualified to be some sort of an artist" can be dismissed as "the Byronic fallacy" (although we must note that Ives was wrong about Byron himself and only right about Byron's many emulators). The entire generation of the abstract expressionists was so crippled by the Byronic fallacy that they will remain historically interesting for centuries to come as an object lesson in narcissism and self-delusion.
4. We may set it down, then, that the world, brutal or otherwise, is as it is; that in general artists are no better than other people; and that we go to them, as a rule, for arresting objects and entertainments, not for spiritual guidance. We may nonetheless find spiritual guidance in some works, because a particular artist did see the world with a vision that we lack and used his technique to make the object or entertainment true to what he saw; and at every moment of creation thought of how best to put his vision across *to us*. Therefore, the audience is the *instigator* of art. Nothing of artistic

value happens until there is an audience for it. No artist is any good unless he is trying to say something to an audience. Saying that an artist can work better by ignoring the audience is like saying that a therapist can do his best work in an empty room or a lover achieve the most ecstatic lovemaking by himself. It might even be true, but we wouldn't pay to watch.

Charles Wuorinen impersonates Humpty Dumpty

The abstract expressionist painters were not the only artists of mid-century America to dispense with the audience. Composer Milton Babbitt wrote a notorious article – frequently anthologized under the title "Who Cares if You Listen?" – setting forth the argument that avant-garde composers ought to be treated by their universities like research physicists. He conceded, in effect, that the audience for his music was unlikely to be larger than the audience for a lecture in the latest developments in particle physics or advanced mathematics; therefore, composers, like scientists, should be protected from the vicissitudes of public taste and allowed to pursue their investigations into auditory phenomena free of the pressures of the market place.

There are several fallacies in Babbitt's entertaining proposal. Two occurred to me after three or four seconds of sustained thought. First, science carries within its methodology an automatic mechanism for detecting charlatans: when it turns out that a chemist has been fudging his results, it is possible to expose him before his colleagues and drum him out of the academy. Second, the taxpayer who supports the physicist does not need to understand a microwave oven in order to benefit from it. But since art is a form of communication, the benefit to the lay person *is* dependent upon, if not synonymous with, his understanding of it.

The way around both these objections is to defy 2500 years of cultural history from Homer to Tolstoy and propound the doctrine that art is *not* created for the purpose

of communicating something of value to an audience.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question *is*," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."

We come, then, to Charles Wuorinen, master of the new meanings of the words about art. But before we take up his definitive statement on communication – well, *all* his statements are definitive – we would do well to note that he scorns the opinions of critics, performers, and listeners, which is to say, everyone involved in the making of music except himself. Please savor the contents of an interview that was published originally in the magazine *Genesis West* in September of 1962. He avers that "most instrumentalists are like most listeners: lazy, uneducated, pretentious – contemptible." Jazz musicians fare no better than classical, inasmuch as they are "far too untutored to have any idea at all of what goes on" in a contemporary score, while their own music is "awful . . . boring . . . irritating." As for critics, they are "too stupid" to be taken seriously, and they are "to a man mediocre musicians and hence have bad ears and worse minds . . . they are bound to be bitterly jealous, spiteful, and destructive – as indeed most of them are."

There would seem to be no one left standing, but Wuorinen does finally, grudgingly, admit to the existence of a tiny coterie of "cultivated individuals" who have earned his approval by their devotion to his works. *But:*

This of course is not to say that their reactions could ever influence what I compose or the way I do it . . .

It is worth while pausing over the precise meaning of this sentence. Wuorinen acknowledges the existence of the fit audience, though few. Presumably his works are directed toward this handful of discerning individuals. *But nothing in their reaction could ever influence his manner of addressing them.*

We have here a clear statement of the interesting notion, which is echoed in Motherwell's writings, that the artist auditions the audience – not the other way around. Wuorinen's compositions are not seeking to please any listeners – rather, listeners are permitted to approach his compositions after proving themselves worthy of the privilege.

This would seem to imply that there *is* an act of communication – that Wuorinen's work will reward the attention paid to it by cultivated individuals and confer upon them something of value. But if these same individuals protest to Wuorinen that, having listened with the best will in the world, they nonetheless cannot make out what that something is, *he will change . . . nothing.*

It is as if I prefaced this essay with a disclaimer that my words are not meant for composers, performers, listeners, or critics – all of whom are too stupid, uneducated, lazy, and pretentious to understand me – but are directed only to those readers who have already been initiated into my style and shown themselves to be sensitive to it. But when even these readers are unable to grasp my message, I simply chalk up their incomprehension to their own failure. Or suppose I am addressing an audience that, I

come to realize, cannot speak English; nonetheless I continue to speak in English, because *of course* I would *never allow their reaction to influence what I do*.

Communication is now somehow peripheral to the work of art; and as a consequence, the artist is the sole judge of whether or not his work has succeeded. And Wuorinen, by saying he can never be influenced by the verdict of his audience, is also saying that he is incapable of making an artistic mistake.

This is immediately comprehensible if I think of art as something akin to my setting up a personal filing system for my work, or even to painting my desk: I need please only myself. And many artists do think of their art-making in this way. But the moment I expect another person to share my files, and the first time I ask another person whether my desk is pleasing to *his* eye, I cross a line. If the other person cannot figure out my filing system, it is a failure; and if the other person thinks the desk is ugly, I have no ground upon which I can stand and say "No, it isn't," and prove that his eye is faulty but mine is not.

Whenever I engage in this particular discussion with artistically inclined people, I can usually count on a tedious exchange in which they try to explain to me that artists create problems for themselves and solve them, and cannot be thinking about the audience while they do this, for if they did, they would be prostituting their work, and *please stop!* Please. Stop. I know that. Everyone knows that.

But what are the "problems"? What are the "solutions"? Is the artist trying to please his own eye? Surely he is. Is his eye unique among the five billion pairs of eyes on earth? Does he assume that no one else will ever see what he sees? This

would be passing strange. Surely if his painting speaks to himself, it will speak to *some* others.

The artist who cares for no man and is too pure to show his work nonetheless paints for an audience – an idealized audience of one. However, all the explanations of how artists must be insulated from the crassness of the marketplace and please only themselves fly out the window the very first time they share one of their productions with so much as one other person – and certainly when they show their paintings in a gallery, have their musical works performed and recorded, and submit their writings to publishers. I do not care what epistemological status you give the work that is never exhibited at all. The moment it *is* exhibited, it is art; and art is a form of communication. To say it is hanging on the wall of a museum or taking up the second half of a concert, but that it is a matter of complete indifference to everyone involved whether viewers or auditors are able to get anything out of it, or even attend it, is to return with Humpty Dumpty to the precincts of Wonderland.

The paradox of an art that need not be appreciated by any audience becomes excruciating when the artist *demands that society support him in his art-making*. Wuorinen, following Babbitt's lead, complained in the early 1970s about the niggardly amounts of money involved in the grants he was obtaining. They were not enough for him to live on. Yet he did not fare so badly, at that. He went on to have one of the most lucrative and high-profile careers among all the members of the "New York School" – recipient of a Pulitzer Prize, of a MacArthur "genius" grant, and by the end of the 1980s, paid \$60,000 a year to teach a few hours a week down the road in New

Jersey.

For those who are curious, Wuorinen's music sounds to most listeners as if it is *trying* to be ugly. However, those who have a bit of technical training, or have had any professional contact with 20th Century music, will recognize immediately that this is not the case: it is simply music that is constructed according to an intellectual plan that exists independently of the way music achieves denotation. To the extent that it is organized by means of what came to be called a "precompositional format," we should be wary but perhaps not altogether intolerant. But to the extent that it dispenses with the musical dictionary, we should be downright alarmed – just as alarmed as we would be with a piece of writing that dispensed with the dictionary of common words. In the polyphonic music of the one thousand years preceding the 1920s, a given musical tone almost always possessed a tensional valence produced by how strongly it agreed or clashed with the overtone series produced by another tone that was installed, for however long, as the generator of the harmony. This degree of concord or discord, with a corresponding tendency to "resolve" somewhere else or to sound already resolved, was determined by acoustical facts. The audience response to these phenomena was stable because all the members of it were wired the same way biologically and then learned by ear the conventional means that composers employed to regularize and systematize the harmonic language. I call the tensional valence a note's denotation, and listeners roughly agreed in their responses to it, just as readers agree with only slight variations about the meanings of words. A composer created an arc of tension and repose by choosing as each next note the one with a denotation that

increased or reduced the tensional valence by just the amount that was required. In the 1920s, an entire school of composers, led by Arnold Schönberg, broke with this tradition and insisted that the generative material of a piece had to be entirely drawn from a single invariant "row" exactly 12 notes long, itself constructed by allowing each of the 12 tones of the chromatic scale to appear once and only once. After this necessarily atonal presentation of the "fundamental gestalt" of the movement, all subsequent melodic materials had to be permutations of this original generative formula. The total number of allowable permutations was 48, and they could be represented by a "grid" that governed the selection of notes from outside the work. No note could be introduced from outside the grid. This method of composition effectively barred the composer from selecting his notes according to the criterion of the harmonic tensional arc. Many other means of intensifying and relaxing the musical soundscape continued to be available, so some 12-tone works gave limited satisfaction, especially when conjoined to lurid programs – it happened that atonal music inevitably best suited the prevailing style of Central European Angst. But it was no longer possible to control the growth and attenuation of a tensional arc based on harmonic denotation, and a thousand-year tradition disappeared overnight. This we could chalk up to a salutary revolution in aesthetic values, although caution would be indicated. But the creators of this new "dodecaphonic" music adopted a pose of modesty and maddeningly argued that they were *continuing* the tradition, and that they worked in the same way as their great predecessors.

It is as if a writer, having understood that the 26 letters of the alphabet are the

means by which all words are constructed and literature achieves all its meanings, then pulled the 26 letters out of a hat one at a time and used them in that order, and in that order only, throughout his novel – but at least allowing himself complete freedom to put the blank spaces between the "words" wherever he wished. To complaints that these random sequences of letters rarely produced words found in a dictionary, and never an intelligible sentence, he replies that his novel, like all previous novels, is made up of the 26 letters of the alphabet occurring in a limited number of sequential configurations: just as George Eliot's novels never include a word containing the letter-sequence "c-b-x," so his novel never includes a word with the letter-sequence "t-h-e." But as with Eliot's *Middlemarch*, he goes on to say, once you accustom yourself to the relatively small number of possible sequences, you will see that they recur throughout the work. And the way literature achieves its meaning is precisely by our recognition of such repeating patterns. The idea that there is *another* meaning to Eliot's work – a meaning tied to a narrative about characters and their emotions – is touchingly outmoded. That belief was always illusory, a kind of figment of the reader's imagination. The thoughts that readers have about Eliot's characters are "subjective," which is proven by there being no two readers who agree completely about them. Such thoughts are not really produced by the sequences of letters. How could they be? Letters are just black marks on a page. Such thoughts are always a product of the reader's *own* mind, and have nothing to do, strictly speaking, with the aesthetic patterns of the letters comprising the novel.

Now that you understand this, you will also surely understand that Wuorinen's

music no more *tries* to be ugly than our hypothetical modern novel tries to be abstruse.

This account of the serialized music of the 1950s – and Wuorinen's music is extraordinarily noxious and unintelligible even by the standards of this school of composition – is not a parody or a travesty, but an exact analogy, as the following excerpt from the writings of composer and theorist Ernst Krenek will demonstrate. While most of his article, "Extents [sic] and Limits of Serial Techniques," is impenetrable, his concluding paragraph does address our worst fears about serial music in a forthright manner:

While it may be true that music from the time of plainsong has been oriented towards speech-like articulation, diction, and the over-all structure, and while especially the exploits of Expressionism and atonality point to a very close association with the free articulation of prose, we have to face the fact that under the influence of the constructive rigor that was the very consequence of Expressionistic roaming serial music has turned away from its rhetorical past.

It would be simpler to say that all prior music presents an intelligible shape of intensification and relaxation, and that serial music abandons this. It is as though literature abandoned the subject-verb-object sentence structure. But Krenek is honest in owning up to the violence of serialism's break with the past.

Since whatever music seems to communicate is not so much the supposed content of the audible matter as it is the product of the listener's reaction touched off by his auditory experience . . .

We need to stop right here and proceed with extreme caution. According to Krenek, I

listen to music and it *seems* as though something has been communicated to me; but there is no *actual* connection between the music playing and the message received. Rather, I hear some "audible matter" and in response to it, I have an "auditory experience"; this experience *touches off* a "reaction," and this reaction *produces* "whatever music seems to communicate." But Krenek explicitly denies that the message I receive at the end of the process is determined by the musical content at the start.

Let's go *very* slowly. The sequence consists of

AUDIBLE MATTER (MUSIC)
which leads to
AUDITORY EXPERIENCE
which leads to ("touches off")
MY REACTION
which leads to
WHATEVER MUSIC SEEMS TO COMMUNICATE TO ME

Why won't Krenek just say that the music communicates its content to me? Why the intervening links in the chain? The answer is that he thinks that somewhere among the links I became infected with "the intentional fallacy" and "the affective fallacy" and told myself that the composer meant to move me in some way. According to him, I think I am hearing the *music* tell me something; but actually, the music is playing, and simultaneously *I am making up something to tell myself*. I am completely taken in by this self-deception – every time I hear the piece. And it has ever been thus, throughout the history of music, and it might still be so, except for the investigations of Krenek and his colleagues that have unmasked this sleight-of-ear.

Let us assume Krenek thinks better than he writes, and has an intelligible point to make: most likely, he wants to say that the break in the chain is between the "auditory experience" and "the listener's reaction"; and indeed, if a listener insists upon verbalizing his reaction in terms of pictures like waterfalls, he may make the mistake of thinking that the music communicates something that cannot be found in "the audible matter." The way to avoid this common error is to state that all verbalizations are irrelevant, but that communication nonetheless takes place – of something that is emotional in nature and, even more pertinently, temporal in nature, namely, a tension curve that unfolds at a particular tempo. This is what music "seems to communicate," and it *is* present in the "supposed content" and the "audible matter."

Put another way, in semi-technical terms: a "leaning note" leans in the mind of the composer when he writes it, in the mind of the performer when he gives it a slight accent to heighten its directional impetus, and in the listener's mind when he experiences a dissonance that is aching to resolve. Because all three personages experience the same thing – and could *fail* to experience it only by being tone-deaf – music is a form of communication as definite as – Felix Mendelssohn said *more* definite than – verbal language. But to resume:

Since whatever music seems to communicate is not so much the supposed content of the audible matter as it is the product of the listener's reaction touched off by his auditory experience, there is no reason to assume that the nature of serial music excludes the possibility of interpreting it as a medium of some sort of communication.

Follow the bouncing ball. Serial music has cut itself adrift from the means by which all

musical communication occurred *in the past*; as a result, the listener cannot make heads nor tails out of it. So: is serial music communicating *anything*? Krenek himself is a serial composer; we might expect him to be in a position to answer this question; but he is unwilling to make a statement *at this time*. He assures us, however, that there is nothing that *precludes* the possibility of interpreting it as some sort of communication. After all, since listeners of Beethoven allow their reactions to be touched off by auditory experiences that occur in conjunction with musical notes, and so believe that they hear meanings in his music, when all they are hearing is permutations of motives, and since readers of George Eliot tell themselves stories about her characters, when all they are looking at is a succession of white surfaces covered with black marks, there is no reason a listener to serial music cannot similarly make up a story, so that it "seems to communicate" something to him.

Krenek was a Central European intellectual, so he ended his disquisition on the communicative properties of serial music with an existential twist: "It may mean as much or as little as life itself."

Now, is that deep? Or is that *deep*?

I must say that Krenek's granting us the right to impose a putative meaning on a supposed content, as well as his humility in the face of these questions about meaning, is a relief after the terrible certainties of Wuorinen; but his espousal of a music consisting purely of "audible matter" that is subjected to "constructive rigor," with the clear implication that the sophisticated listener will find real, objective meaning only in

that construct, brings home the unrelenting formalism of modernist high art. And this raises an interesting paradox: while the making of the work of art has become more and more intellectualized, what the audience actually encounters seems to be more and more wildly and chaotically emotional. Motherwell's raging brushstrokes and evocative titles reflect the turmoil of his inner world; and Wuorinen's extravagant gestures sound at first blush like the musical correlative of an explosively psychotic episode. The two artists might part company here, because Motherwell affirms that he *is* painting a record of his neuroses, whereas modernist composers are more comfortable postulating an aggressive formalism that insists that structure is all you get. In his intellectually lax fashion, Motherwell equated formalism with abstraction while averring that his paintings were a record of his feelings. He might have quailed before the severity of this pronouncement by music theorist Benjamin Boretz, a formalist's formalist: "What, then, *do* art entities *express*? Ideas of relation, I think, *particular* coherences, in analog form; and what they *exemplify* are their structures." Boretz is no more interested in Motherwell's feelings than I am. And indeed, Wuorinen's gestures can be understood to be emotionally rampant only by first assuming (correctly) that the gestures of earlier music were analogs of normal human emotions and then using them as standards of comparison for Wuorinen's gestures. Boretz's aesthetic wipes out all such readings and asserts firmly that the only coherence that matters, or has ever mattered, is a gesture's formal relations to other gestures inside the piece. Nonetheless, even diehard serial composers claim to be all heart and to value spontaneity and intuition over arid intellectualism. Barnett Newman famously said that "aesthetics is for artists

what ornithology is for birds." He was lying, of course, having subjected the content of his own paintings to the most unrelenting theoretical oppression; he was like a Stalinist who rhetorically vaunts the freedom of a democratic workers' republic. But his statement is beloved in modernist circles in direct proportion to the degree that the artist has surrendered his autonomy to formalism. We in the audience, meanwhile, armed with the prerogative that Krenek has tremulously conceded to us, can still give these gestures as much, or as little, meaning as life itself, and legitimately ponder how the hyper-emotional if utterly incoherent surfaces of these art forms are fettered to deep structures of the purest intellectualism.

The solution may lie in the narcissism, or more accurately the self-cultivated autism, of the prototypical 20th century artist. Locked in his own consciousness, he is free to project anything at all onto his formal structures; untethered from the inconvenience of having to communicate in anyone else's language, he can give any definition he wishes to any sign in his own personal lexicon. It is just this solipsistic nexus of narcissism, formalism, and freedom from the requirement that the artist communicate with an audience that creates the absurdity of high modern art. The narcissism by itself is no bar at all to an inner exploration of great integrity and a salient report of the discoveries thereof. Perhaps most great artists of the past were narcissistically impaired; but they accepted the language that they inherited and the obligation to communicate their truths by means of it without complaint; and they understood that form came last in the hierarchy of values, after the inspiration of a subject and the selection of a content expressive of that subject. This content,

pregnant with its potential to express the artist's vision of the subject, is what *is* formed. And form is not content: rather, intelligibility, which is to say meaning, is form. What sinks the modernist project is its forced abandonment of the common language, and the attempt by each artist to found his personal style on formal structures built up out of a newly created language, with subject matter assumed to be either irrelevant or mystically elusive even to the artist. An abstract painting or a piece of serial music thus cuts itself loose from the moorings of intelligibility itself, just as would a novel that abandoned subject-verb-object syntax and instead subjected a series of letters or words to mathematical permutations. These works evince "structure" but not meaning, because that which is being structured is not meaningful and cannot arrive at meaning.

But precisely because such an art work lacks intelligibility and "means only itself," it can also bear any additional meaning that the artist loads upon it – for all is arbitrary here, the form as well as the content and the subject matter. Motherwell can admit that his true subject is his own "state of anxiety" and that the expression of this state issues in a "series of pictures with black ovals and stripes on white grounds." Yet when he is done with them, he can call these pictures "Elegies to the Spanish Republic" – or anything else he damn well pleases. Why not? Who is to say that "the inner tensions of the finished canvas," which embody his state of anxiety, do not also express his anguish over the demise of the Spanish Republic? So the formalist artist can plump up his public reputation with politically correct titles assigned on the basis of any passing whim or careerist calculation, and no one can call him out for it.

Did I say that the form is arbitrary as well? I hear an angry dissent from the

serial composers. When a musical composition has been built up by means of "total organization" – which means that the sounding elements have been distributed throughout the piece according to the particular precompositional format that was employed – it is possible to say with a kind of surface plausibility that *nothing* is arbitrary. But it is truer to say that *everything* is, because the format itself is arbitrary in relation to any known musical language and dictionary. I am judging arbitrariness according to the standard that would be recognized by any person with a pair of working ears – anyone, that is to say, who is capable of distinguishing up from down among musical tones and has a long history of taking pleasure in the music of Josquin, Beethoven, and Stravinsky. Again by way of analogy, I can create an algorithm for combining words, including such rules as "any word ending in the letter 'r' must be followed by a word starting with the letter 'f.'" I can next atomize the words of an existing work of art, or make a random or even purposeful selection of words from the dictionary, and then "totally organize" them into a poem according to the algorithm. The reader, coming to my poem with his own ideas about form (sonnet, sestina, and such), finds my poem to be formless; and with his own idea about intelligibility, unintelligible. Or allowing for an apter conception of form, the reader comes to my poem expecting to encounter a series of semi-pictorial gestalts created by the mental images that are triggered by subject-verb-object configurations; and he further expects that as the work progresses, each additional gestalt will follow from those that have come before and contribute to building up larger, more complex gestalts, with all this eventuating at the end in a *very* large gestalt – the entire piece – that seems to be *one*

unified experience, one complete and complex whole that is the summation of all its parts. This form too the reader finds to be lacking. I can, of course, triumphantly show him my algorithm. But he need not concede that following an algorithm generates a form; and if he is fast on his feet he won't. The reader has the right to insist that the form be a form *of* something that is pertinent to an art experience – that what is structured is relevant to an act of communication between the work of art and himself – whereas my actions, by divesting the materials of my art of their potential for communicative analogy and then arranging their properties according to predetermined quasi-mathematical formulas, have denuded my materials of even the possibility of intelligible form and meaningful communication. There is no there there.

I will conclude by reminding the reader of the equivocal status of evaluation in the cultural world defined by Motherwell and Wuorinen. Obviously Motherwell wanted the best contemporary paintings to be chosen for the Museum of Modern Art, and Wuorinen affirmed the importance and necessity of grants by whining about their inadequacy. *Who will decide?* Audiences are philistines who are lazy and uneducated; critics are failed artists who are motivated by spite; even other painters and composers are suspect. Rothko, you will remember, damned all his fellow painters who produce "trite tripe" such as "pictures for the home; pictures for over the mantel; pictures of the American scene; social pictures" and "prize-winning potboilers"; Wuorinen excoriated his fellow musicians as "pretentious" and "contemptible."

From his writings, it is clear that Wuorinen himself will judge his own work. No

one else is competent to do so. Motherwell was less obviously megalomaniacal in his phrasing, but from the bouquets he strews in the way of his own work, it is clear that he did not shy away from saying that it succeeded.

Now this situation is surely anomalous in the history of art – indeed, in the history of anything. We have only to imagine the producer of any other commodity stating that he, and not the buyer, will judge its excellence. To the argument that art is not, cannot be, must not be, a commodity – that it must be protected by the pure of heart from the evils of commodification – I can only answer as I did before: it becomes a commodity the moment it goes public in any fashion whatsoever. We do not wish lovemaking to be a commodity, either – but as soon as a prostitute sells it, our sentimentality is dashed, and she can be judged by whether or not she is any good at her trade, just the way any other purveyor of goods and services is judged. Even religion thrives or fails as it sells or sits on the shelf: those sects that we damn as "cults" are not weirder in dogma than Roman Catholicism (they hardly *could* be); they are only smaller – much smaller – in membership.

If he can get away with it, much good fun can be had by the artist who arrogates the evaluation of his works to himself. No doubt many artists who were suffering from narcissistic personality disorder tried to do so in the past. But the generation of abstract expressionists and "total organization" serialists was the first, I think, to exhibit collective narcissism to such a pronounced degree and to succeed in having their self-valuation accepted by a large-enough public to make their careers successful.

Posterity has a way of bringing matters to a reckoning, however belatedly.

Goethe asked three questions about works of art. What was the artist trying to do? Did the artist succeed in doing it? Was it worth doing? Perhaps no generation of painters, composers, and poets ever had such ironclad answers to the first two questions. But it's that third question that contains the stinger in the scorpion's tail.

Case closed.

John Ashbery takes meaning lightly

If Goethe's three questions about art did not already exist, we would have to invent them to deal with the poetry of John Ashbery. *Everyone* agrees that he knows what he is doing. Here is a poem from his latest collection, titled *Your Name Here* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000):

BLOODFITS

As inevitable as a barking dog, second-hand music
drifts down five flights of stairs and out into the street,
adjusting seams, checking makeup in pocket mirror.

Inside the camera obscura, jovial as ever
dentists make all the money. I didn't know that then.
Children came out to tell me, in measured tones,
how cheap the seaside is, how the salt air reddens cheeks.

Violently dented by storms, the new silhouettes
last only a few washings.
Put your glasses on and read the label. Hold that bat.
He'd sooner break rank than wind.
He's bought himself a shirt the color of Sam Rayburn Lake,
muddled ocher by stumps and land practices. Picnicking prisoners
never fail to enjoy the musk that drifts off it
in ever-thickening waves,
triggering bloody nostalgia
for a hypotenuse that never was.

No one would say that his four-year-old kid could have done *this*; and even a fan of Edgar Guest can sense that Ashbery has done what he set out to do. So we move with unusual alacrity to the third question, of whether it was worth doing, and we even think

that this time around we have some credentials to sit at the table of judgment. For literature presents a different case from painting and music: the visual language of abstract art and the aural language of atonal music may be foreign to us, but the language Ashbery writes is our native tongue. Therefore we need not be cowed by our lack of expertise about his technical apparatus. How he makes his verbal music (such as it is) may elude us, and indeed may even be a mystery we would prefer to admire rather than understand. Nonetheless, we recognize the words, and we know the meanings of the words. Indeed, for a modern poet, Ashbery's vocabulary is unusually accessible – nothing here has to be looked up in a dictionary. So we think we are in a position to be able to say whether the poem has communicated something of value to us.

And yet, we have a sneaking suspicion that we are *not* going to be allowed to sit at the table. And this suspicion grows stronger with each re-reading of the poem. First time through, zero comprehension. Second time through, slow down, take it a sentence at a time: for instance, it begins with one of those metaphors that jump out at us from all modern poems without exception. They jump out at us because they are so unlikely, so surprising, so *not* what we would ever think. Second-hand music checks its makeup in a pocket mirror. M-hmm. And yet, if we are constant readers of this body of literature, these metaphors *don't* jump out at us, because we have grown so accustomed to them that they never strike us any more, just as the aggressive percussion, growling muted horns, and scratchy *sul ponticello* strings at the beginning of a contemporary piece of atonal music no longer fill us with Central European Angst.

Because of a certain insidious law of biological adaptation, whereby we habituate ourselves to stimuli after continual exposure to them, modern art has lost its power to shock us.

Well, never mind. What we need here is, of course, an expert to guide us, and just as we turn to Motherwell to explain Rothko, and to Wuorinen to explain Babbitt (and to Rothko to explain Motherwell, and to Babbitt to explain Wuorinen), we turn to Ashbery's fellow poet Charles Simic to explain Ashbery in the pages of *The New York Review of Books* on November 30, 2000. And we are greatly reassured to find that Simic cheerfully admits that the poem does *not* make sense, which might seem to be the kiss of death for any piece of writing done with words. But our confidence begins to flag when we realize that Simic does not treat this condition as a liability. We are back in Wonderland.

So let's go slowly, as usual. Simic likes the initial metaphor. "Nice image," he thinks. I can't imagine why. But my not liking it can perhaps be chalked up to a constitutional inhibition: the right side of my brain may be underdeveloped; or I may score too low on the "intuition" axis of the Myers-Briggs test. I have a friend who is practically at the north pole of that axis, and he loves this stuff. Most of my friends possess a greater tolerance for metaphor than I do. They are stimulated where I am irritated.

Nonetheless, the following question has to be fair: Is there a way to determine when a metaphor goes too far? Wouldn't *any* isolated metaphor – "this is like that" – stimulate the intuitions of my more fanciful brethren? I grant you that I have no right to

interfere with their legitimate pleasure. But what exactly is the nature of that pleasure? Even they would agree, I think, that in a sustained piece of writing, be it ever so short, the metaphor has to justify itself not only as a spur to an isolated flight of fancy but also as a link in a chain that ultimately issues in coherence.

Put another way, if metaphors are good in and of themselves, and if dissonant, provocative, idiosyncratic, mind-stretching metaphors are especially good, because they do, yes, stretch our minds . . . are there any grounds for preferring one provocation over another? Are there *any* rules?

There need not be. There could be merely sensibilities. If Simic is engaged where I am put off, perhaps it would be best to treat our two responses as individual bedrock. There is no accounting for taste.

What worries me, however, is that Simic does *not* seem to think that we have reached bedrock. Beneath our aesthetic incompatibility of taste he discerns a moral difference. He adumbrates this difference between us with a light touch, and even a vein of self-mockery, but watch where he winds up: "I need a firm foothold and Ashbery won't let me have one. . . . Scenes, tenses, pronouns shift without the slightest warning. . . . At this point, the reader either gives up on the poem or figures, what the hell, let's go for a ride with it."

This last sentence is morally weighted. Who is more admirable, who do I want to be? A dim suburban bulb who needs a firm foothold? Or one of the doughty band of free spirits who can go for a ride with a poem? Obviously Simic himself, in spite of satirizing his own desire for coherence, aligns himself with those who careen along with

the poet. After all, he is writing this favorable review.

Simic's ethical stance becomes explicit when he summarizes:

Most poets trim their experiences down to their manageable parts. If they are writing about what happened in the woods one snowy night, they are not likely to include stray thoughts they are having at that moment about taking a pair of pants to the cleaners. Ashbery does. He includes such extraneous material, no matter how irrelevant it seems to be. It is his refusal to make a choice between what is "serious" and what is "trivial" that drives his detractors batty. They want poems to tidy up experience, while he keeps insisting that messiness is part of the picture.

Now we begin to catch the religious drift of the thought. Ashbery has spoken of "the risky business of writing," thus putting himself in the same company with Rothko and Motherwell and the other intrepid artists who suffer for their art. And here is Simic paying homage to the chances Ashbery takes. And here am I. Who will I be? A stolid lunkhead, one of those detractors of Ashbery who have to have their experiences tidied up? Or one of the expansive personalities who can deal with the messiness of life, who know that the serious and the trivial often jostle together in the close quarters of existential anxiety?

A few paragraphs later, Simic tells us that Ashbery takes "the whole idea of one meaning" with a grain of salt, and that he is "rightly wary of the way poets, as a matter of habit, contrive to sum it all up for the reader." Setting aside for a moment this cavalier attitude toward meaning, there is no mistaking Simic's self-flattering assumption, so familiar to me from my readings in modern art, contemporary music, and Freudianism, that there are two kinds of people: the quietly desperate many who want everything wrapped up neatly in a package; and those happy, happy few who

have the courage to confront upsetting ideas and difficult, challenging art. As mild and understated as Simic's review sounds, in contradistinction to the aggressive posturings of most "advanced" artists, there is nonetheless no mistaking his condescension: it is too bad and too sad about those poor philistines who are still in the primitive state of needing and craving "one meaning."

But does Ashbery give us a multiplicity of meanings, or no meaning at all? Does the poem really have a subject? Never mind a meaning, a *subject*. For it is subject matter that generates formed content, or did for 2500 years. But Simic tells us that Ashbery starts writing first and discovers his subject later: the idea of "Bloodfits" is probably "something he stumbled upon as he shuffled phrases and images like a pack of cards." Reassuring, except . . . Simic never does, in his long disquisition on the poem, get around to *identifying* that stumbled-upon idea of "Bloodfits."

But can a series of self-standing propositions that have no apparent sequence really be said to give us a multiplicity of meanings, if what we experience is just one damn thing after another? Doesn't such perpetual disjunction vitiate meaning? John Cage thought so. He recommended discontinuity precisely because it eliminates "the burden of psychological intentions." (Cage was a modernist who not only knew what he was trying to do, but what he actually did. He was only mistaken about whether it was worth doing.)

Come to think of it, does Ashbery even give us self-standing propositions? That is to say, do his individual sentences generate even temporary meanings? Are his

sentences real sentences, semantically as well as syntactically?

A talent for self-realization
will get you only as far as the vacant lot
next to the lumber room.

Sounds witty and provocative, I suppose. Simic likes it. He quotes it from another poem, but he must think that I will get something from it even out of context. But what? What does it mean, really? I suppose if I were to let my mind dilate upon it, I could meditate, hypothesize, and fantasize for quite some time and even produce a poem of my own thoughts about it. But you know what? I can do that without Ashbery's lines. I go to great writers to *get away* from my own thoughts.

"He'd sooner break rank than wind." The expression is "break ranks," but never mind: it is a subject-verb-object setup and I guess I know what is being said in a denotative sort of way. But I do not know why it is being said, or what I am supposed to think about it, or how it meets the overly explicit criteria of Aristotle's definition of "the middle" of a work of art – that it should come naturally out of what came before ("Hold that bat") and lead naturally into what goes after ("He's bought himself a shirt the color of Sam Rayburn Lake"). I suppose the line itself is meant to be funny, but the joke seems thin and forced, even if we treat its toilet humor as professorial bonhomie – "I'm just a regular guy" – and not as, say, the sort of offhand remark I might have enjoyed when, at the age of 15, I wanted to demonstrate that I was not only a man among men but also the sort of intellectual who preferred "The Miller's Tale" to the graffiti in a public bathroom.

Can we ever arrive at anything resembling real and actual sense from the statement that picnicking prisoners sometimes experience a "bloody nostalgia for a hypotenuse that never was"? I can certainly *make* it make sense, but will I be able to have any confidence that it is Ashbery's sense, or your sense? And at precisely this point, the chasm of postmodernism yawns. I have already mentioned the painters who say that anything you experience in front of their canvases will be right. Here we have the poem that cannot be misinterpreted. Ergo, we are admitting that art is not a type of communication. It does *not* link one mind to another. It just gives our minds something to do. Fine. But the same writers, painters, and musicians cannot then claim to be the inheritors and protectors of the Great Tradition. When we cross this chasm, we leave art behind and begin the exploration of a new – and very dark – continent, with only the company of a fellow traveler like Charles Simic to light our way, while he tries to persuade us that every step we take is ushering us into the brave new world.

As I write this essay, I also happen to be immersed in the poetry of John Keats. Few modern poets can survive this comparison straight up, but I am struck by how Ashbery differs from Keats not only in his natural gift but also in the nature of his aspiration. Keats wrote for everyday educated Englishmen. His verse was by no means lacking in complexity and intellectual ambition, but it was still addressed to the general reader. We cannot imagine Keats banishing himself to a ghetto of specialists and elitists; still less can we picture him attributing his lack of sales to a failure of moral courage on the part of his audience. Indeed, he is explicit on this point, writing in a letter that "I have I am sure many friends, who, if I fail, will attribute any change in my

life and temper to humbleness rather than pride – to a cowering under the wings of great poets, rather than to a bitterness that I am not appreciated." Keats is the last poet to insist that we raise ourselves to his exalted level with no compromise on his part. I notice instead how hard he tries to communicate his rarefied visions to the rest of us: however strange his philosophy of "indolence" and the death-shadowed progression of his thought, however ravishing his word-music and far-flung his metaphors, he keeps to the subject and takes us with him. He is not an easy poet – if we think he is, we have been reading him too sentimentally – but no one would call him academic or abstruse. He differs from Ashbery not just in talent but also in humility. And we differ from the Englishmen of Keats's time in allowing ourselves to be imposed upon by a writer who makes up in arrogance what he lacks in ability. We must be suffering from an epochal crisis of confidence if we no longer think we have a right to demand that a poem make sense; we must be completely demoralized if, having thrown up our hands at a succession of *non sequiturs*, we can be whipped back into line by Simic's argument that our impatience for meaning is a sign of our immaturity and a dereliction of our aesthetic duty.

The huge effort of art

Earlier in this essay, I described Robert Motherwell as a High Romantic. During the Bush administration, E. L. Doctorow testified before a House subcommittee on NEA funding, extolling the makers of art in the following way:

I speak of the latent underlying jealousy we have for elevated expression that is personal, uninvited, and powerful, that almost automatic anger we have for a kind of witness and truth-telling that is not endorsed or accredited by church, or corporation, or family, or other governing institution of our society. . . . [of] the work of independent witness, that often self-destructive willingness to articulate that which many may feel but no one dares to say . . . singing the unsingable – who we are, what we are becoming . . .

When he says "we" are hostile to the brave witnesses and truth-tellers, he does not, of course, really mean to include himself in the "we." He sees himself among the witnesses and truth-tellers.

Would anyone guess from his description that artists are more likely to be self-absorbed post-adolescents or hustling academicians than prophets and saints? that the majority are either completely apolitical or sophomorically radical? that while some may participate in, and even make a good living out of, some sort of radical government-subsidized alternative art-space, others may very well attend church, work for a corporation, and write home to their families to brag about receiving their grants from private foundations? that in fact some of the most lionized poets of the 20th Century

had distinctly fascist sympathies? Can Doctorow give a single example of a poet's saying what "many may feel, but no one dares to say"? (Is there *anything* today that no one dares to say?) Have artists *ever* prophesied "what we are becoming" better than scientists, journalists, historians, far-sighted (usually cashiered) statesmen, or any other group of intelligent people who pay attention? Would you ever guess from Doctorow's encomium that making art is a hell of a lot of fun, and that if it sells the artist stands to gain, in Freud's famous words, "honor, power, riches, fame, and the love of women," without having to work a single 9-to-5 day the rest of his life? Would you guess that Doctorow himself is a millionaire, and that the movie *Ragtime*, the basis for his wealth, pleasantly entertained people for a couple of hours without challenging a single thought in their heads?

Doctorow's testimony about the courage of artists needs to be understood in light of his own demonstrations of courage. For instance, while basking in the relative freedom and security of the United States – where the rights of authors include not merely the first amendment rights but even, if Doctorow can prevail with Congress, the right to obtain taxpayer support for artistic efforts to insult and demoralize the taxpayer – Doctorow was quick to defend Salman Rushdie's right to express himself freely when the government of Iran put a price on Rushdie's head. But in 1989, when Rushdie, hoping to be able to come out of permanent hiding without risking assassination, issued a statement saying he apologized, not for writing his book, but for any pain it may have caused devout Muslims, Doctorow, still standing safely on American soil, had the courage to deprecate Rushdie's statement.

In case you think there is anything idiosyncratic in Doctorow's view of art, here is Susan Sontag in 1967:

It's well known that when people venture into the far reaches of consciousness, they do so at the peril of their sanity, that is, of their humanity. But the "human scale" of humanistic standard proper to ordinary life and conduct seems misplaced when applied to art. It oversimplifies. If within the last century art conceived as an autonomous activity has come to be invested with an unprecedented stature – the nearest thing to a sacramental human activity acknowledged by secular society – it is because one of the tasks art has assumed is making forays into and taking up positions on the frontiers of consciousness (often very dangerous to the artist as a person) and reporting back what's there. Being a free-lance explorer of spiritual dangers, the artist gains a certain license to behave differently from other people; matching the singularity of his vocation, he may be decked out with a suitably eccentric life style, or he may not. His job is inventing trophies of his experiences – objects and gestures that fascinate and enthrall, not merely (as prescribed by older notions of the artist) edify or entertain. His principal means of fascinating is to advance one step further in the dialectic of outrage. He seeks to make his work repulsive, obscure, inaccessible; in short, to give what is, or seems to be, *not* wanted. But however fierce may be the outrages the artist perpetrates upon his audience, his credentials and spiritual authority ultimately depend on the audience's sense (whether something known or inferred) of the outrages he commits upon himself. The exemplary modern artist is a broker in madness. [from "The Pornographic Imagination"]

This is one of the clearest statements I have ever read of the Romantic myth of the artist-prophet-madman. Let me make my own position equally clear.

People who investigate the far reaches of their consciousness do not flirt with insanity at all: for instance, after years of sustained investigation, most ordinary Zen novices graduate and become ordinary Zen priests; the others go back to being shopkeepers and gardeners.

The forays artists make into their own imaginations aren't dangerous in the least.

If the objects or gestures created by the artist fascinate and enthrall us *without* edifying or entertaining us, they are what we commonly call "garbage."

No artist intentionally makes his work so repulsive, obscure, and inaccessible that it will not sell, since every artist worthy of the name wants to enjoy at least *some* of the fruits of recognition – if only to gain enough money and independence to produce more work. To achieve this, he will have to reach out to at least a few of us and move us. If he takes no pleasure in our pleasure, we should shun him as we shun the fanatical religion-monger, and on the same grounds – that he is useless and annoying. He has nothing to tell us that we want or need to hear; but he won't shut up. I remember a proselytizer who would lug his huge wooden cross into the middle of a university courtyard and preach to universal jeering. He was the perfect analogue of the artist who intentionally alienates his audience. People who *seek* martyrdom are sick. The healthy do not need to be enthralled by the sick.

The sacramental stature of art in recent times is one of the great boondoggles of intellectual history and will make of us a laughing stock to our descendants. That audiences ever refrained from applauding at the end of the first act of *Parsifal* will strike our great-grandchildren as a hoot and a holler. That we have *thought* art was sacred, and the artist a broker in uncanny truths who was menaced by madness for his pains, says nothing about art and the producers of it, and everything about us consumers. But certainly the artists have been more than willing to play their assigned parts – they are quick to agree that the "standard proper to ordinary life and conduct seems misplaced when applied to art," and they especially concur with the bit about the

"license to behave differently from other people." Getting down to cases, what this usually means is what it meant to Richard Wagner: the license to poach upon those dreary others by taking their money, drinking their wine, bedding their wives, and mocking them behind their backs.

Occasionally very minor artists have made a point of killing themselves at an early age. Sontag loves the word "exemplary," and applies it to the suicides of certain writers; but they were merely exemplary of the tired old cliché that life imitates art – and bad art at that. (Great artists who kill themselves do not fit the picture painted by Sontag's febrile romanticism: Van Gogh was a painter who was afflicted by manic-depressive illness, not a painter who underwent manic-depressive illness for the sake of his art.)

Since Sontag fires off so many rounds at that indispensable bogeyman, the philistine, and I have used the word "edify" with approval, let me say that I do not define edification in the same way as a clergyman. But if an artistic outrage exhausts itself in mere fascination, then it is merely morbid or titillating. Because we may all be enthralled by things that are unhealthy, there will always be works of art that operate out of a nexus of morbidity and titillation. There will always be pornography. We will always call it pornography. It does not take a cultural hero to produce it.

Sontag is able to find five French works of highly literate erotic fiction with which to make her case in favor of "the pornographic imagination." I do not know the works and do not intend to know them; but I can nonetheless state that her effort to prove that they are art, while most pornography is *not* art, is doomed to fail. She would be better

advised to say that *Debbie Does Dallas* is art, but *bad* art, and let it go at that. Anyway, I do not in the least mind her speaking up for her favorite bedtime reading; what I mind is her swallowing, hook, line, and sinker, the con-man myth of the artist-prophet-madman.

In a letter to *Harper's Magazine* (September 1998) Cynthia Ozick embellishes the myth:

Writers write because they are doomed, or damned, or driven. . . . Writing is private, isolating, psychically and emotionally dangerous, and extraordinarily risky for anyone [who is] solely out for recognition.

Samuel Johnson gives a fitting answer to this twaddle: "No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money."

If you want the superlative of the myth, try Frank Kermode:

What we think of as truly Modern or Modernist is always relatively apocalyptic. Cézanne plotting against his world mountain, Kandinsky deserting appearances in favor of his abstract proclamations, the novelists with their unique plots against time and reality, all are apocalypticists. . . . When we have some notion of the scope and terror of their efforts, we venerate such artists, considering their courage, inquiring into their heroic illnesses, seeing in them images of ourselves extended to a heroic scale; for in an age when every apocalypse, however trivial, must be personal, when every man's suffering and death are finally his own business only, all ends are insignificant except when transformed by the huge effort of art. [from "Apocalypse and the Modern," in *Visions of Apocalypse*, Saul Friedländer, Gerald Holton, Leo Marx, Eugene Skolnikoff, editors, Holmes & Meier, 1985]

The huge effort of art.

Although the passage makes almost no sense when detached from the essay of which it is the peroration, it was nonetheless quoted out of context, with evident approval, in *The New York Times* Book Review of December 22, 1985. This is because no reader can miss Kermode's religious veneration of art and of the artists who make art. (I must leave to those readers an explanation of how a work of art can be "relatively" apocalyptic, or in what sense an apocalypse can be "trivial," or why it is only in our age that the apocalypse must be personal and one's death one's own business only.)

Here is the antidote to Doctorow, Sontag, Ozick, and Kermode:

When I was at school, on certain afternoons we all had to do what was called Labour – weeding, sweeping, sawing logs for the boiler-room, that kind of thing; but if you had a chit from Matron, you were let off to spend the afternoon messing about in the Art Room. Labour or Art. And you've got a chit for *life*? *Where did you get it?* . . . The idea of the artist as a special kind of human being is art's greatest achievement, and it's a fake!

This is the way a really great artist, Tom Stoppard, talks about art in his play *Travesties*. I am not in the least put off by the fact that these sentiments are often uttered by complete philistines, and that Stoppard has put this speech in the mouth of one such. Stoppard is saying that even an idiot can see through the Myth of the Artist.

I should say here, just to avoid misunderstanding, that art is almost as important as the High Romantics think it is. Great art educates our imaginations and gives us experiences that may well count among the richest and most memorable of our lives. It is silly to follow Doctorow and try to make art do what it cannot do, but what art *can* do

can be done by nothing else. The crime of so much bad art in the 20th Century is that it drove out the good.

I have ended each chapter of this essay with a reminder that the behavior of the artists is easier to justify than the behavior of the audiences. Beethoven was self-confident to the point of arrogance; Charles Wuorinen is arrogant to the point of illness. Isn't it just human nature that Wuorinen can't tell the difference? But shouldn't we be able to tell the difference? The actual schools of "cutting edge" 20th Century art – totally organized music, abstract expressionist painting, concrete poetry – will become curious footnotes to the history of style. But the Myth of the Artist, bestriding the entire 20th Century like a colossus, will dominate the social histories that touch upon the consumption of culture, and provide much matter and more mirth for future generations to mull over. Their opinion of us will not be flattering.

Coda

Charles Ives suggested in his *Essays Before a Sonata* that when an artist "becomes conscious that his style is 'his personal own' . . . then it may be that the value of his substance is not growing . . . it may be that he is trading an inspiration for a bad habit." Instead, he would do better to stand "unprotected from all the showers of the absolute which may beat upon him." What might he have thought of the manic effort on the part of later artists to develop a "signature style"? – he who, like Beethoven, tried to make every piece a foray in a new style, an experiment in a unique sound-world? The paintings of Motherwell, Rothko, and Barnett Newman are as formulaic as those of Thomas Kinkade, who varied the look of his *kitschified* cottages and villages more than the abstract expressionists ever varied the look of their dreary non-objective canvases.