Thus two phenomena - avant-garde - made a sort of precocious appearance in England - the most advanced country in Europe - in the 18th century, when, as Hazlitt points out, in the intermezzo, the weakening of aristocratic patronage thrust whole literary generation into the indulgence of book and Bohemia, from which it was not reached until the appearance of a bourgeois reading public with money to spend on literature. In the latter half of the century, sensation- seeking fiction and sentimental fiction, precursors of Kitsch, in spite of the real literary talents involved here, made their appearance with D'Urfey and Richardson, at the very beginning of the genuine Bohemia era of English literature. It was not however until the Industrial Revolution had consolidated its reigns that Bohemia and Kitsch could...
I

Contents

Acknowledgments xiii
Editorial Note xv
Introduction by John O'Brian xvii

1939
1. The Beggar's Opera—After Marx: Review of A Penny for the Poor by Bertolt Brecht 3
2. Avant-Garde and Kitsch 5

1940
3. Towards a Newer Laocoon 23
4. An American View 38

1941
5. The Renaissance of the Little Mag: Review of Accent, Diogenes, Experimental Review, Vice Versa, and View 42
6. Aesthetics as Science: Review of The Structure of Art by Carl Thurston 47
7. Bertolt Brecht's Poetry 49
8. Review of Exhibitions of Joan Miró, Fernand Léger, and Wassily Kandinsky 62
11. Review of Selected Poems by John Wheelwright 76
12. Review of Rosa Luxemburg, Her Life and Work by Paul Frölich 77
talism—yet in so far as faithfulness to background is concerned, it might just as well be capitalism among the Yahoos. MacHeath is no longer a cute desperado, but a grim racketeer who operates a chain of stores with stolen goods and succeeds so well in crushing competition that he is able to force his way into respectable financial institutions and pose as a pillar of society in the manner of F. Donald Coster, of whom he is the necessary archetype. Peachum, the best-drawn character in the book, remains the bourgeois bonhomme, the timid and rapacious family father whose most intense emotional and physical sensations are caused by money. The action unfolds in a long-drawn and detailed complication of knavery involving MacHeath's grandiose schemes for power and position, and the struggles for survival of his victims, who are equally villainous, but lack his daring and frankness. In spite of the machinery of commercial transactions with all their faithful details, the novel makes little attempt to be realistic in the common sense of the word, for Brecht intends, not to draw a picture, but to give a dramatic definition of capitalist society, showing it as it is ideally, not as it appears or as it is experienced.

For all this, as well as for other reasons, the novel constitutes an experiment. Brecht, like many other contemporary poets who feel that they have to prove themselves in a novel, has approached the form with restlessness and dissatisfaction and has attempted to fill it with a new content. He breaks away from the premise most basic to the novel as we have come to know it, namely, that it shall deal with actual experience, and instead transfers attention from the real to the ideal, from actual behavior to the operative patterns or formulas of behavior. What we are to read is not a sample of life under capitalism, but the paradigm, the non-allegorical parable, of all life under capitalism. An intention such as this can be fulfilled in literature only in the form of the morality play or tale—Pilgrim's Progress is the best example—and a morality tale is exactly what A Penny for the Poor is.

But Brecht also wants to make propaganda in more emphatic terms, he wants to shock the reader in order to make sure his point is not missed; and so he satirizes what he exposes. He will show the unrelieved viciousness of a world in which the fundamental assumptions of bourgeois society are driven to their final conclusions. The result, however, must be an absurd world, its absurdity following from the strictness of its logic. The action, therefore, proceeds, not in accordance with the internal necessities of characters and verisimilitude, but in obedience to the external logic of a set scheme that overrides the former. This is well and good in a play or in some other short form, but in a longer form like the novel it is unendurable, for an absurd world can only contain absurd characters and absurd characters produce nothing but farce, whether it is grim farce, as in the present case, or merry farce. And farce palls. After a hundred pages or so, by which time the reader has grasped his point, Brecht's novel becomes something like a stage farce from which the voices and gestures of actors have been excluded, or like a succession of subtitles from a silent movie, which we refuse to believe until we see. Continued the length of four hundred pages in a manner that strains at every point to make its gratuitous irony dear—presumably for the benefit of the untutored reader whom Brecht wants to attract to serious literature—the book ends by becoming nerve-wracking.

In its original German, at least, the novel is to some extent redeemed by Brecht's virtuosity as a master of language. Scattered through the book are splendidly executed passages of irony in a prose which for its firmness and sensitivity might serve as a model to any writer of German. The English translation, much too literal, has caught almost nothing of this, and very little more of Brecht's "collage" compositions in cliché and cant phrase, for which he has an extraordinary ear. Isherwood's versions of Brecht's own poems which are set at the chapter heads are brave efforts, but inadequate since they coarsen Brecht's colloquialisms to the point of banality, something which is entirely absent from the German.

Partisan Review, Winter 1939

2. Avant-Garde and Kitsch

One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such different things as a poem by T. S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley
song, or a painting by Braque and a *Saturday Evening Post* cover. All four are on the order of culture, and ostensibly, parts of the same culture and products of the same society. Here, however, their connection seems to end. A poem by Eliot and a poem by Eddie Guest—what perspective of culture is large enough to enable us to situate them in an enlightening relation to each other? Does the fact that a disparity such as this within the frame of a single cultural tradition, which is and has been taken for granted—does this fact indicate that the disparity is a part of the natural order of things? Or is it something entirely new, and particular to our age?

The answer involves more than an investigation in aesthetics. It appears to me that it is necessary to examine more closely and with more originality than hitherto the relationship between aesthetic experience as met by the specific—not the generalized—individual, and the social and historical contexts in which that experience takes place. What is brought to light will answer, in addition to the question posed above, other and perhaps more important questions.

I

A society, as it becomes less and less able, in the course of its development, to justify the inevitability of its particular forms, breaks up the accepted notions upon which artists and writers must depend in large part for communication with their audiences. It becomes difficult to assume anything. All the verities involved by religion, authority, tradition, style, are thrown into question, and the writer or artist is no longer able to estimate the response of his audience to the symbols and references with which he works. In the past such a state of affairs has usually resolved itself into a motionless Alexandrianism, an academicism in which the really important issues are left untouched because they involve controversy, and in which creative activity dwindles to virtuosity in the small details of form, all larger questions being decided by the precedent of the old masters. The same themes are mechanically varied in a hundred different works, and yet nothing new is produced: Statius, mandarin verse, Roman sculpture, Beaux-Arts painting, neo-republican architecture.

It is among the hopeful signs in the midst of the decay of our present society that we—some of us—have been unwilling to accept this last phase for our own culture. In seeking to go beyond Alexandrianism, a part of Western bourgeois society has produced something unheard of heretofore—avant-garde culture. A superior consciousness of history—more precisely, the appearance of a new kind of criticism of society, an historical criticism—made this possible. This criticism has not confronted our present society with timeless utopias, but has soberly examined in the terms of history and of cause and effect the antecedents, justifications and functions of the forms that lie at the heart of every society. Thus our present bourgeois social order was shown to be, not an eternal, "natural" condition of life, but simply the latest term in a succession of social orders. New perspectives of this kind, becoming a part of the advanced intellectual conscience of the fifth and sixth decades of the nineteenth century, soon were absorbed by artists and poets, even if unconsciously for the most part. It was no accident, therefore, that the birth of the avant-garde coincided chronologically—and geographically, too—with the first bold development of scientific revolutionary thought in Europe.

True, the first settlers of bohemia—which was then identical with the avant-garde—turned out soon to be demonstratively uninterested in politics. Nevertheless, without the circulation of revolutionary ideas in the air about them, they would never have been able to isolate their concept of the "bourgeois" in order to define what they were not. Nor, without the moral aid of revolutionary political attitudes would they have had the courage to assert themselves as aggressively as they did against the prevailing standards of society. Courage indeed was needed for this, because the avant-garde's emigration from bourgeois society to bohemia meant also an emigration from the markets of capitalism, upon which artists and writers had been thrown by the falling away of aristocratic patronage. (Ostensibly, at least, it meant this—meant starving in a garret—although, as we will be shown later, the avant-garde remained attached to bourgeois society precisely because it needed its money.)

Yet it is true that once the avant-garde had succeeded in "detaching" itself from society, it proceeded to turn around and repudiate revolutionary as well as bourgeois politics. The revolution was left inside society, a part of that welter of ideological
struggle which art and poetry find so unpropitious as soon as it begins to involve those “precious” axiomatic beliefs upon which culture thus far has had to rest. Hence it developed that the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to “experiment,” but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence. Retiring from public altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point. “Art for art’s sake” and “pure poetry” appear, and subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague.

It has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at “abstract” or “nonobjective” art—and poetry, too. The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape—not its picture—is aesthetically valid; something given, increase, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself.

But the absolute is absolute, and the poet or artist, being what he is, cherishes certain relative values more than others. The very values in the name of which he invokes the absolute are relative values, the values of aesthetics. And so he turns out to be imitating, not God—and here I use “imitate” in its Aristotelian sense—but the disciplines and processes of art and literature themselves. This is the genesis of the “abstract.”

1. The example of music, which has long been an abstract art, and which avant-garde poetry has tried so much to emulate, is interesting. Music, Aristotle said curiously enough, is the most imitative and vivid of all arts because it imitates its original—the state of the soul—with the greatest immediacy. Today this strikes us as the exact opposite of the truth, because no art seems to us to have less reference to something outside itself than music. However, aside from the fact that in a sense Aristotle may still be right, it must be explained that ancient Greek music was closely associated with poetry, and depended upon its character as an accessory to verse to make its imitative meaning clear. Plato, speaking of music, says: “For when there are no words, it is very difficult to recognize the meaning of the harmony and rhythm, or to see that any worthy object is imitated by them.” As far as we know, all music originally served such an accessory function. Once, however, it was abandoned, music was forced to withdraw into itself to find a constraint or original. This is found in the various means of its own composition and performance. [Author's note]

2. I owe this formulation to a remark made by Hans Hofmann, the art teacher, in one of his lectures. From the point of view of this formulation, Surrealism in plastic art is a reactionary tendency which is attempting to restore “outside” subject matter. The chief concern of a painter like Dali is to represent the processes and concepts of his consciousness, not the processes of his medium. [Author's note]

3. See Valéry’s remarks about his own poetry. [Author's note]
poetry in pure sound alone. However, if it were easier to define poetry, modern poetry would be much more "pure" and "abstract." As for the other fields of literature—the definition of avant-garde aesthetics advanced here is no Procrustean bed. But aside from the fact that most of our best contemporary novelists have gone to school with the avant-garde, it is significant that Gide's most ambitious book is a novel about the writing of a novel, and that Joyce's Ulysses and Finnegans Wake seem to be, above all, as one French critic says, the reduction of experience to expression for the sake of expression, the expression mattering more than what is being expressed.

That avant-garde culture is the imitation of imitating—the fact itself—calls for neither approval nor disapproval. It is true that this culture contains within itself some of the very Alexandrianism it seeks to overcome. The lines quoted from Yeats referred to Byzantium, which is very close to Alexandria; and in a sense this imitation of imitating is a superior sort of Alexandrianism. But there is one most important difference: the avant-garde moves, while Alexandrianism stands still. And this, precisely, is what justifies the avant-garde's methods and makes them necessary. The necessity lies in the fact that by no other means is it possible today to create art and literature of a high order. To quarrel with necessity by throwing about terms like "formalism," "purism," "ivory tower" and so forth is either dull or dishonest. This is not to say, however, that it is to the social advantage of the avant-garde that it is what it is. Quite the opposite.

The avant-garde's specialization of itself, the fact that its best artists are artists' artists, its best poets, poets' poets, has estranged a great many of those who were capable formerly of enjoying and appreciating ambitious art and literature, but who are now unwilling or unable to acquire an initiation into their craft secrets. The masses have always remained more or less indifferent to culture in the process of development. But today such culture is being abandoned by those to whom it actually belongs—our ruling class. For it is to the latter that the avant-garde belongs. No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold. The paradox is real. And now this elite is rapidly shrinking. Since the avant-garde forms the only living culture we now have, the survival in the near future of culture in general is thus threatened.

We must not be deceived by superficial phenomena and local successes. Picasso's shows still draw crowds, and T. S. Eliot is taught in the universities; the dealers in modernist art are still in business, and the publishers still publish some "difficult" poetry. But the avant-garde itself, already sensing the danger, is becoming more and more timid every day that passes. Academ­icism and commercialism are appearing in the strangest places. This can mean only one thing: that the avant-garde is becoming unsure of the audience it depends on—the rich and the cultivated.

Is it the nature itself of avant-garde culture that is alone responsible for the danger it finds itself in? Or is that only a dangerous liability? Are there other, and perhaps more important, factors involved?

II

Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rear­guard. True enough—simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that thing to which the Germans give the won­derful name of Kitsch: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap danc­ing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc. For some reason this gigantic apparition has always been taken for granted. It is time we looked into its whys and wherefores.

Kitsch is a product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and estab­lished what is called universal literacy.

Prior to this the only market for formal culture, as distin­guished from folk culture, had been among those who, in addi­tion to being able to read and write, could command the leisure and comfort that always goes hand in hand with cultivation of some sort. This until then had been inextricably associated with literacy. But with the introduction of universal literacy, the abil-
ity to read and write became almost a minor skill like driving a
car, and it no longer served to distinguish an individual's cul-
tural inclinations, since it was no longer the exclusive concomi-
tant of refined tastes.

The peasants who settled in the cities as proletariat and petty
bourgeois learned to read and write for the sake of efficiency,
but they did not win the leisure and comfort necessary for the enjoy-
ment of the city's traditional culture. Losing, nevertheless, their
taste for the folk culture whose background was the coun-
tryside, and discovering a new capacity for boredom at the same
time, the new urban masses set up a pressure on society to pro-
vide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption.
To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was
devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insen-
sible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless
for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide.

Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized
simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insen-
sibility. It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and
operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but re-
mains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spu-
rious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand noth-
ing of its customers except their money—not even their time.

The precondition for kitsch, a condition without which kitsch would be impossible, is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisi-
tions, and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advan-
tage of for its own ends. It borrows from it devices, tricks, strat-
agems, rules of thumb, themes, converts them into a system,
and discards the rest. It draws its life blood, so to speak, from
this reservoir of accumulated experience. This is what is really
meant when it is said that the popular art and literature of today
were once the daring, esoteric art and literature of yesterday. Of
course, no such thing is true. What is meant is that when enough time has elapsed the new is looted for new "twists,"
which are then watered down and served up as kitsch. Self-
evidently, all kitsch is academic; and conversely, all that's academic is kitsch. For what is called the academic as such
no longer has an independent existence, but has become the stuffed-shirt "front" for kitsch. The methods of industrialism
displace the handicrafts.

Because it can be turned out mechanically, kitsch has become
an integral part of our productive system in a way in which true
culture could never be, except accidentally. It has been capital-
ized at a tremendous investment which must show commen-
surate returns; it is compelled to extend as well as to keep its
markets. While it is essentially its own salesman, a great sales
apparatus has nevertheless been created for it, which brings
pressure to bear on every member of society. Traps are laid even in those areas, so to speak, that are the preserves of genuine cul-
ture. It is not enough today, in a country like ours, to have an
inclination towards the latter; one must have a true passion for it
that will give him the power to resist the faked article that sur-
rounds and presses in on him from the moment he is old enough
to look at the funny papers. Kitsch is deceptive. It has many
different levels, and some of them are high enough to be danger-
ous to the naive seeker of true light. A magazine like the New
Yorker, which is fundamentally high-class kitsch for the luxury
trade, converts and waters down a great deal of avant-garde ma-
terial for its own uses. Nor is every single item of kitsch al-
together worthless. Now and then it produces something of mer-
it, something that has an authentic folk flavor; and these ac-
cidental and isolated instances have fooled people who should
know better.

Kitsch's enormous profits are a source of temptation to the avant-garde itself, and its members have not always resisted this tem-
ination. Ambitious writers and artists will modify their work under the pressure of kitsch, if they do not succumb to it
tirely. And then those puzzling borderline cases appear, such
as the popular novelist, Simenon, in France, and Steinbeck in
this country. The net result is always to the detriment of true
culture in any case.

Kitsch has not been confined to the cities in which it was
born, but has flowed out over the countryside, wiping out folk
culture. Nor has it shown any regard for geographical and national-cultural boundaries. Another mass product of Western
industrialism, it has gone on a triumphant tour of the world,
crowding out and defacing native cultures in one colonial country after another, so that it is now by way of becoming a universal culture, the first universal culture ever beheld. Today the native of China, no less than the South American Indian, the Hindu, no less than the Polynesian, have come to prefer to the products of their native art, magazine covers, rotogravure sections and calendar girls. How is this virulence of kitsch, this irresistible attractiveness, to be explained? Naturally, machine-made kitsch can undersell the native handmade article, and the prestige of the West also helps; but why is kitsch a so much more profitable export article than Rembrandt? One, after all, can be reproduced as cheaply as the other.

In his last article on the Soviet cinema in the Partisan Review, Dwight Macdonald points out that kitsch has in the last ten years become the dominant culture in Soviet Russia. For this he blames the political regime—not only for the fact that kitsch is the official culture, but also that it is actually the dominant, most popular culture, and he quotes the following from Kurt London's The Seven Soviet Arts: "... the attitude of the masses both to the old and new art styles probably remains essentially dependent on the nature of the education afforded them by their respective states." Macdonald goes on to say: "Why after all should ignorant peasants prefer Repin (a leading exponent of Russian academic kitsch in painting) to Picasso, whose abstract technique is at least as relevant to their own primitive folk art as is the former's realistic style? No, if the masses crowd into the Tretyakov (Moscow's museum of contemporary Russian art: kitsch), it is largely because they have been conditioned to shun 'formalism' and to admire 'socialist realism.'"

In the first place it is not a question of a choice between merely the old and merely the new, as London seems to think—but of a choice between the bad, up-to-date old and the genuinely new. The alternative to Picasso is not Michelangelo, but kitsch. In the second place, neither in backward Russia nor in the advanced West do the masses prefer kitsch simply because their governments condition them toward it. Where state educ-
values: the values of the vividly recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic. In Repin’s picture the peasant recognizes and sees things in the way in which he recognizes and sees things outside of pictures—there is no discontinuity between art and life, no need to accept a convention and say to oneself, that icon represents Jesus because it intends to represent Jesus, even if it does not remind me very much of a man. That Repin can paint so realistically that identifications are self-evident immediately and without any effort on the part of the spectator—that is miraculous. The peasant is also pleased by the wealth of self-evident meanings which he finds in the picture: “it tells a story.” Picasso and the icons are so austere and barren in comparison. What is more, Repin heightens reality and makes it dramatic: sunset, exploding shells, running and falling men. There is no longer any question of Picasso or icons. Repin is what the peasant wants, and nothing else but Repin. It is lucky, however, for Repin that the peasant is protected from the products of American capitalism, for he would not stand a chance next to a Saturday Evening Post cover by Norman Rockwell.

Ultimately, it can be said that the cultivated spectator derives the same values from Picasso that the peasant gets from Repin, since what the latter enjoys in Repin is somehow art too, on however low a scale, and he is sent to look at pictures by the same instincts that send the cultivated spectator. But the ultimate values which the cultivated spectator derives from Picasso are derived at a second remove, as the result of reflection upon the immediate impression left by the plastic values. It is only then that the recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic enter. They are not immediately or externally present in Picasso’s painting, but must be projected into it by the spectator sensitive enough to react sufficiently to plastic qualities. They belong to the “reflected” effect. In Repin, on the other hand, the “reflected” effect has already been included in the picture, ready for the spectator’s unreflective enjoyment. Where Picasso paints cause, Repin paints effect. Repin predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a short cut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art. Repin, or kitsch, is synthetic art.

The same point can be made with respect to kitsch literature: it provides vicarious experience for the insensitive with far greater immediacy than serious fiction can hope to do. And Eddie Guest and the Indian Love Lyrics are more poetic than T. S. Eliot and Shakespeare.

III

If the avant-garde imitates the processes of art, kitsch, we now see, imitates its effects. The neatness of this antithesis is more than contrived; it corresponds to and defines the tremendous interval that separates from each other two such simultaneous cultural phenomena as the avant-garde and kitsch. This interval, too great to be closed by all the infinite gradations of popularized “modernism” and “modernistic” kitsch, corresponds in turn to a social interval, a social interval that has always existed in formal culture, as elsewhere in civilized society, and whose two termini converge and diverge in fixed relation to the increasing or decreasing stability of the given society. There has always been on one side the minority of the powerful—and therefore the cultivated—and on the other the great mass of the exploited and poor—and therefore the ignorant. Formal culture has always belonged to the first, while the last have had to content themselves with folk or rudimentary culture, or kitsch.

In a stable society that functions well enough to hold in solution the contradictions between its classes, the cultural dichotomy becomes somewhat blurred. The axioms of the few are shared by the many; the latter believe superstition what the former believe soberly. And at such moments in history the masses are able to feel wonder and admiration for the culture, on no matter how high a plane, of its masters. This applies at least to plastic culture, which is accessible to all.

In the Middle Ages the plastic artist paid lip service at least to the lowest common denominators of experience. This even remained true to some extent until the seventeenth century. There was available for imitation a universally valid conceptual reality, whose order the artist could not tamper with. The subject matter of art was prescribed by those who commissioned

5. T. S. Eliot said something to the same effect in accounting for the shortcomings of English Romantic poetry. Indeed the Romantics can be considered the original sinners whose guilt kitsch inherited. They showed kitsch how. What does Keats write about mainly, if not the effect of poetry upon himself? [Author’s note]
works of art, which were not created, as in bourgeois society, on speculation. Precisely because his content was determined in advance, the artist was free to concentrate on his medium. He needed not to be philosopher, or visionary, but simply artificer. As long as there was general agreement as to what were the worthiest subjects for art, the artist was relieved of the necessity to be original and inventive in his "matter" and could devote all his energy to formal problems. For him the medium became, privately, professionally, the content of his art, even as his medium is today the public content of the abstract painter's art—with that difference, however, that the medieval artist had to suppress his professional preoccupation in public—had always to suppress and subordinate the personal and professional in the finished, official work of art. If, as an ordinary member of the Christian community, he felt some personal emotion about his subject matter, this only contributed to the enrichment of the work's public meaning. Only with the Renaissance do the inflections of the personal become legitimate, still to be kept, however, within the limits of the simply and universally recognizable. And only with Rembrandt do "lonely" artists begin to appear, lonely in their art.

But even during the Renaissance, and as long as Western art was endeavoring to perfect its technique, victories in this realm could only be signalized by success in realistic imitation, since there was no other objective criterion at hand. Thus the masses could still find in the art of their masters objects of admiration and wonder. Even the bird that pecked at the fruit in Zeuxis' picture could applaud.

It is a platitude that art becomes caviar to the general when the reality it imitates no longer corresponds even roughly to the reality recognized by the general. Even then, however, the resentment the common man may feel is silenced by the awe in which he stands of the patrons of this art. Only when he becomes dissatisfied with the social order they administer does he begin to criticize their culture. Then the plebian finds courage for the first time to voice his opinions openly. Every man, from the Tammany alderman to the Austrian house-painter, finds that he is entitled to his opinion. Most often this resentment toward culture is to be found where the dissatisfaction with society is a reactionary dissatisfaction which expresses itself in revivalism and puritanism, and latest of all, in fascism. Here revolvers and torches begin to be mentioned in the same breath as culture. In the name of godliness or the blood's health, in the name of simple ways and solid virtues, the statue-smashing commences.

IV

Returning to our Russian peasant for the moment, let us suppose that after he has chosen Repin in preference to Picasso, the state's educational apparatus comes along and tells him that he is wrong, that he should have chosen Picasso—and shows him why. It is quite possible for the Soviet state do do this. But things being as they are in Russia—and everywhere else—the peasant soon finds the necessity of working hard all day for his living and the rude, uncomfortable circumstances in which he lives do not allow him enough leisure, energy and comfort to train for the enjoyment of Picasso. This needs, after all, a considerable amount of "conditioning." Superior culture is one of the most artificial of all human creations, and the peasant finds no "natural" urgency within himself that will drive him toward Picasso in spite of all difficulties. In the end the peasant will go back to kitsch when he feels like looking at pictures, for he can enjoy kitsch without effort. The state is helpless in this matter and remains so as long as the problems of production have not been solved in a socialist sense. The same holds true, of course, for capitalist countries and makes all talk of art for the masses there nothing but demagogy. 6

6. It will be objected that such art for the masses as folk art was developed under rudimentary conditions of production—and that a good deal of folk art is on a high level. Yes it is—but folk art is not Athene, and it's Athene whom we want: formal culture with its infinity of aspects, its luxuriance, its large comprehension. Besides, we are now told that most of what we consider good in folk culture is the static survival of dead formal, aristocratic, cultures. Our old English ballads, for instance, were not created by the "folk," but by the post-feudal squirearchy of the English countryside, to survive in the mouths of the folk long after those for whom the ballads were composed had gone on to other forms of literature. Unfortunately, until the machine age, culture was the exclusive prerogative of a society that lived by the labor of serfs or slaves. They were the real symbols of culture. For one man to spend time and energy creating or listening to poetry meant that another man had to produce enough to keep himself alive and the former in comfort. In Africa today we find that the culture of slave-owning tribes is generally much superior to that of the tribes that possess no slaves. Author's note]
Where today a political regime establishes an official cultural policy, it is for the sake of demagogy. If kitsch is the official tendency of culture in Germany, Italy and Russia, it is not because their respective governments are controlled by philistines, but because kitsch is the culture of the masses in these countries, as it is everywhere else. The encouragement of kitsch is merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects. Since these regimes cannot raise the cultural level of the masses—even if they wanted to—by anything short of a surrender to international socialism, they will flatter the masses by bringing all culture down to their level. It is for this reason that the avant-garde is outlawed, and not so much because a superior culture is inherently a more critical culture. (Whether or not the avant-garde could possibly flourish under a totalitarian regime is not pertinent to the question at this point.) As a matter of fact, the main trouble with avant-garde art and literature, from the point of view of fascists and Stalinists, is not that they are too critical, but that they are too “innocent,” that it is too difficult to inject effective propaganda into them, that kitsch is more pliable to this end. Kitsch keeps a dictator in closer contact with the “soul” of the people. Should the official culture be one superior to the general mass-level, there would be a danger of isolation. Nevertheless, if the masses were conceivably to ask for avant-garde art and literature, Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin would not hesitate long in attempting to satisfy such a demand. Hitler is a bitter enemy of the avant-garde, both on doctrinal and personal grounds, yet this did not prevent Goebbels in 1932–1933 from strenuously courting avant-garde artists and writers. When Gottfried Benn, an Expressionist poet, came over to the Nazis he was welcomed with a great fanfare, although at that very moment Hitler was denouncing Expressionism as Kulturbohmschewismus. This was at a time when the Nazis felt that the prestige which the avant-garde enjoyed among the cultivated German public could be of advantage to them, and practical considerations of this nature, the Nazis being skilful politicians, have always taken precedence over Hitler’s personal inclinations. Later the Nazis realized that it was more practical to accede to the wishes of the masses in matters of culture than to those of their paymasters; the latter, when it came to a question of preserving power, were as willing to sacrifice their culture as they were their moral principles; while the former, precisely because power was being withheld from them, had to be cozened in every other way possible. It was necessary to promote on a much more grandiose style than in the democracies the illusion that the masses actually rule. The literature and art they enjoy and understand were to be proclaimed the only true art and literature and any other kind was to be suppressed. Under these circumstances people like Gottfried Benn, no matter how ardently they support Hitler, become a liability; and we hear no more of them in Nazi Germany.

We can see then that although from one point of view the personal philistinism of Hitler and Stalin is not accidental to the roles they play, from another point of view it is only an incidentally contributory factor in determining the cultural policies of their respective regimes. Their personal philistinism simply adds brutality and double-darkness to policies they would be forced to support anyhow by the pressure of all their other policies—even were they, personally, devotees of avant-garde culture. What the acceptance of the isolation of the Russian Revolution forces Stalin to do, Hitler is compelled to do by his acceptance of the contradictions of capitalism and his efforts to freeze them. As for Mussolini—his case is a perfect example of the disponibilité of a realist in these matters. For years he bent a benevolent eye on the Futurists and built modernistic railroad stations and government-owned apartment houses. One can still see in the suburbs of Rome more modernistic apartments than almost anywhere else in the world. Perhaps Fascism wanted to show its up-to-dateness, to conceal the fact that it was a retrogression; perhaps it wanted to conform to the tastes of the wealthy elite it served. At any rate Mussolini seems to have realized lately that it would be more useful to him to please the cultural tastes of the Italian masses than those of their masters. The masses must be provided with objects of admiration and wonder; the latter can dispense with them. And so we find Mussolini announcing a “new Imperial style.” Marinetti, Chirico, et al., are sent into the outer darkness, and the new railroad station in Rome will not be modernistic. That Mussolini was late in com-
ing to this only illustrates again the relative hesitance with which Italian Fascism has drawn the necessary implications of its role.

Capitalism in decline finds that whatever of quality it is still capable of producing becomes almost invariably a threat to its own existence. Advances in culture, no less than advances in science and industry, corrode the very society under whose aegis they are made possible. Here, as in every other question today, it becomes necessary to quote Marx word for word. Today we no longer look toward socialism for a new culture—as inevitably as one will appear, once we do have socialism. Today we look to socialism simply for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now.


3. Towards a Newer Laocoon

The dogmatism and intransigence of the "non-objective" or "abstract" purists of painting today cannot be dismissed as symptoms merely of a cultist attitude towards art. Purists make extravagant claims for art, because usually they value it much more than any one else does. For the same reason they are much more solicitous about it. A great deal of purism is the translation of an extreme solicitude, an anxiousness as to the fate of art, a concern for its identity. We must respect this. When the purist insists upon excluding "literature" and subject matter from plastic art, now and in the future, the most we can charge him with off-hand is an unhistorical attitude. It is quite easy to show that abstract art like every other cultural phenomenon reflects the social and other circumstances of the age in which its creators live, and that there is nothing inside art itself, disconnected from history, which compels it to go in one direction or another. But it is not so easy to reject the purist's assertion that the best of contemporary plastic art is abstract. Here the purist does not have to support his position with metaphysical pretensions. And when he insists on doing so, those of us who admit the merits of abstract art without accepting its claims in full must offer our own explanation for its present supremacy.

Discussion as to purity in art and, bound up with it, the attempts to establish the differences between the various arts are not idle. There has been, is, and will be, such a thing as a confusion of the arts. From the point of view of the artist engrossed in the problems of his medium and indifferent to the efforts of theorists to explain abstract art completely, purism is the terminus of a salutory reaction against the mistakes of painting and sculpture in the past several centuries which were due to such a confusion.
There can be, I believe, such a thing as a dominant art form; this was what literature had become in Europe by the 17th century. (Not that the ascendancy of a particular art always coincides with its greatest productions. In point of achievement, music was the greatest art of this period.) By the middle of the 17th century the pictorial arts had been relegated almost everywhere into the hands of the courts, where they eventually degenerated into relatively trivial interior decoration. The most creative class in society, the rising mercantile bourgeoisie, impelled perhaps by the iconoclasm of the Reformation (Pascal's Jansenist contempt for painting is a symptom) and by the relative cheapness and mobility of the physical medium after the invention of printing, had turned most of its creative and acquisitive energy towards literature.

Now, when it happens that a single art is given the dominant role, it becomes the prototype of all art: the others try to shed their proper characters and imitate its effects. The dominant art in turn tries itself to absorb the functions of the others. A confusion of the arts results, by which the subservient ones are perverted and distorted; they are forced to deny their own nature in an effort to attain the effects of the dominant art. However, the subservient arts can only be mishandled in this way when they have reached such a degree of technical facility as to enable them to pretend to conceal their mediums. In other words, the artist must have gained such power over his material as to annihilate it seemingly in favor of illusion. Music was saved from the fate of the pictorial arts in the 17th and 18th centuries by its comparatively rudimentary technique and the relative shortness of its development as a formal art. Aside from the fact that in its nature it is the art furthest removed from imitation, the possibilities of music had not been explored sufficiently to enable it to strive for illusionist effects.

We ourselves, even today, are too close to literature to appreciate its status as a dominant art. Perhaps an example of the converse will make clearer what I mean. In China, I believe, painting and sculpture became in the course of the development of culture the dominant arts. There we see poetry given a role subordinate to them, and consequently assuming their limitations: the poem confines itself to the single moment of painting and to an emphasis upon visual details. The Chinese even require visual delight from the handwriting in which the poem is set down. And by comparison to their pictorial and decorative arts doesn't the later poetry of the Chinese seem rather thin and monotonous?

Lessing, in his Laokoon written in the 1760s, recognized the presence of a practical as well as a theoretical confusion of the arts. But he saw its ill effects exclusively in terms of literature, and his opinions on plastic art only exemplify the typical misconceptions of his age. He attacked the descriptive verse of poets
like James Thomson as an invasion of the domain of landscape painting, but all he could find to say about painting's invasion of poetry was to object to allegorical pictures which required an explanation, and to paintings like Titian's *Prodigal Son* which incorporate "two necessarily separate points of time in one and the same picture."

II
The Romantic Revival or Revolution seemed at first to offer some hope for painting, but by the time it departed the scene, the confusion of the arts had become worse. The romantic theory of art was that the artist feels something and passes on this feeling—not the situation or thing which stimulated it—to his audience. To preserve the immediacy of the feeling it was even more necessary than before, when art was imitation rather than communication, to suppress the role of the medium. The medium was a regrettable if necessary physical obstacle between the artists and his audience, which in some ideal state would disappear entirely to leave the experience of the spectator or reader identical with that of the artist. In spite of the fact that music considered as an art of pure feeling, was beginning to win almost equal esteem, the attitude represents a final triumph for poetry. All feeling for the arts as métiers, crafts, disciplines—of which some sense had survived until the 18th century—was lost. The arts came to be regarded as nothing more or less than so many powers of the personality. Shelley expressed this best when in his *Defense of Poetry* he exalted poetry above the other arts because its medium came closest, as Bosanquet puts it, to being no medium at all. In practice this aesthetic encouraged that particular widespread form of artistic dishonesty which consists in the attempt to escape from the problems of the medium of one art by taking refuge in the effects of another. Painting is the most susceptible to evasions of this sort, and painting suffered most at the hands of the Romantics.

At first it did not seem so. As a result of the triumph of the burghers and of their appropriation of all the arts a fresh current of creative energy was released into every field. If the Romantic revolution in painting was at first more a revolution in subject matter than in anything else, abandoning the oratorical and frivolous literature of 18th century painting in search of a more original, more powerful, more sincere literary content, it also brought with it a greater boldness in pictorial means. Delacroix, Géricault, even Ingres, were enterprising enough to find new form for the new content they introduced. But the net result of their efforts was to make the incubus of literature in painting even deadlier for the lesser talents who followed them. The worst manifestations of literary and sentimental painting had already begun to appear in the painting of the late 18th century—especially in England, where a revival which produced some of the best English painting was equally efficacious in speeding up the process of degeneration. Now the schools of Ingres and Delacroix joined with those of Morland and Greuze and Vigée-Lebrun to become the official painting of the 19th century. There have been academicians before, but for the first time we have academicism. Painting enjoyed a revival of activity in 19th century France such as had not been seen since the 16th century, and academicism could produce such good painters as Corot and Theodore Rousseau, and even Daumier—yet in spite of this academicians sank painting to a level that was in some respects an all-time low. The name of this low is Vernet, Gerôme, Leighton, Watts, Moreau, Böcklin, the Pre-Raphaelites, etc., etc. That some of these painters had real talent only made their influence the more pernicious. It took talent—among other things—to lead art that far astray. Bourgeois society gave these talents a prescription, and they filled it—with talent.

It was not realistic imitation in itself that did the damage so much as realistic illusion in the service of sentimental and declamatory literature. Perhaps the two go hand in hand. To judge from Western and Graeco-Roman art, it seems so. Yet it is true of Western painting that in so far as it has been the creation of a rationalist and scientifically-minded city culture, it has always had a bias towards a realism that tries to achieve allusions by overpowering the medium, and is more interested in exploiting the practical meanings of objects than in savoring their appearance.

III
Romanticism was the last great tendency following directly from bourgeois society that was able to inspire and stimulate the profoundly responsible artist—the artist conscious of certain in-
flexible obligations to the standards of his craft. By 1848
Romanticism had exhausted itself. After that the impulse, al-
though indeed it had to originate in bourgeois society, could
only come in the guise of a denial of that society, as a turning
away from it. It was not to be an about-face towards a new so-
ciety, but an emigration to a Bohemia which was to be art's san-
cuary from capitalism. It was to be the task of the avant-garde to
perform in opposition to bourgeois society the function of find-
ing new and adequate cultural forms for the expression of that
same society, without at the same time succumbing to its ideo-
logical divisions and its refusal to permit the arts to be their own
justification. The avant-garde, both child and negation of Ro-
manticism, becomes the embodiment of art's instinct of self-
preservation. It is interested in, and feels itself responsible to,
only the values of art; and, given society as it is, has an organic
sense of what is good and what is bad for art.

As the first and most important item upon its agenda, the
avant-garde saw the necessity of an escape from ideas, which
were infecting the arts with the ideological struggles of society.
Ideas came to mean subject matter in general. (Subject matter as
distinguished from content: in the sense that every work of art
must have content, but that subject matter is something the art-
ist does or does not have in mind when he is actually at work.)
This meant a new and greater emphasis upon form, and it also
involved the assertion of the arts as independent vocations, dis-
ciplines and crafts, absolutely autonomous, and entitled to re-
spect for their own sakes, and not merely as vessels of commu-
ication. It was the signal for a revolt against the dominance of
literature, which as the chief victim of literature brought the prob-
lem into sharpest focus. (Forces stemming from outside art play a much larger part than I have room to acknowledge here. And I must perforce be rather schematic and abstract, since I am interested more in tracing large out-
lines than in accounting for and gathering in all particular
manifestations.)

By the second third of the 19th century painting had degen-
erated from the pictorial to the picturesque. Everything de-
pends on the anecdote or the message. The painted picture oc-
curs in blank, indeterminate space; it just happens to be on a
square of canvas and inside a frame. It might just as well have
been breathed on air or formed out of plasma. It tries to be
something you imagine rather than see—or else a bas-relief or a
statue. Everything contributes to the denial of the medium, as if
the artist were ashamed to admit that he had actually painted his
picture instead of dreaming it forth.

This state of affairs could not be overcome at one stroke. The
campaign for the redemption of painting was to be one of com-
paratively slow attrition at first. Nineteenth century painting
made its first break with literature when in the person of the
Communard, Courbet, it fled from spirit to matter. Courbet,
the first real avant-garde painter, tried to reduce his art to im-
mediate sense data by painting only what the eye could see as a
machine unaided by the mind. He took for his subject matter
prosaic contemporary life. As avant-gardists so often do, he
tried to demolish official bourgeois art by turning it inside out.
By driving something as far as it will go you often get back to
where it started. A new flatness begins to appear in Courbet's
painting, and an equally new attention to every inch of the can-
vass, regardless of its relation to the "centers of interest." (Zola,
the Goncourts and poets like Verhaeren were Courbet's corre-
latives in literature. They too were "experimental"; they too
were trying to get rid of ideas and "literature," that is, to estab-
ilish their art on a more stable basis than the crumbling bour-
geois oecumene.) If the avant-garde seems unwilling to claim
naturalism for itself it is because the tendency failed too often
to achieve the objectivity it professed, i.e., it succumbed to
"ideas."

Impressionism, reasoning beyond Courbet in its pursuit of
materialist objectivity, abandoned common sense experience
and sought to emulate the detachment of science, imagining
that thereby it would get at the very essence of painting as well
as of visual experience. It was becoming important to determine
the essential elements of each of the arts. Impressionist painting
becomes more an exercise in color vibrations than representation
of nature. Manet meanwhile, closer to Courbet, was attacking
subject matter on its own terrain by including it in his pictures
and exterminating it then and there. His insolent indifference to
his subject, which in itself was often striking, and his flat color-modeling were as revolutionary as Impressionist technique proper. Like the Impressionists he saw the problems of painting as first and foremost problems of the medium, and he called the spectator's attention to this.

IV

The second variant of the avant-garde's development is concurrent in time with the first. It is easy to recognize this variant, but rather difficult to expose its motivation. Tendencies go in opposite directions, and cross-purposes meet. But tying everything together is the fact that in the end cross-purposes indeed do meet. There is a common effort in each of the arts to expand the expressive resources of the medium, not in order to express ideas and notions, but to express with greater immediacy sensations, the irreducible elements of experience. Along this path it seemed as though the avant-garde in its attempt to escape from "literature" had set out to treble the confusion of the arts by having them imitate every other art except literature. \(^1\) (By this time literature had had its opprobrious sense expanded to include everything the avant-garde objected to in official bourgeois culture.) Each art would demonstrate its powers by capturing the effects of its sister arts or by taking a sister art for its subject. Since art was the only validity left, what better subject was there for each art than the procedures and effects of some other art? Impressionist painting, with its progressions and rhythmic suffusions of color, with its moods and atmospheres, was arriving at effects to which the Impressionists themselves gave the terms of Romantic music. Painting, however, was the least affected by this new confusion. Poetry and music were its chief victims. Poetry—for it too had to escape from "literature"—was imitating the effects of painting and sculpture (Gautier, the Parnassians, and later the Imagists) and, of course, those of music (Poe had narrowed "true" poetry down to the lyric). Music, in flight from the undisciplined, bottomless sentimentality of the Romantics, was striving to describe and narrate (program music). That music at this point imitates literature would seem to spoil my thesis. But music imitates painting as much as it does poetry when it becomes representational; and besides, it seems to me that Debussy used the program more as a pretext for experiment than as an end in itself. In the same way that the Impressionist painters were trying to get at the structure beneath the color, Debussy was trying to get at the "sound underneath the note."

Aside from what was going on inside music, music as an art in itself began at this time to occupy a very important position in relation to the other arts. Because of its "absolute" nature, its remoteness from imitation, its almost complete absorption in the very physical quality of its medium, as well as because of its resources of suggestion, music had come to replace poetry as the paragon art. It was the art which the other avant-garde arts envied most, and whose effects they tried hardest to imitate. Thus it was the principal agent of the new confusion of the arts. What attracted the avant-garde to music as much as its power to suggest was, as I have said, its nature as an art of immediate sensation. When Verlaine said, "De la musique avant toute chose," he was not only asking poetry to be more suggestive—suggestiveness after all, was a poetic ideal foisted upon music—but also to affect the reader or listener with more immediate and more powerful sensations.

But only when the avant-garde's interest in music led it to consider music as a method of art rather than as a kind of effect did the avant-garde find what it was looking for. It was when it was discovered that the advantage of music lay chiefly in the fact that it was an "abstract" art, an art of "pure form." It was such because it was incapable, objectively, of communicating anything else than a sensation, and because this sensation could not be conceived in any other terms than those of the sense through which it entered the consciousness. An imitative painting can be described in terms of non-visual identities, a piece of music cannot, whether it attempts to imitate or not. The effects of music are the effects, essentially, of pure form; those of painting and poetry are too often accidental to the formal natures of these arts. Only by accepting the example of music and defining each of the other arts solely in the terms of the sense or faculty which perceived its effect and by excluding from each art whatever is intelligible in the terms of any other sense or faculty would the

---

1. This is the confusion of the arts for which Babbitt [Irving Babbitt, The New Laokoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts, 1910] made Romanticism responsible. [Author's note]
non-musical arts attain the “purity” and self-sufficiency which they desired; which they desired, that is, in so far as they were avant-garde arts. The emphasis, therefore, was to be on the physical, the sensorial. “Literature’s” corrupting influence is only felt when the senses are neglected. The latest confusion of the arts was the result of a mistaken conception of music as the only immediately sensuous art. But the other arts can also be sensuous, if only they will look to music, not to ape its effects but to borrow its principles as a “pure” art, as an art which is abstract because it is almost nothing else except sensuous.

V

Guiding themselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, by a notion of purity derived from the example of music, the avant-garde arts have in the last fifty years achieved a purity and a radical delimitation of their fields of activity for which there is no previous example in the history of culture. The arts lie safe now, each within its “legitimate” boundaries, and free trade has been replaced by autarchy. Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art. To prove that their concept of purity is something more than a bias in taste, painters point to Oriental, primitive and children’s art as instances of the universality and naturalness and objectivity of their ideal of purity. Composers and poets, although to a much lesser extent, may justify their efforts to attain purity by referring to the same precedents. Dissonance is present in early and non-Western music, “unintelligibility” in folk poetry. The issue is, of course, focused most sharply in the plastic arts, for they, in their non-decorative function, have been the most closely associated with imitation, and it is in their case that the ideal of the pure and the abstract has met the most resistance.

The arts, then, have been hunted back to their mediums, and there they have been isolated, concentrated and defined. It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself. To restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be emphasized. For the visual arts the medium is discovered to be physical; hence pure painting and pure sculpture seek above all else to affect the spectator physically. In poetry, which, as I have said, had also to escape from “literature” or subject matter for its salvation from society, it is decided that the medium is essentially psychological and sub- or supra-logical. The poem is to aim at the general consciousness of the reader, not simply his intelligence.

It would be well to consider “pure” poetry for a moment, before going on to painting. The theory of poetry as incantation, hypnosis or drug—as psychological agent then—goes back to Poe, and eventually to Coleridge and Edmund Burke with their efforts to locate the enjoyment of poetry in the “Fancy” or “Imagination.” Mallarmé, however, was the first to base a consistent practice of poetry upon it. Sound, he decided, is only an auxiliary of poetry, not the medium itself; and besides, most poetry is now read, not recited: the sound of words is a part of their meaning, not the vessel of it. To deliver poetry from the subject and to give full play to its true affective power it is necessary to free words from logic. The medium of poetry is isolated in the power of the word to evoke associations and to connore. Poetry subsists no longer in the relations between words as meanings, but in the relations between words as personalities composed of sound, history and possibilities of meaning. Grammatical logic is retained only in so far as it is necessary to set these personalities in motion, for unrelated words are static when read and not recited aloud. Tentative efforts are made to discard metric form and rhyme, because they are regarded as too local and determinate, too much attached to specific times and places and social conventions to pertain to the essence of poetry. There are experiments in poetic prose. But as in the case of music, it was found that formal structure was indispensable, that some such structure was integral to the medium of poetry as an aspect of its resistance.... The poem still offers possibilities of meaning—but only possibilities. Should any of them be too precisely realized, the poem would lose the greatest part of its efficacy, which is to agitate the consciousness with infinite possibilities by approaching the brink of meaning and yet never falling over it. The poet writes, not so much to express, as to create a thing which will operate upon the reader's consciousness to produce the emotion of poetry. The content of the poem is what it does to
the reader, not what it communicates. The emotion of the reader derives from the poem as a unique object—pretendedly—and not from referents outside the poem. This is pure poetry as ambitious contemporary poets try to define it by the example of their work. Obviously, it is an impossible ideal, yet one which most of the best poetry of the last fifty years has tried to reach, whether it is poetry about nothing or poetry about the plight of contemporary society.

It is easier to isolate the medium in the case of the plastic arts, and consequently avant-garde painting and sculpture can be said to have attained a much more radical purity than avant-garde poetry. Painting and sculpture can become more completely nothing but what they do; like functional architecture and the machine, they look what they do. The picture or statue exhausts itself in the visual sensation it produces. There is nothing to identify, connect or think about, but everything to feel. Pure poetry strives for infinite suggestion, pure plastic art for the minimum. If the poem, as Valéry claims, is a machine to produce the emotion of poetry, the painting and statue are machines to produce the emotion of “plastic sight.” The purely plastic or abstract qualities of the work of art are the only ones that count. Emphasize the medium and its difficulties, and at once the purely plastic, the proper, values of visual art come to the fore. Overpower the medium to the point where all sense of its resistance disappears, and the adventitious uses of art become more important.

The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane’s denial of efforts to “hole through” it for realistic perspectival space. In making this surrender, painting not only got rid of imitation—and with it, “literature”—but also of realistic imitation’s corollary confusion between painting and sculpture. (Sculpture, on its side, emphasizes the resistance of its material to the efforts of the artist to ply it into shapes uncharacteristic of stone, metal, wood, etc.) Painting abandons chiaroscuro and shaded modelling. Brush strokes are often defined for their own sake. The motto of the Renaissance artist, Ars est artem celare, is exchanged for Ars est artem demonstrare. Primary colors, the “instinctive,” easy colors, replace tones and tonality. Line, which is one of the most abstract elements in painting since it is never found in nature as the definition of contour, returns to oil painting as the third color between two other color areas. Under the influence of the square shape of the canvas, forms tend to become geometrical—and simplified, because simplification is also a part of the instinctive accommodation to the medium. But most important of all, the picture plane itself grows shallower and shallower, flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth until they meet as one upon the real and material plane which is the actual surface of the canvas; where they lie side by side or interlocked or transparently imposed upon each other. Where the painter still tries to indicate real objects their shapes flatten and spread in the dense, two-dimensional atmosphere. A vibrating tension is set up as the objects struggle to maintain their volume against the tendency of the real picture plane to re-assert its material flatness and crush them to silhouettes. In a further stage realistic space cracks and splinters into flat planes which come forward, parallel to the plane surface. Sometimes this advance to the surface is accelerated by painting a segment of wood or texture trompe l’œil, or by drawing exactly printed letters, and placing them so that they destroy the partial illusion of depth by slamming the various planes together. Thus the artist deliberately emphasizes the illusoriness of the illusions which he pretends to create. Sometimes these elements are used in an effort to preserve an illusion of depth by being placed on the nearest plane in order to drive the others back. But the result is an optical illusion, not a realistic one, and only emphasizes further the impenetrability of the plane surface.

The destruction of realistic pictorial space, and with it, that of the object, was accomplished by means of the travesty that was cubism. The cubist painter eliminated color because, consciously or unconsciously, he was parodying, in order to destroy, the academic methods of achieving volume and depth, which are shading and perspective, and as such have little to do with color in the common sense of the word. The cubist used these same methods to break the canvas into a multiplicity of subtle recessive planes, which seem to shift and fade into infinite depths and yet insist on returning to the surface of the canvas. As we gaze at a cubist painting of the last phase we witness the birth and death of three-dimensional pictorial space.
And as in painting the pristine flatness of the stretched canvas constantly struggles to overcome every other element, so in sculpture the stone figure appears to be on the point of relapsing into the original monolith, and the cast seems to narrow and smooth itself back to the original molten stream from which it was poured, or tries to remember the texture and plasticity of the clay in which it was first worked out.

Sculpture hovers finally on the verge of "pure" architecture, and painting, having been pushed up from fictive depths, is forced through the surface of the canvas to emerge on the other side in the form of paper, cloth, cement and actual objects of wood and other materials pasted, glued or nailed to what was originally the transparent picture plane, which the painter no longer dares to puncture—or if he does, it is only to dare. Artists like Hans Arp, who begin as painters, escape eventually from the prison of the single plane by painting on wood or plaster and using molds or carpentry to raise and lower planes. They go, in other words, from painting to colored bas-relief, and finally—so far must they fly in order to return to three-dimensionality without at the same time risking the illusion—they become sculptors and create objects in the round, through which they can free their feelings for movement and direction from the increasing ascetic geometry of pure painting. (Except in the case of Arp and one or two others, the sculpture of most of these metamorphosed painters is rather unsculptural, stemming as it does from the discipline of painting. It uses color, fragile and intricate shapes and a variety of materials. It is construction, fabrication.)

The French and Spanish in Paris brought painting to the point of the pure abstraction, but it remained, with a few exceptions, for the Dutch, Germans, English and Americans to realize it. It is in their hands that abstract purism has been consolidated into a school, dogma and credo. By 1939 the center of abstract painting had shifted to London, while in Paris the younger generation of French and Spanish painters had reacted against abstract purity and turned back to a confusion of literature with painting as extreme as any of the past. These young orthodox surrealists are not to be identified, however, with such pseudo- or mock surrealists of the previous generation as Miró, Klee and Arp, whose work, despite its apparent intention, has only contributed to the further deployment of abstract painting pure and simple. Indeed, a good many of the artists—if not the majority—who contributed importantly to the development of modern painting came to it with the desire to exploit the break with imitative realism for a more powerful expressiveness, but so inexorable was the logic of the development that in the end their work constituted but another step towards abstract art, and a further sterilization of the expressive factors. This has been true, whether the artist was Van Gogh, Picasso or Klee. All roads led to the same place.

VI

I find that I have offered no other explanation for the present superiority of abstract art than its historical justification. So what I have written has turned out to be an historical apology for abstract art. To argue from any other basis would require more space than is at my disposal, and would involve an entrance into the politics of taste—to use Venturi's phrase—from which there is no exit—on paper. My own experience of art has forced me to accept most of the standards of taste from which abstract art has derived, but I do not maintain that they are the only valid standards through eternity. I find them simply the most valid ones at this given moment. I have no doubt that they will be replaced in the future by other standards, which will be perhaps more inclusive than any possible now. And even now they do not exclude all other possible criteria. I am still able to enjoy a Rembrandt more for its expressive qualities than for its achievement of abstract values—as rich as it may be in them.

It suffices to say that there is nothing in the nature of abstract art which compels it to be so. The imperative comes from history, from the age in conjunction with a particular moment reached in a particular tradition of art. This conjunction holds the artist in a vise from which at the present moment he can escape only by surrendering his ambition and returning to a stale past. This is the difficulty for those who are dissatisfied with abstract art, feeling that it is too decorative or too arid and "inhuman," and who desire a return to representation and literature in plastic art. Abstract art cannot be disposed of by a simple-minded evasion. Or by negation. We can only dispose of abstract art by assimilating it, by fighting our way through it.
Where to? I do not know. Yet it seems to me that the wish to return to the imitation of nature in art has been given no more justification than the desire of certain partisans of abstract art to legislate it into permanency.


4. An American View

One important reason for the reluctance of the British and French ruling classes to go to war with Nazi Germany was the realization that in order to go all out in such a war they would have to proclaim an anti-fascist crusade, an “ideological” war, than which there is nothing more repellent to the leaders of the bourgeois democracies. From the point of view of their own class interests they are right. For a capitalist country to raise anti-fascist slogans during a war is to play with fire: slogans require a positive as well as a negative content; anti-fascist slogans, when they have any real drive to them begin to suggest too much that is antithetical to capitalism no less than to fascism: such things as social and economic democracy, mass participation in the guidance of the nation, integral freedom of speech and action, etc. The heat of war would force these slogans from the realms of the safely abstract into the regions of the dangerously concrete. Rather than gamble with this danger, the rulers of Great Britain and France preferred to gamble with what was for them a lesser danger, defeat at the hands of Hitler. Instead of declaring war against a principle and a system, they declared it against a personality and a people. Instead of blaming the war upon fascism, they blamed it, once more, upon a people. In books and magazines the “problem” of Germany—how the corpse was to be disposed of after the kill—was discussed, but very little was said about the problem of fascism. They named the enemy by his family name, they docketed his ancestry and personal habits, but they were very careful not to permit him to stand for anything except the broadest abstractions such as injustice, tyranny, totalitarianism and so forth. By skipping back and forth between the very general and the very particular one manages to avoid dangerous topics.

Despite some vague talk about a European federation and the elimination of international injustices, we were given to understand that Hitler must be destroyed in order to restore the status quo. But the masses in Britain and France are not satisfied enough with the status quo to die for it. Not having experienced a Versailles treaty in the recent past, the prospect of losing the war does not terrify them as much as it does the Germans; and having experienced the disillusion of victory, they expect much less from one than do the Germans. The French workers, moreover, were in retreat when the war broke out. All they had won in 1936 had been taken away from them, and they saw relatively little left to defend against Hitler—not even “national honour”; especially when those who mouthed the phrase most sold it shortest. Yes, for the French, at any rate, the fatherland idea had lost its credit; it couldn’t even buy xenophobia, much less fighting spirit. Only a sincere anti-fascist programme could have done that.

The strategical and tactical mistakes made by the allied rulers are but the reflection of their refusal to face the historical situation squarely. Military methods flow from political ones. The defence of the status quo of 1918 constrains the British and French to the strategy and tactics of 1918. Hitler’s revolutionary methods of warfare derive from his revolutionary political methods—albeit these methods are revolutionary only in the sense that they are new ways of preserving capitalism. Hitler realizes this much: that in order to keep capitalism there must be fascism; Trotsky realizes that in order to keep democracy there must be a socialist revolution. We cannot stand still. We can only keep what we value by adding to it. To preserve, we must change; to meet the attrition of time, we must launch our own offensives. As Goethe says: “Nur der die Freiheit sich verdient, der täglich sie erobern muss.” Only he earns freedom who must win it daily.

The war no longer permits any straddling. There is not enough room left for that. We must choose: either capitalism or democracy. One or the other must go. If we insist on keeping capitalism then we cannot fight Hitler. He must win. This is the dilemma which faces British and French capitalism and pre-