

# Social signs and natural bodies

On T.J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea*

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'But clearly something of socialism and modernism has died, in both cases deservedly...'\*

1. Modernism is no longer the dominant and leading edge of high culture; so there is no contesting that something of modernism has died, but deservedly? As if it merited that death and passing, like someone deserving the death penalty? Clark's judgement here, the judgement that his book aims to bring to pass, is somewhat wishful and vengeful, as if the death of modernism might become more bearable – and, to his credit, modernism's death is finally not quite bearable for Clark – if we could find it not just intelligible (the way someone's death from a fatal genetic disease is), but, in the light of cold judgement (the black robe and white wig kind of judgement), deserved. Of course, there could not be the fierceness, the will or desire for separation, except against a background of bewildered attachment, erotic obsession. If these are somewhat histrionic terms for framing a cultural history of modernism, they are ones which Clark does more than invite. They represent a level or stratum without which cultural history, art history would cease to matter. The attachment to and the drive for separation from modernism also represent some of the rhythm of Clark's modernist history of modernism, its fervent dialectic of destruction and narration.<sup>1</sup> Its subtitle is *Episodes from a History of Modernism*; 'episodes' could just as well be read as 'fragments'.

2. *Farewell to an Idea* is a book torn between a lived cultural melancholy, the melancholy of our inability to put modernism in general and abstract expressionism in particular behind us, and a maddened desire to

mourn, a fantasy of mourning in which, finally, we could be done with it, put it in the past in a way which would enable art to happen again: 'Not being able to make a previous moment of high achievement part of the past – not to lose it and mourn it and, if necessary, revile it – is, for art in modernist circumstances, more or less synonymous with not being able to make art at all' (371); that is, to make an art that, speaking loosely, might command general assent. If art might happen again, then (so the subtext of *Farewell* desperately hopes) so might socialism. Of course, a possible future for art is not a necessary condition for a renewal of socialism, but it might be thought indicative since the two great wishes of modernism – to lead its audience towards a recognition of the social reality of the sign, and conversely, of turning the sign 'back to a bedrock of World/Nature/Sensation/Subjectivity which the to and fro of capitalism has all but destroyed' (9–10) – are, in fact, two irrepressible aspects of modernity as such. Hence, an art that might make sense of our autonomy, our secular powers for world-making, on the one hand, and an art that simultaneously could make sense of us as wholly natural creatures inhabiting a material world, on the other hand, would be an art that could found a collective sense of purpose and focus, or at least the possibility of such, on the far side of the negations through which secular modernity was formed. It is certainly worth noting that the entirety of Clark's argument flies under what is almost certainly a false counterfactual, namely, that 'there could have been (there ought to have been) an imagining otherwise which had more of the stuff of the world to it' (9). Clark believes that since 'socialism occupied the

\* T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999. vii + 451 pp., £30.00 hb., 0 300 07532 4. All references in the body of the text are to this book.

real ground on which modernity could be described and opposed', then ideally modernist art ought to have flowed from socialism. But, of course, the socialism we actually had was 'compromised – complicit with what it claimed to hate' (9), and thus unusable by modernism. So Clark's fantasy speculative history has the thought that modernism (in its weightlessness and extremism, its occupation of an unreal ground) and socialism in its extremism, were two halves of an integral freedom that did not add up – but they could have. This is a fantasy only in the sense that I doubt the absence of socialism, as opposed to the presence of capitalism, is necessary for the explanation of the failure of modernism. Which is not to deny that the success of modernism, what it would be to realize its potentiality, requires socialism.

### Modernism and melancholy culture

3. So the project of *Farewell* is to transform melancholy into a possible mourning, a mourning that would be accomplished if, at least, a new representational art might emerge; but such an art is only likely to emerge with or in anticipation of socialism, making socialism the glue or the standpoint of the historical narration, and hence what must arrive for its vindication. If you agree with the premiss, the melancholy of the present, then formally at least the strategy is impeccable. Since I do agree with Clark's premiss, and further agree that somewhere in the entanglement between the parallel but different destinies of socialism and modernism is the source of the melancholic structure of the present, then I will distinguish myself from him by, finally, explaining differently how they are to be reconciled. Standing on the ground of a future socialism, the unsurprising means Clark adopts in order to carry out his project is the redescription of his fragmentary and partial canon of modernism – David's *Death of Marat*, Pissaro's *Two Young Peasant Women*, Cézanne's various *Bathers*, the great period of Picasso's cubism, 1910–12, El Lissitzky (or is it Malevich?) in 1920, Pollock between 1947 and 1950, and abstract expressionism (especially, finally, Hans Hofmann<sup>2</sup>) – such that, in each case, the achievement that the works in question exemplify becomes utterly saturated by its historical moment, in either its socio-political fullness (David, Pissaro, Malevich) or the imaginary escape from it into fantasized immediacy or new beginning (Cézanne, cubism, Pollock). So just that moment – in its social and art-historical thickness – is necessary for that work to have the *aesthetic* force it does. Hence the work belongs to that moment in its greatness and pathos, and can and must be left there, in that past,

if we are to inherit it at all. Lacking that placement the works, in being narratively untethered, are thereby untellable – which is to say they will continue to circulate like traumatic memories, representations (of art and the meaning of art) that do not represent but are the sign of an event that culture cannot get on level terms with but can only suffer. And, of course, on Clark's own accounting there has been such a vast and awful event of wounding: capitalist modernity. This is the 'holocaust' that makes modernism appear as a series of unintelligible, 'unreadable' fragments:

because the 'modernity' which modernism prophesied has finally arrived ... the forms it originally gave rise to are now unreadable.... Modernism is unintelligible now because it had truck with a modernity not yet fully in place.... Modernism is our antiquity. (2–3)

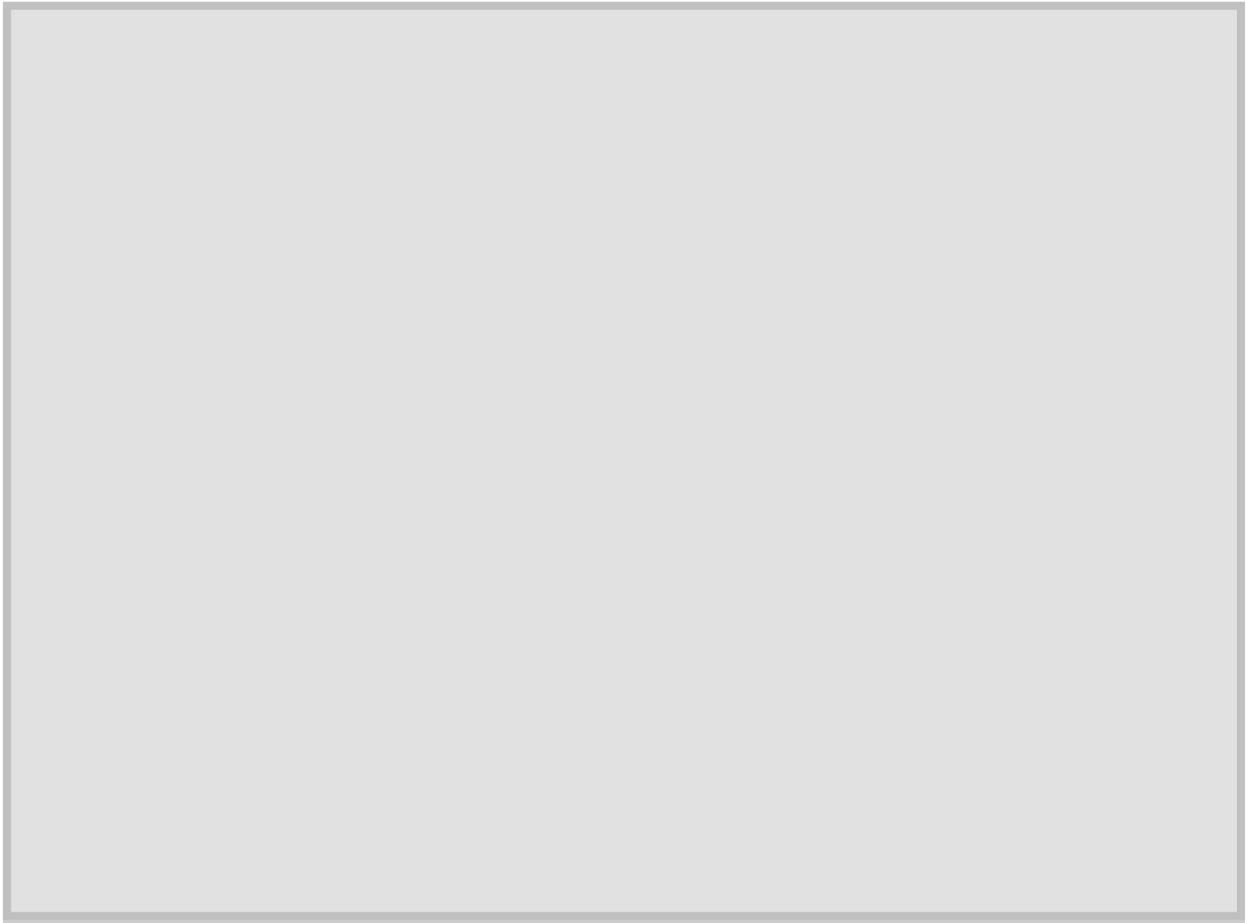
4. But you can also now begin to see how Clark's project might misfire: by standing on the ground of an as-yet-groundless socialism (Clark's notion of historical writing is, I think, for him the occupation of that ground, the one we remain capable of), Clark wants to generate a fragmented narrative of modernism that, through its fragmentary character, will open up the possibility of rendering the past past and history thus usable (inheritable rather than haunting). The social history of art can be therapeutic because, at least at the level of the sign, its *placing* of art works through the recovery of the scene making them aesthetically possible enables separation from them. To be free of modernism in this setting, in which it is the marker for secularizing modernity's self-understanding, or a certain crazed resistance to that self-understanding, is to be free of at least some of modernity's self-defeating logic. Diagnosis and critical practice are in perfect alignment. It is a brilliant strategy.<sup>3</sup> But this, I am suggesting, is just a fantasy because if culture really is traumatically wounded, and the depth of the wound figured precisely in an art bound to its own impossibility (which for the moment can be read as simply an art that is incapable of providing representations that would offer a binding collective orientation), hence an art that is always already past, too late, an art inhabiting art's demise, then it *cannot* be put in the past, but will haunt. Clark thinks the haunting power of modernism derives from our misdescription or misunderstanding of it. If we could see through it, see it as internally, intrinsically and hopelessly flawed – caught in nothing less than a self-contradiction (365) – then putting it behind us would become possible. I see the obviously flawed but nonetheless haunting power of modernism as a consequence of it being

trapped and blocked by what (traumatically) places it. So Clark thinks modernism died because it was somehow intrinsically false; I think it died because it was trapped in a social formation that blocked its progressive forms from realization. For both of us it is true to say that modernism will continue to haunt art until socialism arrives (or the world fully becomes a place past caring). Clark deplores this fact; for me it is the best hope we have.

5. *Farewell* is a work of scintillating brilliance. I do not expect to see a book on modernism of comparable originality, depth, judgement and sweep during my lifetime. Each chapter synthesizes, as no one else now writing can, the socio-historical (including, or perhaps especially, the political and class realities of the time) with the artistic, with all the mediations through artist and art history elaborately detailed. Clark possesses rare gifts for the detailed description of works, and even rarer ones for informed judgement. It can be breathtaking to watch him marshalling all his knowing and judgement, all those mediations (!), and the delicacy needed to make it hang together to the degree it does. And I should say, apart from my demurs, as a work of cultural history that enables us to come to grips a little with the imagining of modernity embedded in modernist practice, *Farewell* is fabulous and irreplaceable. Still, as I have begun to suggest, there is a mismatch between the detail of Clark's readings, the hermeneutics of modernism that it generates, and the overall diagnostic project, betwixt trees and forest. In a manner that is wholly unfair to the subtlety and fineness of the particular analyses, I here want to suggest the actuality and significance of the mismatch. Perhaps only someone not trained as an art historian would approach Clark in this ungainly way; but given the stakes of his book, the governing desire finally to place modernism behind us, a look at the general shape of the project seems both justified and appropriate.

6. It is possible to demonstrate how each chapter, apart from the David, is open to criticism – the places of criticism easy to spot because they derive from the overkill of the method: making the conjunctural redescription the necessary underpinning for the sustaining of the judgement of the works' aesthetic force and achievement, or failure. My account will fall into two parts: a brief critical summary of the Pissaro, Cézanne and Picasso chapters, and then a somewhat fuller survey of Clark's account of Pollock, which I understand to be the linchpin of the book as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Before commencing, however, a brief word about David's *Death of Marat*.

7. It is a daring and outrageous coup to claim that modernism begins in Year 2 with this painting and not, say, with Manet or impressionism, but the structure of his argument is instantly plausible. Modernism in art emerges emphatically only when traditional authority is no longer formative for determining what counts as painting. At this moment in 1793 'contingency rules. Contingency enters the process of picturing. It invades it. There is no other substance out of which paintings can now be made – no givens, no matters and subject-matters, no forms, no usable pasts' (18). What, then, must be shown about the *Death of Marat* is that contingency rules with it by demonstrating how utterly the painting is a response to the political events surrounding it, where politics 'is the form of the contingency that makes modernism what it is' (21). This last thought is essential. If I have understood Clark aright, he can say that contingency rules because the form of politics which David's painting articulates (expresses, furthers, is a moment in) is, affirmatively, a politics of radical freedom, more dubiously a politics of Revolutionary purity. In either eventuality, the authority of the people, the new authority opposing traditional authority which was to be represented in the painting and be its authority, in its Jacobin dress, was understood negatively (in opposition to the *riches* and the *aristocrates*), and thereby, finally, as without determinate content. This opens traditional authority to the full force of negativity which makes contingency constitutive. Jacobinism is, in political fact, the sceptical doubt that opens modernity to its self-grounding secular fate as well as sceptical negativity. In constructing his argument Clark makes an extraordinary claim, namely that the placeholder of the emptiness of 'the People' in this painting is the empty background of, in particular, the right-hand corner of the painting (47). To see not only a politics, but a crucible for modernity's entering into painting in this bit of scumbling (45) is, well, gripping. And there is more, since the evacuation of eternity entailed by the rule of contingency equally entails that the medium through which contingency emerges suddenly comes to possess a weight or authority of its own. So the empty background of the painting is 'something more like a representation of painting, of painting as pure activity. Painting as material, therefore. Aimless. In the end detached from any one representation task. Bodily. Generating (monotonous) orders out of itself, or maybe out of ingrained habit. A kind of automatic writing' (45). Not only do we here have an adumbration of modernism right through to Pollock and abstract expressionism, but with it, right



Camille Pissaro, *Two Young Peasant Women*, 1892,  
oil on canvas, 89cm x 165cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

from the get-go, the need for another politics as the content which might redeem modernism's negativity and sub-signifying materialism. But, again, all that hangs on the claim that David's background is quite other to any previous blank background in the history of painting.

8. It is impossible not to mention how closely this account of David presents an art-historical account of the French Revolution that parallels the form of analysis of consciousness found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. One might think this to be a coincidence or contingent vindication of Hegel, but for the fact that Clark entitles and models his account of Pollock on Hegel's depiction of 'The Unhappy Consciousness'; and, further, that his final chapter on abstract expressionism is self-consciously a meditation on Hegel's doctrine of the end of art. If three chapters of the text are explicitly Hegelian in inspiration, what of the rest? And if Clark's text is itself modernist, the irony in his critique of modernism, is he suggesting that a usable modernism is Hegelian? Or that a usable Marxism must be Hegelian?

### Three fragments of modernism

9. Clark contends that the new characteristics in Pissaro's painting that come to an exquisite realization in *Two Young Peasant Women* of 1892 – the ones that speak of his overcoming the sentimentality of Millet and his distancing himself from the mechanism of pointillism – are, so to speak, nudged into place by, or, what is the same, impossible to explain without, Pissaro's commitment to anarchism: 'his [Pissaro's] mood counts. It is the anarchist temper – vengeful, self-doubting, and serene – out of which *Two Young Peasant Women* comes' (104). More explicitly:

The moment of anarchist politics in late 1891 was specific, I think, and had effects on Pissaro's *Two Young Peasant Women*. Not dramatically. Not in terms of particular imagery or even firmly identifiable tone.... I see no outright socialist politics in it. There is a slight shifting of boundaries – in a modernist practice where even the slightest shift in conception endangers the economy of the whole – between expressiveness and surface integrity, or drawing and colour, or pastoral and monumentality. A willingness to risk stiffness and solemnity. To bring the figures closer. To try to overhear them. (99)

Now Clark convincingly does show that there is an elective affinity between anarchism, considered as a theory of the compatibility of freedom and order, and Pissaro's kind of painting. But the detailed account is not compelling. In order for it to be compelling it would have to be the case that we found ourselves bound by a new redescription of the painting, that something about the old ways of telling the painting's achievement is inadequate and is only made adequate by the pressure of 1891's politics. But Clark never quite mounts that argument; nor can he.

10. Surely well before 1891 Pissaro's commitments to the pastoral (say our essential belonging to the natural world no matter how disenchanting) and the peasant as the figure of the working class are well in place. The formal, technical problems those two commitments engender are everywhere severe for Pissaro. But once that is conceded, then the game is up. To be sure, the 1892 painting is unique, and quite different from Pissaro's other peasant pictures. Nonetheless, the features that best describe *Two Young Peasant Women*, and I am persuaded by Clark's description, all seem to me to follow *directly* from asking how one might carry on pastoral/peasant painting without falling into sentimentality and naïveté and the too-much-beauty sweetness of Monet; that is, asking how the constellation of theme and painterly practice can be united into an authentic work – full stop. Perhaps without his anarchism we could not explain why he would want, as modernist, to continue with the pastoral/peasant genre; and the wanting to continue with that genre is, rightly, his mode of resistance to other visions of modernism, and hence the signature of the possibility of ethical depth in his painting. But that really is at the wrong level of explanatory significance. Does anarchism, even as motive, help in appreciating the dignity afforded by placing the two women in a moment of interrupted conversation (they cannot be talking since the figure on the left is clearly lost in contemplation, far away, in the pose of a thinker/contemplator), the necessity of introducing incompleteness (the cropping of the thinking woman) in order, not to bring us in too close (86–7) but, I think, in order that the *weight* of head and shoulder in the left-hand figure becomes palpable, dominating, so it is the figure of 'woman-pensiveness' we see rather than simply woman-sitting-on-the-ground-thinking? And that decision requires the extra size of the canvas: her absorptive weightiness would be ludicrous if miniaturized. Indeed, I would go further than Clark and say that incompleteness coupled with increase in dimension is what enables the left-hand figure to possess the kind of absorptive weightiness

that allows her to be the formal and emotional centre of the picture despite her corner position, and it is this that is the painting's dissonant structuring, its strange monumentality, this raising what is low (by withdrawing it from the picture) without sentimentality or cheap pathos. And all that echoed by the gaze of the kneeling woman. She is as rapt by her thinking companion as we are, and her gaze forces us back to the meditating figure. The problems resolved by the painting are those of a genre in the context of previous and contemporary painting. Showing the context certainly helps focus the achievement. But none of this requires the mention of anarchism. No new description of the achievement emerges. On the contrary, the best account remains the internal, painterly-practice, problem-solving approach: again, given a certain set of thematic and painterly commitments, how it is possible to make an authentic work, one avoiding a range of aesthetic dangers lurking in the vicinity (sentimentality, sweetness, mechanism, for Pissaro).

11. I have a quicker and more defiant way with Cézanne and Picasso. Certainly, I will never see the Barnes Foundation's *The Large Bathers* (1895–1906) the same again: the right-hand figure leaning on the tree has become androgynous – head unclear, maybe/maybe not breasts, and the dark shadow rising up to the belly button – well, the male organ is not an impossible conjecture; whilst the head of the figure on the far left of the painting now does look more like a penis than a head should! And, with Clark's guidance, I can only see the figure on the right of the Philadelphia Museum's *The Large Bathers* as a head atop buttocks and legs. Although there are some truths about modernism that Clark infers here – I like best and agree with most the thesis that 'modernism ... would not anger its opponents in the way it seems to if it did not so flagrantly assert the beautiful as its ultimate commitment. And if it did not repeatedly discover the beautiful as nothing but mechanism, nothing but matter dictating (dead) form' (167) – I am not sure they come from these paintings. But, and here is the rub, the *Bathers* paintings have always seemed to me utterly anomalous in the context of Cézanne's oeuvre, to have been driven by some fantasy that sprints free of the *Mont Sainte-Victoire* pictures and the still lifes, those paintings upon which his achievement and influence rest. But this is to say that those paintings that have always been difficult to place in respect of Cézanne's oeuvre become, through Clark's accounting, even more outlandish, fantastic (literally) and unplaceable. The claim that these are limit cases through which we understand the rest is not implausible in principle, just

here stranded on the extremism of these pictures, an extremism that Clark neither tames (he wouldn't want to) nor places.<sup>5</sup>

12. There is a further possibility about the Cézanne, namely that the pay-off for the analysis of the emergence of sexual material relates not to the remainder of Cézanne's oeuvre, but rather is designed to adumbrate a crucial moment in the Pollock chapter. It will be a surprise to some that Clark accepts, rightly, the central element of Michael Fried's analysis, namely that Pollock's achievement turns on freeing the line 'at last from the job of describing contours and bounding shapes'; and that in virtue of this freeing of the line, the pictorial field tilts away from the tactile to become almost wholly 'optical'.<sup>6</sup> The rightness of this claim does entail the exclusions (of painterly materialism) that Fried assumed. But the rub here in which I am interested is Clark's contention, as part of a broader analysis of the role of sex and gender in Pollock (355–63), that the transformation of line, the undoing of it as border or boundary or limit, maybe the central plank of Pollock's abstractness, 'was rooted in a previous (maybe continuing) dream of gender writing itself to death' (362). You cannot undo the line without undoing gender division – a particularly male fantasy of incorporation. Hence, what is adumbrated by Cézanne's libidinous, unconscious transfiguration of the body is Pollock's disembodied line. So the significance of Cézanne is his adumbration of modernism sinking into the writing of the unconscious? Something is half done here.

13. The interpretive claims concerning Picasso are the most compelling in *Farewell* and the most forced, a place where both Clark's insight is indisputable and yet what he takes himself to have shown troubling, forced. Crudely, Clark's claim is, negatively, that the cubism of 1911–12 is not the discovery of a new language of representation, and hence a new quasi-scientific analytic which would be painting's own, the object-world offering itself 'in the form of juxtaposition, not silhouette', and hence admitting fully to the picture being flat (205). Now what Picasso suffers, at Cadaques, is the 'disenchantment of painting – the revealing of more and more, and deeper and deeper, structures of depiction as purely contingent, nothing but devices' and emerging out of this a new project, painting continuing by 'counterfeiting necessity' (220). This is the moment of hyper-conventionalism that is the twin of Cézanne's positivism and scientism for Clark. The detailed description of the works is telling; but their framing, the extremism of the discovery of

the true language of painting, on the one hand, collapsing into a counterfeiting of necessity, on the other, seems wildly forced since neither account captures what *in fact* appears to be the achievement of these paintings. Which is to say that the extremism of the two possibilities floats free of whatever force or achievement we might now find in the paintings themselves. What does either 'true language of painting' or 'counterfeiting necessity' have to do with those works as experienced? Rather than explaining the works, the account makes their aesthetic achievement unintelligible. To put it another way: did anyone – outside the classroom – ever suppose that the intrinsic demand of a cubist painting was its epistemological uncovering of deceit, its new representational integrity, as opposed to the continuing acknowledgement that commanding visual attention is not dependent on representational success, but on autonomous/just-paint-on-canvas rendering? And whilst this latter raises questions, indeed all the questions about how paintings compel (to which cubism in 1911–12 offers a wonderfully subtle and complex answer which draws heavily on foregrounding flatness and devices), those are questions that hug the shore of visual comprehension, of the actual cognitive achievement of these paintings. If Clark is not destroying our illusion about the language of cubism, then is it being rendered past in the way he intends, or does its pastness remain of the familiar kind, namely another necessary failure? The notion of necessary failure is me, not Clark. And I will return to it momentarily.

### **Representation, or the return of the repressed**

14. There will be other occasions for weighing and evaluating the detail of Clark's history. For the purposes to hand we need to cut to the chase: his presumption of a single, pervasive underlying fault in modernism, one that comes to a head and is evacuated with abstract expressionism. Clark contends that modernism 'had two great wishes. It wanted its audience to be led toward a recognition of the social reality of the sign (away from the comforts of narrative and illusionism, was the claim); but equally it dreamed of turning the sign back to a bedrock of World/Nature/Sensation/Subjectivity which the to and fro of capitalism had all but destroyed' (9–10). Let's say that these two wishes are equivalent to the claim that, on the one hand there is no surpassing of conventionality, of what 'we' (however this magical 'we' is figured) think and believe in the light of our needs and history, and hence that there is no surpassing of the wholly fragmentary and exemplary character of social rationality. And,

on the other hand, in opposition to the denaturing and disembodied effects of capital, that all social rationality would be that of mortal, embodied selves, forever bidding farewell to a nature from which no final farewell is possible. It is difficult to state this second claim perspicuously (which is why it keeps shifting in the course of modernist practice, taking wild and exorbitant forms – all modernism’s sensationism and positivism), although Hegel’s version of it in his account of Greek tragedy seems most promising, viz. we are in the position of continually rehearsing the loss of nature as ground – what is figured in the images of matricide, patricide and incest – as the condition for becoming political beings; that rehearsal of the loss of nature *is* our continuing relation to it.<sup>7</sup> The continuing loss of nature as ground has a nice fit with modernism’s progress, its desperation. This is what I think the notion of ‘contingency’ comes to.<sup>8</sup> It is very different in kind from the extremes of modernism – ‘crude voluntarism and an equally crude positivity (in the nature of materials and so on)’ – and the more deracinating features of contingency upon which Clark focuses: ‘the turning from past to future, the acceptance of risk, the omnipresence of change, the malleability of time and space ... an absolute, quantitative increase in uncontrolled and unpredictable events’ (10). Clark contends that modernism failed because it ‘lacked the basis, social and epistemological, on which its two wishes might be reconciled’. I would prefer to say that modernism lacked the social basis not for reconciling its two halves (that is just what it does do, at its best), but for letting those reconciliations, at least the kind of reconciliations available (namely, unreal ones), possess the kind of content that would enable them to be socially efficacious. Lack of perspicuous affirmative social content is the price modernism pays for its continuing power of reconciliation. Hence, I dispute Clark’s epistemological claim. The last thing we need is a new epistemology; but that is just what Clark surreptitiously does want, and what he thinks is implied by the commitment to socialism.

15. Although Clark at one point describes himself as a ‘modernist cynic’ (397), he is not. Indeed, against the flow of his rhetoric, despite the almost hallucinatory affect of his voice throughout *Farewell* – a voice whose judgement, often stunning in its acuteness, and historical and cultural knowingness can be overwhelming and irresistible (hence a voice that is, in all its exemplary contingency, the deepest source holding the fabric of his book together) – his is not the voice of a modernist, that is, the voice of someone who accepts that the two halves of the modernist project are

reconcilable without modification, and hence accepts what might be called, to be overly literal for a moment, fragmented material rationality. On the contrary, Clark thinks that some as yet unstated socialism would provide the *representational* resources necessary to provide collective focus and purpose (11), and it is only through those representational resources that the two sides of modernism, as he conceives them, could be reconciled. In putting the matter this way, it becomes evident that what Clark resists about modernism is its embrace of the fragmentary and the contingent, hence the idea of a local rationality. Because Clark thinks socialism and some form of totalizing representation go together, and that going together is incompatible with the fragmentary, his critique of modernism is a kind of overkill: the baby (fragmentary material rationality) and the bathwater (abstraction as modernist negativity, modernism’s belonging to *capitalist* modernity) get thrown out together.

16. All this, I think, becomes clear in Clark’s concluding remarks on Pollock. The brunt of his argument seems at one level compelling, namely that since 1850 ‘no work of real concentration was possible without it being fired – superintended – by ... some form of intransigence or difficulty in the object produced, some action against the codes and procedures by which the world was lent its usual likeness’ (364), hence some way of negating, resisting and exceeding our normal representational understanding of the world. Now Clark rightly urges that this work of abstraction/negation is not self-sufficient, not an element in a process whose telos would be the uncovering of the essence of painting in flatness and the delimitation of flatness, for example (although hardly merely for example!). On the contrary, Clark urges,

a work of art will only strike the receiver as difficult ... if it succeeds in showing (or intimating) what its work against likeness is for or about: on what other basis in shared experience it might be seen to rest, how it could alter our attitudes to objects and processes we recognize as held in common: in a word, what the meaning of abstraction is, as applied to these materials (this ‘world’), at this particular moment. (364)

Stated so benignly, one can find this thesis impossible to resist. Must not the movement of abstraction be the experience of the sensuous particularity of things in their unavailability to us; hence, as I have been wont to state it, a concrete material experience of the absence of such experience? Of course, the concreteness of the experience is illusory, just art, but that is the contradictory appeal of modernist art: when

sensuous material meaning compellingly or authentically appears it does so *only* as art – which casts an intolerable shadow over art and world. From this standpoint all the tensions in Clark’s account flow: he too is compelled by modernist works, but wants to displace that compulsion (explain it away?) by showing that it is either fully consonant with our representational commitments (the significance of Pissaro and Malevich), or utterly empty, pure pretence (the case of Picasso). At no point does he allow that the power of compulsion, our assent to it, derives from the placement, the peculiarity, the puzzling fact of *art* itself in the modern world – modernist art figuring, each time again, our continuing commitment to the materiality of the sign. Clark cannot allow that at a certain moment the achievement of visual authority, of a concrete sensuous particular being demanding and having a claim, is itself a critical achievement, a defeat of scepticism, conventionalism, nihilism, and the patent forces ruining the perceived world. This does make the achievement of some modernist works, the more abstract ones, second order, ‘general’, indeed abstract, of the kind ‘here again is material meaning’, and hence, indeed, lacking thick social content. But this is to say one needs some more general account of ‘art’ in order to tap the significance of modernism; and there is no ‘aesthetic theory’ in Clark; so his work of narration, despite the fineness of the aesthetic judgements subtending each moment of it, is nonetheless ‘without aesthetics’.

17. Some framing is in order before turning to Clark’s final indictment of Pollock, the ‘contradiction’ in Pollock that explains why abstraction stopped, why the paintings, and modernism, come to nothing, ended. To make the whole story finally turn on the uncovering of a contradiction is, at least for me, brave and right, even if I disagree. The overt frame for the chapter is the least convincing: the Cecil Beaton fashion photographs, each model in front of a different Pollock, from the March 1951 issue of *Vogue*; and what goes along with that easy assimilation of Pollock, the bad dream, the nightmare of modernism – that it either falsely celebrated what was, in fact, a feature of capitalist rationalization, or, in its exploration of an other to bourgeois experience, it did no more than prepare the way for the further expansion of capital (306). Obviously the second bit of the nightmare is one which thinks about how Beaton and Pollock are brought together; and how the Beaton photographs represent the sad tail-end of the public use of modernist art that began with David’s *Death of Marat* being marched through the streets of Paris, the painting and the

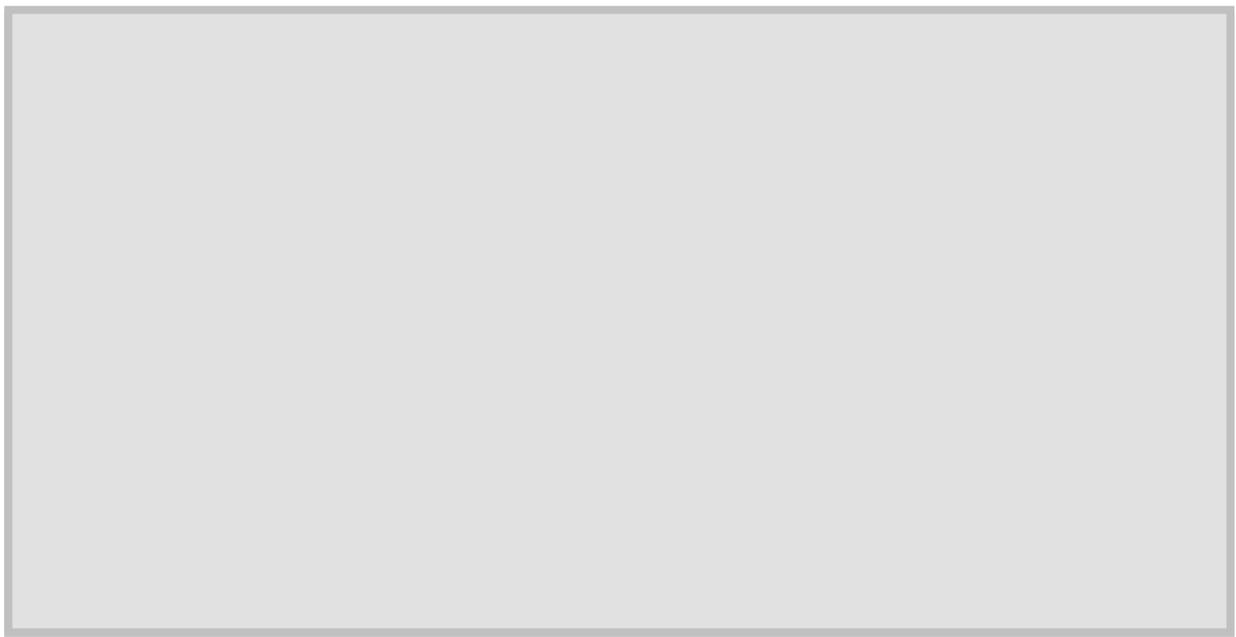
event a marker for the entry of ‘the people’ on to the stage of power which Clark believes is the ‘deepest cause of modernism’ (46). Clark’s history charts how modernism, in the very midst of its continuing path of negation, inhabited ever narrower, less political, less collective, less resisting cultural spaces in which the final step, after Pollock being Beaton, is Hans Hofmann’s painting fitting so neatly on Marcia Weisman’s sitting-room wall – indicating, it is claimed, a profound community of interest between artist and client: ‘He could not have painted their interiors if they were not his interior too’ (397). This discontinuous historical trajectory of the public use of modernism makes the nightmare/Beaton frame apt. But I do not find it fruit-bearing here because nothing Clark says convinces me that the ‘crass’ answers to this conundrum are not sufficient: that abstraction emerges as necessary to modernism when representations can no longer be the bearer of our conviction and connectedness with the world (344); that the same process that undermines representation as the bearer of conviction and connection with the world equally corrodes the achievement of abstract art; that there is an *aspect* of abstraction’s power that is or can be seen as ‘decorative’ (that the symbolic in the semiotic, rhythm, appears or can appear as indistinguishable from what is merely decorative), an aspect which Beaton could exploit (photographs of Pollocks eliminate the force of their monumentality);<sup>9</sup> that less extreme versions of abstraction had prepared the way for Pollock. None of which is to deny that the pairing of Pollock, his risky, daring, transgressive, gothic, difficult paintings, with fashion models in *Vogue* is chilling. I am conceding that the bad dream of modernism is true, too true. That is my point. The *Vogue* photographs are a worthy reminder, but not a frame, and not one that Clark can do much with.

18. The other frame for Clark’s analysis, which is the formal version of the nightmare/Beaton frame, is the question as to ‘why abstraction stops at its moment of triumph’ (343). Now I think there is an *obvious* answer to this question implied by Clark’s magnificent account, even if it is not the one that satisfies him. Abstraction ended at the moment of its triumph because the very means Pollock found necessary to make painting after Picasso and after his surreal (representational) forms were found insufficient. All the de-skilling, the negations, the magnifying and shrinking of the canvas, all the refusals that make *Number 1, 1948* possible equally *exhaust* painting’s resources (everything that could be negated and transformed was), and any further step would not be or be a continuation of easel painting, but

its displacement and transformation – which Pollock himself half believed and wanted.<sup>10</sup> The detail of Clark's account, his fineness in showing just what was involved in making those paintings – of what Pollock does to line and colour, to handling, to size – makes the exhaustion story irresistible. I would underline two features in particular. (i) Pollock's production of a molecular anatomy of paint stuff: in the line family there are threads, ropes, skeins, and webs; there are dots, spots, points; fuller areas can be splodges, pools, puddles, stains; together with the multiplication of these by the method of application – drip, pour, splash, throw, and so on. (ii) The notion that largeness involved in the very idea of all-overness 'is made out of an unregenerate, unsublated smallness'.<sup>11</sup> To think these two features of Pollock together is, by itself, to begin thinking of easel painting being brought to its limit and so end. But it is not Clark's story (even if all its elements are presented by him). With it we would not be able to put Pollock or modernism behind us. As the quotation in §16 (above) anticipates, the heft of Clark's account depends on foregrounding the world departed from; but this is to say that it is not exhaustion which is the focal issue for Clark, but the distance from representation, the limits of anti-representation. Hence it is inevitable that Clark should come to conclude with an analysis of the representational works that Pollock continued to produce, including the magnificent and overly commented upon *Out of the Web: Number 7, 1949*. The matter needs delicate handling since, while I want to acknowledge that there is a deep issue of representation in modern-

ism, representation is not the problem of modernism. Hence, Clark's treatment of representation as the return of the repressed misfires.

19. The focus of Clark's argument is Pollock's *The Wooden Horse*, from 1948; or better, Clark uses this work in order to allegorize the poles of Pollock's endeavour. This is perhaps a strange work on which to basis an indictment of modernism as a whole – for that is essentially what Clark is about here. However, for the sake of argument, let me concede that the interplay of 'abstract' and 'figurative' in this painting/collage is in some sense exemplary, allegorical, for their interplay generally in Pollock, hence part of the trajectory of his painting even when nothing figurative is present. Clark initially presents the painting/collage in terms of a personified agon in which first the wooden horse's head, as the voice of representation, and then the oil and duco, as the voice of abstraction, speak. After the horse's head affirms that likeness is both easy and unavoidable, avoiding it just bravura, the oil and duco reply: 'aimlessness is the heart of matter. Painting now stands or falls exactly by its ability to show what gets in the way of likeness.... These thrown lines, this wretched meandering – the scratches of blue, red, and yellow that (almost) fill them out and give them body – they are ways of circling *around* likeness, looking for likeness is those movements where you would least expect it' (354–5). That is very odd, the horse's head arguing with the oil and duco. But, of course, it opens on to the thought that there are *sides* here in conflict, an 'agon' (355); maybe even an irresolvable contradiction.



Jackson Pollock, *The Wooden Horse: Number 10A*, 1948, oil, enamel, and wood on brown cotton canvas mounted on board, 90.1cm x 190.5cm (Moderna Museet, Stockholm)

20. Clark's indictment occurs in two stages. Here is stage one: 'What is hardest to take about *The Wooden Horse* ... is that the work against resemblance is still going on, and looks like it will go on forever' (364; emphasis mine). That is the indictment, after which follows the sober representational reminder:

Nothing will finally put paid to making and matching. The banal simulacrum of horse will always win. A painter can seize on infantile certainty about reference and parrot it to the point of disintegration. ... But the 'horse' is still there. Reference is imper- turbable. Abstraction is parasitic on likeness, however much the achievement in abstraction may depend on fighting that conclusion to the death. (364)

Now this claim depends on what I take to be a wilful inflating of the claim of painting, of Pollock's and modernism's claim, for the sake of disposing of that claim. I read *The Wooden Horse* in exactly the opposite direction: the wooden horse itself points to both the idea of pretend and deception, hence to the idea of painting being like a child's rocking horse, a simulacrum of the real thing; and with it the childhood investment in corporeal fantasy. Art, painting, then would be something like a rocking horse for grown-ups, which is to say a fantasized experience of somatic exhilaration in a world bereft of such. Hence, the exhilaration of painting is pretence; such painting may be thought mournful or melancholic, depending on the possibilities of somatic exhilaration outside art, but nothing in the painting/collage signals that the work against resemblance will go on forever. Is not the correct way to take the wooden horse's head as a dissonant moment of excess that in ruining the self-sufficient abstract whole (showing how much more 'real' even a pretend horse is) reminds us of what that whole, or those like it, are for the sake of and about? And hence, does not the horse's head in its dissonant excess, its whistle-blowing, circumscribe and thereby avoid the regressive investment that a blind attachment to the painting would install? Hence, is not the horse's head a moment of non-ironic reflexivity, precisely the avoidance of infantile posturing? Further, do not painting, the material act and the horse's head refer to one another: blasted and illusory fragments? Is it the work against representation that is going on forever, or the dialogue between representation and abstraction? And if the latter, how might we place or explain the forever? At the very least, then, the horse's head is deeply ambiguous, and this ambiguity is precisely what the painting wishes for itself and is unwilling to forfeit. Clark's indictment will not tolerate the ambiguity.

21. Stage two. There is a stage two because, I think, Clark is aware that somehow the indictment of *The Wooden Horse* overshoots. So he corrects himself and launches in again – against Pollock and modernism as a whole. I need to quote Clark at length here since this is his big claim:

What I want to say, finally, is that *Pollock's painting in its best period, from 1947 to 1950, is contradictory: it lives on its contradictions, thrives on them, and comes to nothing because of them. Its contradictions are the ones that any abstract painting will encounter as long as it is done within bourgeois society*, in a culture that cannot grasp – for all its wish to do so – the social reality of the sign. That is to say: on the one hand, abstract painting must set itself the task of cancelling nature, and ending painting's relation to the world of things. It will make a new order to experience: it will put its faith in the sign, in the medium: it will have painting be a kind of writing at last, and therefore write a script none of us has read before. But on the other hand, painting discovers that none of this is achievable with the means it has. Nature simply will not go away. It reasserts its right over the new handwriting, and writes a familiar script with it – in the script of *One-ness, Autumn Rhythm, Lavender Mist*. So that painting always reneges on its dream of anti-*phusis*, and comes back to the body – that thing of things, that figure of figures. It cuts the body out of the sign, out of the field of writing. (365; emphasis mine)

When Clark says the paintings come to nothing, he must mean they come to be backdrops in Cecil Beaton's photographs.

22. In order to answer this claim in full I would need to say something about Pollock's best paintings. But that is not necessary in order to catch what goes wrong here. Let's return to the instance of *The Wooden Horse* since it is the re-emergence of the figurative and representational there that fuels Clark's critique – although I could just as easily, and even better perhaps, made use of *Full Fathom Five*. I casually described *The Wooden Horse* as a painting/collage; I want to defend that slash. To say of *The Wooden Horse* that it is a painting/collage is to say that it means to equivocate between painting and collage: that painting is just, only, collage absent of the fragmentary things collages are made of – collage made of paint. And the modernist collage is the taking of the detritus of experience, the fragments of material reality that are broken, fragmented, because the thing has been devoured by capital, and creating from those bits and pieces a second-order life, call it a fragmentary script, that is a way of, not mourning them since their fragmentation

is intolerable, but of, let's say, *preserving them as fragments of a lost reality*, as if the canvas were an embalming fluid or a glass-windowed mausoleum.<sup>12</sup> Every abstract painting is, or so Pollock is insisting, a dissolved collage – the fragments dissolved into paint-stuff (which literally is what happens perceptually in *Full Fathom Five* with its inventory of button, matches, key, pennies, etc. physically embedded in the paint but dissolved, utterly, in the abstract perceptual swirl). And every collage is an abstract painting in the making since the fragmentation of the world to which the collage points will continue leaving fragments and even less than fragments, perhaps just 'stuff', like paint itself.<sup>13</sup> And both on this account are forms or modes of melancholia, melancholia become form, become art. *And this would make sense just in case our only access to material meaning, the materiality of the sign, were art, the art we call modernist.* In saying that what is preserved in art are always fragments or ruins of the representational world, I am agreeing with Clark that abstraction always refers back to the object. But we read that fact differently: for me the power of art to accomplish that work of preservation speaks to a defused potentiality that hibernates in aesthetic form. Aesthetic form is, finally, in modernist art, a stand-in for the social reality of the sign, a compensation for a lost social 'we' and hence an anticipation of another one. Aesthetic form is thus the social reality of the material sign in its displacement – its excision from the world and lapse into, alas, art. Hence, even an arbitrarily grounded practice is capable, through the efficacy of singular works, of sustaining moments of material meaningfulness. Hence, particular works, fragments, can be meaningful in opposition to the totality of which they are a part. The power of works to preserve is the power of the fragment. I am not suggesting that modernists have meant this; but it is what modernism comes to.

23. In contrast, Clark's argument rests on nothing more than an ambiguity in the notion of 'representation'. He construes the abstraction/figuration relation, which I have claimed is best conceived in terms of the relation between abstract painting and collage, as implicitly projecting a representational whole: call it socialist society and its narrative telling. This is bizarre and unearned – the whole edifice turning on an ambiguity in the concept of 'representation': as if one cannot say of a human body that it has been brutalized without summoning up a whole non-brutal social formation. For Clark the non-brutal social formation is the ultimate source of the intelligibility of there being whole human bodies; for me the lesson of modernism

is that matters are the other way around – our glimpse of a non-brutalized body occurs through the preservation of its broken parts in a work, which is in turn the source of intelligibility of there being non-brutalizing social practices. It comes to that.

24. It is not hard to figure Clark's response to me, namely that in neither mood nor ambition are Pollock's best works compatible with my notion of melancholic form. About the ambition, Clark contends that 'if Pollock had a dream of exceeding the normal terms of painting's reference – and I am sure he had – the fantasy was more of endlessness and transparency than of physical grounding' (332). Clark presses this idea with respect to *Number 1, 1948* and *Number 32, 1950* in which, as he powerfully describes what occurs, Pollock's ambition is to provide a Hegelian sublation of handling ('traces of making, demonstrations of the artist's touch'):

handling here seems not to be the sign of unity, whether the picture's or the picturemaker's. The marks in these paintings ... are not meant to be read as consistent trace of a making subject, but rather as a texture of interruptions, gaps, zigzags, a-rhythms and incorrectnesses: all of which signify a making, no doubt, but at the same time the absence of a singular maker – if by that we mean a central, continuous psyche persisting from start to finish. (331–2)

After this, Clark goes on to make his central point about abstract painting's ambition to be rid of resemblance, and thus to make the first painting, again. Four points in response to this. First, and most important, it is a demand of painting that it demonstrate an objectivity, a being something more than an individual willing, for which nature is a continuing model, whilst nonetheless acknowledging itself as something made. If you grant these are general demands on painting, then Pollock may have been brought to an extreme in order to accomplish them – that is, the repudiation of handling in its traditional guise and the opening up of the canvas to the full force of its material substratum as material – but *formally* he is doing no more nor less than what any modernist painter must do. Second, even if we concede to Clark (in his running critique of Rosalind Krauss) the idea that Pollock sought transparency, that he meant his paintings to be optical, to appeal to the eye against the tactility of previous modernist art (330), and so on, all this is a project of *painting*, hence, as Clark well knows, deeply immured with the colour and the materiality of the paint (331, 336–7). He can set off one aspect of Pollock (endlessness) against the other (materiality) only because he smug-

gles into the idea of materiality that of embodiment and thus resemblance. But why not say that in painting what materiality and embodiment come to is *sensuous particularity*, and that the embrace of sensuous particularity in abstraction from full embodiment is precisely the price that is paid for art being art and not world? Third, a tired point but one necessary in the light of how Clark operates his historical method, even if he is right about Pollock's ambition, it does not follow that he is right about the meaning of the paintings – what the paintings accomplish and what they were meant to accomplish are different things. In fact, Clark powerfully spells out the materialist/dissonant, Adornian aspect of Pollock (337), and argues for a dialectic of dissonance and totality in which the process of blocking connotation by multiplying it should nonetheless yield a dense totality (338–9). This, again, seems fine, which makes the trailing criticism seemed forced. Fourth, Clark would be right to complain that my description of what is accomplished is incompatible with the actual ambition of the big canvases, their monumentality, their wild hubris. But nothing I have said is meant to deny that overambition, literally attempting the impossible, cannot be a *necessary condition* for art to accomplish what it does. The whole point about what I think of as the a priori deadness of art is that a successful work is impossible – it cannot really accomplish a reconciliation of matter and sign, universal and particular – just because it is art, and so any modernist artist must attempt to provide utterly self-contained or autonomous forms of meaningfulness from within the terms, paint on canvas, afforded. And this will fail because objects imply worldly practice, and just that is the one thing that capitalist culture will not permit its art to be.

25. So, what goes wrong in Clark's big critique is what went wrong in its anticipation: a transforming of ambiguity, contingency and aporia into contradiction. Art can only accomplish its task of affirmative melancholy by contriving something like a putative new set of conventions, conventions made possible by the fact of art itself. These conventions will indeed collapse since the autonomy of art is premised on nothing but its excision from everyday, intersubjective, social utilitarian practice, on the one hand, and its resting on what is *in the last instance* a wholly arbitrary conventional frame (easel painting itself as the stand-in for the material aspect of the social sign), on the other. But again what is so outlandishly and intolerably exiled there, in painting, is nothing other than the very two elements that Clark claims are in contradiction: the sociality and materiality of the sign. I am not

denying that in modernism, sometimes, the extremes of sociality (the arbitrariness of the sign) and materiality (the scrawl of the unconscious) get asserted. And I am certainly not denying that the sociality and materiality of the sign routinely and necessarily fall apart. This is just what modernist works lament when they achieve that mood. But those episodes, I am suggesting, are a consequence of modernism, as the fundamental effort to establish the materiality of the social sign, being under siege; of its attempt to secure the materiality of the social sign against the grain of the dominant practices surrounding. So I am committed to thought that a different history of modernism would show that each of its moments of achievement is one in which there is an uprising of meaning from materiality (or a sinking of meaning back into its material conditions of possibility), where the very fact of the uprising (or sinking), its achievement, is what solders sign to the social. (Which, again, makes the whole enterprise more cognitive than is standard; each moment presents and defeats a particular kind of sceptical challenge. Modernist negativity is then a use of scepticism to defeat scepticism.) The further recuperation of that moment will, inevitably, recover more sociality (in the Bakhtin sense in which the material for sense-making is 'already bespoken') in the uprising moment than it appeared to have at the moment of emergence (even if the moment of emergence is thought as only logically prior to the moment of reception). Is what happens in Clark, then, a matter of his attempt to push the moment of recuperation back into the moment of uprising? And since that is doable, how can I resist his knowingness? But is not this knowingness one which, finally, defeats art as such? This is why I used the word 'vengeful' in §1.

26. I said at the outset that I agreed with Clark that modernism fails, and I am claiming that modernism's failure, its a priori deadness, is intrinsic to it. It is what is bizarrely most alive about it. (So, in a sense, we agree that modernist art 'lives on its contradictions', i.e. the impossibility of it doing the work of reconciliation here and now.) But it fails like this, being only a public mausoleum, because of the lack of an adequate social basis, not as a consequence of its epistemological failure. I can now make this claim a little more precise: modernist art provides us with all the evidence we possess that the sociality and materiality of the sign are reconcilable; but that form of reconciliation would be *both representational and fragmentary*. Socialism, the one that failed and deserved to, was premised on a more totalizing representational account of the world as its condition for providing collective focus and

purpose.<sup>14</sup> Like Clark, I am willing to bet that human lives require focus and purpose; unlike Clark I do not think socialism in its traditional guise can provide those without running aground in all the horrific ways it did in the last century. What I find deeply puzzling about Clark is that his critique of modernism leaves him without resources for resurrecting socialism. This is the ambiguity in the title of the book: the farewell may be not only to modernism and bad, old socialism, but to socialism itself; although, again, it is only on the ground of an absent socialism – perhaps now a forever absent socialism? – that he can construct his narration at all. So socialism becomes a Kantian regulative idea. Perhaps Clark is indeed more cynical than I am imagining. Or romantic, since for him the critique of modernism points to an absent epistemology, one that would reconcile the two halves of modernism – the sociality of the sign and the materiality of the body – in a ‘whole’. However delicate and indirect his approach, if I am reading him aright this does sound awfully like the romantic utopianism of the early Marx. It is not too wild, I think, to see the modernist cynic and the utopian romantic Marxist as two sides of the same coin: fantastical hopefulness and cynical despair locked into their familiar two-step. Be that as it may, to await the revolution whilst awaiting a saving epistemology seems wrong-headed. Surely, it is modernist practice itself that projects, if anything does, the form of a collective practice adequate to a wholly secular world. Only with the emergence of such a practice, which is to say only through the practical continuation of modernism into everyday life, could modernist art’s melancholy be mourned.

## Notes

*This is an expanded version of a talk given at the Radical Philosophy conference in May 2000. My thanks to Peter Osborne for pressing on me the proximity of my position to Clark’s. Reflection on that has shaped my rewriting.*

1. The Pollock chapter, for example, is carved into roughly one- or two-pages sections, some with an overweening metaphorical title: ‘Vortex’, ‘Moby-Dick’, ‘The Magic Mirror’, ‘Sleeping Effort’, etc.; some with titles that are the name of the work being discussed in the section. And we are offered three endings to the chapter, or Clark finds himself forced into ending and then again and again. The book as a whole is something of a Pollock.
2. Hofmann left a goodly number of works to Clark’s home university, the University of California, Berkeley. So there is an intimacy involved in Clark’s positioning of Hofmann.
3. Methodologically, Clark is taking his own originally explanatory model of the social history of art and giving

it a suitable therapeutic twist.

4. I have yet to grasp exactly how Clark intends his account of El Lissitzky to bear on our evaluation of Malevich, which is to say I am missing that chapter’s hook. For an extended commentary on the essay that has become the final chapter of *Farewell*, see my ‘The Death of Sensuous Particulars: Adorno and Abstract Expressionism,’ *Radical Philosophy* 76, March-April 1996, pp. 7–16.
5. Clark makes one quick stab at inclusive significance: ‘Flatness in general in Cézanne had always been at root a metaphor for materiality – for the painter’s conviction that in a world made up of matter the being-in-the-eye of an object is also its being-out-there-at-a-distance, known to us only by acquaintance. This is the truth to which the Philadelphia picture naively returns’ (159). This won’t be helpful since if pushed too far it would make the whole of Cézanne fantastic and incomprehensible – as art.
6. Michael Fried, *Three American Painters: Noland, Olitski, Stella* (1965), now reprinted in Fried’s *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998, p. 224. On p. 227 Fried provides some of the terms that come to fruition in Clark when he states that the problem faced by Pollock in *The Wooden Horse* and company seems to have been ‘how to achieve figuration within the context of a style that entailed the denial of figuration, or ... with the problem of how to restore to line some measure of its traditional figurative capability, within the context of a style that entailed the renunciation of that capability.’
7. Gregg Horowitz has convinced me that this Hegelian thesis is what Freud’s doctrine comes to, and holds up better than competitors as a general account of our relation to nature. Put it this way: in the light of our secularity, we cannot forgo a fundamental acknowledgement of our belonging to the material/natural world; in the light of our conventionality, that belonging has no positive normative content. But we cannot acknowledge our naturalness without acknowledging that naturalness is unnatural, that we are displaced from the natural world of which we are nonetheless apart. Acknowledging our *displacement* from nature thus becomes our mode of acknowledging how it is we are placed in it. This last sentence adumbrates what I think is the fundamental gesture of modernism.
8. In my *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, New York, forthcoming), chapter 5, I argue that idealism, naturalism and particularism represent three irreducible categorial orientations which are jointly constitutive of modernity. That Clark sees the first two so powerfully and does not appear to have space for the third is striking since it is there, one might suppose, that modernist painting belongs. I guess that is the gravamen of this essay.
9. No one has better grasped the role of monumentality in Pollock than Clark: ‘Pollock’s Smallness’, in Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel, eds, *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999, pp. 15–31.
10. More important than what Pollock anticipated is the fact of what happens to painting after him and abstract expressionism. I think of early Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, Jules Olitski, to mention Michael Fried’s post-Pollock pantheon, as revealing just how exhausted painting had become, and hence how the up-rising of an art that turns against easel painting was both

necessary, inevitable and regressive at once. Again, the exhaustion story is one in which there is a drying up of the force of negation. I have elaborated what I call the paradox of modernism, why a dialectical progress should entail a path of exhaustion, which is the expanded version of Clark's question, in my 'Readymades, Monochromes, Etc.: Nominalism and the Paradox of Modernism', forthcoming.

11. Clark, 'Pollock's Smallness', p. 23. I think this essay demonstrates the exhaustion thesis superbly. I even think that without Clark's historicism in this essay, we could not think this logic of smallness and cosmic largeness, the atomic and the cosmic: the time's awareness of atomic fusion and fission, 'of the small and large as

instantly convertible, as terrible immediate transforms of each other' (p. 29).

12. This idea is pursued in my 'Readymades, Monochromes, Etc.'
13. In between the two extremes might be the skins of congealed paint from open paint cans used in *Autumn Rhythm*. Are the skins paint or fragments of reality?
14. My only hesitancy in ascribing this view to Clark is the degree to which one might find Pissaro the hero of this book, and so think that if it contains an express politics it is one that might give anarchist socialism a second hearing (9). Or is this different from the position I am ascribing to him? I would hope, at any rate, that my response here not be read as a 'prearranged sneer' (9).