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Figure 1, Philip Guston, Unused Preparatory Drawing for In Memory of my Feelings, 1967, 35.6 x 27.8 cm, Ink on Acetate, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Strange Fruit
Philip Guston’s Absurd and the Sisyphean Affirmation in the Battle for Existentialism

By

J.B Blacklock

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth in partial fulfilment for the degree of

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At no time during the registration for the degree of Research Masters has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment.

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Abstract

Philip Guston’s Absurd and the Sisyphean Affirmation of the Battle for Existentialism — By Jason Blacklock

This dissertation offers an Existentialist interpretation of the life and work of Philip Guston. Discourse regarding avant-garde New York School artists and their knowledge and manipulation of Existentialism has an illustrious rollcall. Dore Ashton and Harold Rosenberg, amongst others have added their powers of exegesis to contemporary work by Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Willem de Kooning. Amongst this canon of America’s great twentieth century Abstract-Expressionists Philip Guston’s work is often noted, but rarely aligned fully with Existentialist and particularly Absurdist values. I propose that Absurdism can be linked to Guston’s work in three ways. First, by reviewing his biography I suggest that he was exposed to fundamental traumas early on. Second, close visual analysis of his paintings will be used here to identify Absurdist concerns. In these sections I am adopting the Absurdist terminology in order to describe and interpret his visual output. Third, I will make also some tentative links between the paintings and his actual knowledge of philosophy. This will be underpinned by Guston’s readings and associations throughout his social and political life. His involvement with Muralism and the WPA during the Great Depression, and connection to Modern Man discourse following the Second World War. This covers Guston’s entanglement with Primitive and Aesthetic forces, in the Nietzschean sense as a guiding factor in Guston works; these forces are particularly manifest in Guston’s New York School and abstract period and culminate in his return to figurative works. The divergence between the two theories posited by Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, and their interpretation by New York School artists is key. Camus’ liberal cultural leftism i.e. rebellion in the face of a stony-faced establishment, and Sartre direct action in communication with society at large pushing for Marxist revolution, will be shown to converge in Guston’s later figurative works. This dissertation seeks through three chapters to quantify Guston’s position as his period’s Sisyphus. Further, it posits that the antithetical sense in which Guston operated was informed by his reading and experiences both from childhood and throughout his adult life. Guston’s empiric experience and understanding of Existentialist doctrine will be examined. His reading of a multitude of literary texts from Franz Kafka to Pasternak, Valery, Mallarme, and of course Sartre and Camus as attested by his daughter Musa Mayer will be woven into Guston
narrative. This intermingles with Guston’s detachment and distance from society. And exacerbates his ability as watcher and maintenance of an Absurd distance from a world alienated from the artist. Dore Ashton and Robert Slifkin will be key to interpreting Guston’s development particularly his sense of process and arts position of finding a frozen moment in eternal evolution as expression of multiple struggles. This moment in three separate paradigms expresses the battle riven period of the early to mid-twentieth century as Guston attempts to express substance and find expression amid a world in turmoil. Chapter one will chart the beginnings of a uniquely gifted painter’s personal alienation, from Guston senior’s suicide to the Great Depression. Chapter two will explore Guston’s celebrated Abstract-Expressionist phase. And chapter three will circumnavigate Guston’s alienation from an ever more consumer driven marketplace, telling stories rebelling against dogma and writing messages in abstraction. This thesis will reveal Guston’s own bibliography from Gogol to Sartre and from Kafka to Samuel Beckett. Through Guston’s words and with my supporting bibliography a complex web will be weaved using chosen works which reveal an Absurdist rebel seeking painterly absolution.
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Dedicated to John Berger.

“If one thinks of appearances as a frontier, one might say that painters search for messages which cross the frontier”.
Introduction

“If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence. For nothing is self-sufficient, neither in us ourselves nor in things; and if our soul has trembled with happiness and sounded like a harp string just once, all eternity was needed to produce this one event—and in this single moment of affirmation all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified, and affirmed.”

This investigation will necessarily focus on Guston’s life and works and be interpreted through an Absurdist lens. Considering Guston’s development as a dialectician and his demonstrable affinity with alienation and feelings towards the Existential, some clarification is needed regarding terminology. This is particularly prescient at this early stage in qualifying the plethora of names and their influences. Whether considering Kierkegaard, Kafka, Camus, Sartre, or Nietzsche. It is also imperative that these influences amalgamate into definitions of Existentialism, and Absurdism throughout Guston’s panoply of works. The terms Existentialism, Absurdism and primitive and aesthetic vehicles found in the Nietzschean Paradox are explicit to Guston’s story from three unique perspectives. The journey from Existentialism’s purposelessness in an eternal process is made explicit in Sartre. If as Sartre contends “existence precedes essence” then Guston is pursuing agency against terrifying freedom. However, it follows that in pursuing agency Guston alongside his confreres is bereft facility eternally discarding historicist notions in the hope of finding affirmation in the void. Alternatively, Camus’ Absurdism is perhaps a ready and natural panacea for Guston, the pursuit of an affirmatory Sartrean void, while perpetually discarding notions or cultural connotations only serves to deliver nothingness, art devoid of all social facility. Guston’s detachment, and his affinity with the Absurd, in terms of his repudiation of the staid, and tacit acceptance of life as a tumultuous progressive process become affirmatory in rebellion. In Guston’s refiguration this conflict in rebellion is palpable; the alien’s choice to act antithetically to culture or circumstance. Guston, of course is still without facility like Rosenberg’s Hamlet; but acting grotesquely using notions and connotations historically and culturally to demonstrate society’s Absurdity. Guston will be shown to be acting as alien against capitulation to nothingness and an intolerable world. In Nietzschean terms these manoeuvres are enacted with positive and negative forces. The Nietzschean Paradox more than familiar to Guston and his New York School comrades has been roundly discussed by

Michael Leja in *Reframing Abstract-Expressionism*. The discussion is centred around Jackson Pollock, though Guston is also readily involved in “Modern Man Discourse” where the exegesis focuses around art produced between a post-war fascination with human control and uncontrol. These positive and negative factors focus art works using primitive forces and their aesthetic counter position as a vehicle to the void, further lending themselves as catalysts for Guston in achieving affirmation.

The discussion around “Modern Man Discourse” and Michael Leja’s study of this period is focused around a particular period following the Second World War. Further, Nietzsche’s Perspectivism easily lends credence to the dissolution of God and Existential purposelessness. Sequentially Sartre and Camus, in their opposing positions provide flesh to the bones of human agency, Sartre in terms of “Bad Faith” almost maps an authentic route through the minefield of external detritus. This presents a cult of the individual constantly battling against terrible freedoms which yearn for human capitulation. Camus perhaps answers this in *The Rebel* 1951 and 1942’s *The Myth of Sisyphus* where human agency is again mapped as a struggle against an inevitable fate, but which yields progress in rebellion. Guston’s intellectual development and literary evolution, were perhaps inchoate in Kafka as early as the 1930s, piqued by the likes of Burgoyne Diller and Lorser Feitalson. His tenure in Iowa and St Louis exacerbated this further, satiating Guston’s thirst for knowledge through exploring Panofsky and Gogol’s works. His associations with the New York School, and broader association from Feldman and poet Clark Coolidge illuminated the works of Camus, Sartre and Nietzsche delivering new theories into Guston’s crosshairs.

Kierkegaard and Kafka also lend credibility to this theory and a sense of individual agency against a purposeless corrupted backdrop. Perhaps they approach this from fundamentally differing angles, but the result is still a rebellious alienation in the face of perpetual nothingness. Kierkegaard speaks of primitive man against an unforgiving universe continuing to struggle against an intolerable world, and by so doing affecting a kind of universal affirmation. Equally Kafka philosophically speaks of books disturbing a human continuum of nothingness, achieved against a human bubble of bad faith. These elements are nothing if not Existential and further Absurd. Pointing to a realisation that progress and human agency is a gathering and navigating of facilities and contingencies in order to perpetuate progress. This in terms of Guston is a recurrent and demonstrable theme which throughout this essay will manifest in different stages of his struggle. Further, if there is one shining example of this Existential self and an Absurd character disengaged from a chaotic...
terrifying circumstance then its Hamlet. Harold Rosenberg’s use of Hamlet to exhibit the New York School and in this case Guston as action painters is key. An Existential character uninvolved in the play searching for authentic facility in a world which has revealed itself as alien, dogmatic and in decline. These philosophical positions will amalgamate within Guston and become manifest as an affinity with the Absurd. Whether using Nietzsche’s understanding of establishment control of conventions and historical narrative, or Camus and Sartre’s authenticity and rebellion in the face of the intolerable. Guston assimilates these agencies rebelling to search for the authentic and remaining as a Hamlet without real facility caught amid newly revealed chaos. In this Guston will appear to adopt the Kierkegaardian stance of the primitive opposing the world, while producing Kafkaesque disturbances in paint to shake the foundations of the staid and tired establishment.

Throughout this text a variety of terms will be used to underpin my argument, and as such will need clarification at this stage to act as a guide. Also, in choosing a somewhat biographical approach I have had to assimilate numerous critical views. Elements of Formalism in terms of reading individual paintings have been used, but also Psychoanalysis Social/ Marxist Art History and further elements including Semiotics. It is in this sense that I hope to reveal a character in Guston developing over a lifetime and attempting to create, in his work some note of progress perhaps in search of some authentic totality, only to realise this to be an eternal struggle a la Sisyphus. Before which a disclaimer, at no juncture in this thesis is the terminology designed to imply genius or mystical autonomy to Guston as an artist. Guston is one of several individuals concerned with Existentialism and or Absurdism, within Art Historical theories many now discredited. It is not my intention to claim Guston as some character above his peers, or to rediscover the author, only to offer a view through his well-documented literary nature, and to affix a uniqueness to his interpretation of the Existential or Absurd using these sources. Further, the readings offered are not ascribable to Guston as so-called genius, only as artist as conduit of experience and multiple factors present in any “heteroglot” approach. Firstly, some definitions, Existentialism is definable in Sartrean parlance as “existence before essence” though is defined more relevantly throughout the text using Sartre’s theory of “Bad Faith”. This manifested itself in Guston’s journey through a purposeless universe attempting to discover “authenticity” while avoiding “Bad Faith” i.e. external factors along the way. This then lends itself to the Absurd, in

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5 Ibid., 485-151
Camus’ sense the paradox of humanity’s need to succeed despite being pitted against the Existentialist’s purposeless universe.\(^6\) These concepts then neatly posit themselves into Nietzschean Affirmation, quoted above as a culmination of forces in the pursuit of, and resulting in some authentic and profound revelation or paradigm shift. This then in-turn lends itself as an example of Sisyphian struggle through Guston in attaining repeated affirmatory moments in his paintings, produced however unconsciously as a complex reaction to his surroundings. Guston’s journey will be defined by a pursuit of some collective factor grounded in humanist philosophy and informed by a symbiosis between his literary and artistic interpretations. Sisyphus, Camus’ allegory for the Absurd and model for rebellion against a purposeless existence naturally fits several of the other New York School adherents. However, this text seeks in part to prove that this interpretation, despite its apparent broadness exerts an arguably keener hold on the interpretation of Philip Guston’s works than his comrades, particularly when considering Guston’s transgression in the Marlborough Gallery images. Further, Sisyphian struggle and journey will be explored in another borrowed term the “Nietzschean Paradox\(^7\)”, this concept will be cited as a philosophical catalyst. Sisyphus or in this case Guston, wrought between positive and negative or Dionysian and Apollonian factors, revealed as a balance of external influences to be the smelting pot of progress to the summit.

Further, terminology which interleaves with this theory will lend foundations to a developing understanding of Guston’s motivations. Terms like “totality” will act as crossover terms to underpin affirmation. Within this there are Freudian elements also related to Mondrian, a painter for whom Guston speaks of both ambivalently but fascinatedly. In Dr Briony Fer’s book *On Abstract Art* analysis of “totality” as a pursuit for Mondrian is perceived as a Narcissism. And though no suggestion is being made that Guston is narcissistic there is ample evidence of his interest in Mondrian particularly when discussing Guston’s Abstract paintings. This journey, towards a diaphanous “totality\(^8\)”, however the artist pursues it, will interleave further with Guston’s struggle and the pursuit of affirmation. Also discussed is Dore Ashton’s claim of Guston’s interest and assimilation of the ideas of Chardin de Teilhard. More specifically Teilhard’s belief that humanity was involved in an eternal evolution, counterposed to Darwin’s conclusion to the contrary\(^9\). This grasp of process

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\(^6\) Ibid., 485-600  
will undergird Guston as having an affinity with constant rebellious flux and transience. Further, Guston’s documented averseness to the doctrinaire will reveal a figure charting a journey along a diachronic process attempting to achieve affirmatory synchronic moments, potentially revelatory.

In the final chapter these philosophical terms will narrow the thesis in its focus, parenthetically delivering the term \textit{Grotesque}\textsuperscript{10} and a discussion of Modernism in Guston’s journey. Further, this will explore and amplify Guston’s position as “Action Painter\textsuperscript{11}” reinforcing him as the Existential/Absurd messenger attempting to produce a deviant disruptive principle in an arguably stagnant art scene. Guston’s Marlborough Gallery paintings and beyond will be discussed with Guston taking the role of Hamlet, adjunct to the play having finally found facility to act. Revealed in this will be Guston as arguably the most literary and poetic of the New York School, or at the least the most engaged in terms of literature and philosophy. The concept of the \textit{Grotesque} is here defined with Mikhail Bakhtin’s book \textit{Rabelais and His World}; with Guston as destroyer ironically discarding contemporary Modernism as despoiled and futile. In terms of the socio-political atmosphere of the period and the paradigm shift to a new chaotic modernity, Guston’s experience of the political turmoil consuming America will be discussed\textsuperscript{12}. Furthermore, these events will manifest themselves in Guston’s work. Revealing the artist as having accepted modernity and in producing the Marlborough Gallery images, using his new reality to forge towards a fresh summit. Guston will appear to define himself through alienation and the Existential, joyously floating dogma, and sowing discord as a rebel using the system to continue towards affirmation, while his contemporaries continue in the void.

A primary example to be used to undergird Guston’s development both biographically and philosophically is \textit{A Critical Study of Philip Guston} by Dore Ashton\textsuperscript{13}. Ashton was Philip Guston’s only officially sanctioned biographer, and this updated version underlines Guston’s peculiarities and independent nature. Ashton is perhaps one of the first critics to read a progressive note into Guston return to figuration. Positing Guston’s output and their interpretation amidst the cultural milieu of a changing art scene. Further, exposing the conflicts experienced by Guston, and his contemporaries in depicting abstract art able to

\textsuperscript{10} Mikhail Bakhtin, \textit{Rabelais and His World} (New York: Indiana University Press, 1965), 152.
comment on the reality of the world around them. Throughout the text Ashton skilfully interleaves Guston’s progression both personally and politically, charting his relationships and aligning them with his development as a painter. Further, Ashton provides valuable philosophical examples citing Guston’s literary interests, which yield evidence of his affinity with alienation. The narrative and examples of Guston’s literary development correspond with an Existentialist and latterly Absurdist trajectory, marking out a character embarking on a developmental journey pursuing multiple levels of affirmation in the Nietzschean sense. These examples taken from different Guston-ion paradigms reveal an antithetical approach, both rebellious and detached, while at the same time willing to assimilate and absorb the socio-political wreckage he found himself amid. Also revealed in the Ashton work is Guston’s understanding of process and progression as an eternal summing through Sisyphean peaks and troughs. Guston consistently appears to be pursuing a summit, perhaps as Nietzschean affirmation, though antithetically and frequently willing to discard or destroy ideas and works in seeking some authentic panacea.14

Secondary to Dore Ashton’s investigation, but by no means in terms of its importance Robert Slifkin’s Out of Time: Philip Guston and the Refiguration of Postwar American Art will bolster the Existentialist/Absurdist argument. Slifkin focuses on thirty-three paintings from Guston’s often maligned 1970 Marlborough Gallery exhibition. Exploring the place of figuration in the post-war American art scene, Slifkin offers an in-depth counterposed discussion, citing numerous of Guston’s temporal and cultural influences. Pointing to myriad events, Slifkin offers a comprehensive exegesis of the literary, musical, and more broadly political zeitgeists of the period. Also, charting and examining history’s role in Guston’s development, both as an artist and as a catalyst for Guston’s progressive deviations, particularly focusing on Guston’s Marlborough Gallery exhibition. Further, Slifkin’s text manipulates a plethora of images to undergird his argument, aligning these with archival evidence and scholarly originality to expose Guston’s trajectory. Amid these fascinating explorations, and using the sixties cultural milieu as backdrop, Slifkin creates a conduit between temporality in art and that of the material world. The significance of Slifkin’s findings also expose Guston as distinct from both the period’s developments and the trajectory of contemporary Modernism.15 These deviations can be witnessed in images such as The light 1964, one in a series of paintings imbued with an ever darkening and brooding

palette where alienation seems immanent. This series of images will be read as a
disappearance from a tumultuous decade not only culturally but personally, as an increasingly
disgruntled Guston veers towards a paradigm shift. Further Existential and Absurd elements
are revealed in Guston’s final metamorphosis. This will appear in the guise of Slifkin’s
discussion of Lacan’s concept of slippage both in Guston’s individual figural images, and in
Guston’s metamorphosis itself. This slippage will be exposed as Guston’s understanding of
process, in which a Hamlet-esque character, in Harold Rosenberg’s terms without facility,
and perched at the periphery seeks to create a destructive deviation from an arguably
bankrupt cultural milieu. In this deviation Guston appears to discard contemporary
modernism’s asceticism to pursue a new target, one where conventions are used antithetically
to re-arrange the cultural narrative towards some hybrid affirmation.

Another imperative text in defining Guston’s position as perhaps one of the most
literary and poetic of painters is Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and
Conversations. Compiled and edited by poet and philosophical collaborator Clark Coolidge
and with a revealing introduction by Dore Ashton the book is a compilation of Guston’s
lectures, interviews, and conversations. It is important to note when approaching Guston’s
own words to remain sceptical. Guston was a gifted raconteur with an incisive grasp of irony
and a talent for mischief when confronted with any audience. However, the text is a litany of
examples revealing Guston’s grasp both of the Existential and Absurd, particularly when
discussing his literary and artistic heroes. Selected extracts reveal a painter in pursuance of
some affirmation or void, citing Kafka and Valery, Guston speaks of “Superconsciousness”
seeming to point to alienation as formative to art. These excerpts also display a deep affinity
with the temporal, within which struggle amid opposing forces is key. Further, from these
examples Guston’s understanding of developing beliefs regarding semiotic and contemporary
philosophical conventions in art are also present. These examples appear in conversation with
intellectual sparing partners such as Bill Berkson, Morton Feldman and particularly Harold
Rosenberg. Guston’s explanations through his literary influences of method and
philosophical approach to painting are also pregnant with knowledge. Whether citing Kafka,
Gogol, Beckett, Valery or Mallarme, Guston exposes himself as the Existentialist pursing

16 Ibid., 53
18 Clark Coolidge, Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations (London: University of California
some profound pause\textsuperscript{19}. A pause which in both the Kafkaesque example and the Kierkegaardian notion of the primitive seeks to act as alien against dogma. A similar notion of Guston as aspiring alien artist is also present in his discussions regarding painterly heroes. His well-documented love of Piero Della Francesca, including a short essay and lecture about renaissance art is counterposed by further conversations referring to de Chirico, Picasso, Manet and Piet Mondrian. This diverse collection yields compelling examples of Guston’s philosophical trajectory; Guston appears as himself the alien/messenger separate and desirous of an art of substance and freedom.

Michael Leja’s \textit{Reframing Abstract-Expressionism} will doubtlessly prove integral to demonstrating the socio-political influences guiding Guston and his comrades in their post-war heyday. Though Guston is mentioned rarely in Leja’s complex and compelling work, his framing of a culture in transition searching for a reimagined self adds grist to Guston’s Existential persona. The book underpins Guston’s journey in a broad cultural context, revealing transient but fundamental cultural developments which appear to have acted as catalysts to Guston’s philosophical purpose. Leja’s study concentrates more broadly on Pollock, Rothko, Newman and de Kooning, and as such attempts to chart their involvement in a developing cultural milieu. One where New York School adherents find themselves channelling a “primitive” and “aesthetic\textsuperscript{20}” unconscious which interleaves with contemporary academicians, philosophers, filmmakers, and journalists. Further, Leja’s work seeks to expose how these influences are woven amid Abstract-Expressionist works particularly when discussing the main protagonists. In terms of Guston the positive negative theme of modern man discourse and the conflict between control and uncontrol are key. This conflict fits neatly into the Nietzschean Paradox discussed in Dore Ashton’s revealing study \textit{The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning}.\textsuperscript{21} Excerpts from Leja’s work will reveal Guston as primary in these dialectical developments. Pursuing a mythical affirmative void amid sparring forces, used as catalysts to attain some utopian artistic peak; only to descend to a reified plateau to recuperate before returning renewed for another seismic battle.

Further, Leja’s approach is somewhat dependent on a psycho-analytical reading of Pollock, and how this impacted his fellow-travellers in-terms of contemporary beliefs. Pollock was particularly influenced by Jungian theory, though more than well acquainted

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 250-298
with Freud, in fact claiming that his images were the product of the unconscious. Leja’s claims regarding Pollock include the criticism of previous art historical, mostly Jungian readings of Pollock’s works. As perhaps Pollock’s claims himself were regarded too literally at this time. These discussions, and their relationship to my readings of Guston will somewhat interleave, and further take a unique view of Guston as an artist. Guston was indeed also influenced by Freudian and Jungian theory, however unlike Pollock had, as far as is evidenced never attended any psychotherapy sessions. Pollock of course has a well-documented history in psychotherapy which has undergirded many readings of Pollock’s work. Guston, like all New York School adherents produced work from a specific angle. And though a friend and contemporary of Pollock was approaching the void or totality in a much more literary and artistic sense. Part of my approach has been to present Guston from a socio-political position offering a biographical charting of his career. Contained within this is an attempt to posit Guston’s works developmentally. Further, any psychological readings are speculative though evidenced in Guston’s works and philosophy. What emerges is a highly literary painter, whose approach somewhat goes against the grain of Modernism’s stated aims of isolating and detaching itself, in its plasticity from external literary or historiographic influences.

Another integral source in undergirding my thesis, will be that of Professor Andrew Hemingway. At the forefront of this is Hemingway’s book *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956*, which will provide detailed analysis of the socio-political atmosphere in the American art scene both pre and post-war. Guston also appears as an active figure in this period and his associations with post-depression anti-fascist movements, and the Communist Party are briefly explored. *Artists on the Left* seeks to chart the rise and fall of the Communist Party’s influence on American art between 1926-1956. Further, the text provides details of how artists reacted to various Party policy decisions during this tumultuous period. The book also reveals how the Communist Party continued to exert influence on the American art scene, even after the revelation of the Nazi-Soviet pact. Furthermore, Hemingway impressively scrutinizes numerous progressive artist’s works and pinpoints their position and allegiances, revealing a surprising diversity of images produced under the aegis of an increasingly bureaucratic Communist Party. Also discussed is the role

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22 Ibid., 275-295
of the John Reed Clubs and their interaction with pre-war government departments. The influence of these and similar groups is reassessed particularly their collaboration with the New Deal oriented Federal Government. Also, the generous donation of a truly enlightening Andrew Hemingway review of Michael Leja’s *Reframing Abstract-Expressionism* has shed new light on post-war philosophical movements. *The Two Paths* is an imperative adjunct to this text, as Hemingway dissects Leja’s work critiquing his approach and assumptions regarding the connection between mass cultural movements and the New York School. One further (unpublished) Hemingway text has also come to light, a text more specifically focussing on Philip Guston biographically. *Philip Guston 1930-50: From Revolutionary Art to Mood Painting* charts Guston’s journey and reveals a multitude of connections and links using Guston’s works and associations. Hemingway’s contribution to the thesis will, alongside my other sources provide a fundamental foundation for my theory. Acting as part of a biographical narrative and aiding the charting of events which yield evidence for Existentialist and Absurdist readings of Guston’s images.

Now, one final point relating to my understanding of Guston’s development, and his stated aims in painting. This thesis is not predicated on Guston being posited as some individual genius far and away above his contemporaries. Further, Guston’s use of the Existential and Absurdist doctrines will be examined both as inadvertent and or unconscious. What can be claimed is that Guston through images and throughout his career is anything but doctrinaire in his approach. Both in Guston’s own words and in the accompanying literature an image is consistently produced of a rebellious Other. An Existential character with an analytical mind constantly expanding his reading, with attention to those authors deemed or connected to Existential, alienated or Absurd works. What is unclear is to what extent Guston is pursuing these summits, by overtly donning a facility which enables, as with his *confreres* an Existential reading. One thing will become clear, Guston’s reading and arguably literary nature correspond with the above philosophical movements and appear to emerge perhaps unconsciously at various stages of his life and career, but more specifically in his images.

It is with these authors that an Existentialist and Absurdism argument will be made, one that I will examine in Guston’s life and work. The three chapters of the dissertation follow chronological order. In each chapter I discuss personal traumas (biography), visual expression (paintings) and access to Absurdist conceptual frameworks (philosophical readings). I propose that these three phenomena may allow us to rethink Guston’s figure and

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25 Ibid., 113-121
his artistic practice as an embodiment of Absurdist tensions. Throughout the dissertation I will leave the question open to what extent did he assume consciously and intentionally this role; in Chapter One I focus on the beginnings of his career. Nestled in the bohemian foliage of Woodstock some 103 miles north of New York’s Museum of Modern Art lurk the remains of the original American subversive artists’ colony. Significantly, this former commune was a haunt if not residence for New York School adherents and acolytes. Emerging in the guise of Willem and Elaine de Kooning, John Cage and Morton Feldman, this nothing if not sleepy bolthole echoes with a long-gone but experimental history. Not the least of these luminaries, was one Philip Guston nee Goldstein perhaps the most pivotal, maligned and celebrated of those engaged in a search for the soul of art. In a frozen moment Guston’s wooden billet and enormous studio still perch in sepia, alive in myth, an enclave away from Capital. Perhaps a place where process was independent of the stasis of consumer fashions. Once occupied by Guston, Musa Mayer (Guston’s Daughter) and Musa McKim (Guston’s wife) these shadows of creation now lay dormant.

Having migrated first from Russia to Montreal Canada in search of tolerance Guston’s family would migrate to Los Angeles in search of an ever-elusive American dream. Prior to these developments and to Guston’s explorations in painting, life was intermittently piqued with tragedy. In 1923 a ten-year-old Guston would make a macabre discovery. In an adjoining wooden barn at the family home Guston would find his Father, dead. Having failed to secure subsistence and in the grip of a sombre and depressive disposition Guston’s Father had committed suicide. Guston found the body hanging from a beam. Guston’s brother would also pass following an horrific road traffic accident, Nat’s injuries would develop into gangrene leaving Guston isolated further. Reinforcing these traumas, the Ku Klux Klan stalked the sun-drenched Californian streets of L.A. Jewish Americans were fair game for the ignorant malevolent infestations of White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestants in defence of their delusion. These hooded figures would emerge in Guston’s work in ever more complex manifestations. A ferociously talented autodidact, Guston is Other, alienated, orbiting an Absurd, tumultuous world with an ever-developing analytical alien eye. In Night Studio Musa Mayer’s memoir of her late Father she quotes an unpublished autobiographical statement from a 1978 entry which perhaps resonates with incipient alienation.


“I have never been able to escape my family” “As a boy I would hide in the closet when the older brothers and sisters came with their families to Mama’s apartment for the Sunday afternoon dinner visit. I felt safe.”

Guston’s keen sense of detachment and separation from the traumas of a worsening depression era reality were manifest. Amid this maelstrom of Capitalism’s seeming demise, Guston absorbed literature as readily as he began to make indelible marks as an artist. Young exuberant, and perhaps not yet estranged but increasingly disparate from his family, Guston became involved with radical politics. In his own words, he became enshrined with a bad crowd. Regardless of his later reservations, Guston found himself exposed alongside Reuben Kadish to Marxist and progressive intellectuals. Amid a plethora of radicals, poets, writers, and fellow painters, Guston would read and absorb Existentialist and even Absurdist theories. From Nietzsche to Kierkegaard, but especially Franz Kafka, Guston would carve his own image in to being, spending a lifetime in an antithetical balance between the visceral and purely aesthetic. This divide Dore Ashton investigates in her book A Critical Study of Philip Guston is manifest throughout Guston’s career, exposing Guston’s need to converge disparate forces to affect some substantial pause in the process.

During the 1930s as Guston developed, and the economic crisis deepened, various anti-establishment progressive organisations emerged. Collectives of Socialists, Anarchists, Communists, and a nomad like diaspora of intellectuals sensed the possibilities of change in a topsy-turvy world hurtling towards conflict. A plethora of progressive workers organisations would pop-up from the IWW (International Workers of the World) to the overtly Marxist John Reed Clubs and the WPA (Works Progress Administration) of which Guston was indoctrinated. Alongside this, magazines such as the New Masses another overtly Marxist publication, would inspire and enable Guston and Kadish amongst other contemporaries to pursue a new more radical egalitarian trajectory. The inception of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt would however fleetingly, provide succour to these machinations under the progressive banner of the New Deal. The newly unionized artists would be government funded mural painters under a modern for progress not dissimilar to Mexican organisations made famous by Siqueiros, Rivera, and Orozco. Guston like so many would be seconded to mural commissions on public buildings and himself work with Rivera and his...

29 Mayer, Night Studio, 178.
contemporaries. The locus of renaissance art would remain central to Guston’s philosophical understanding of painting, manifesting itself in the guise of Piero della Francesca and Paolo Uccello

By 1941 and perhaps in preparation for a transitional period Guston accepted a post at Iowa State University. This sleepy Midwest city would provide Guston with ample opportunity for intellectual and personal development. Two other discoveries Guston made in this period, were his having exhausted the painterly style part Social Realism and part Surrealism, and secondly that teaching full-time prevented his development and fulfilling of his goals. Guston yearned for New York and despite being an enthusiastic and much-loved lecturer, the hiatus between 1941-1945 would see Guston perfect and abandon this award-winning mask. This gives me perhaps the first opportunity to choose and interpret transitional works beginning with *If This Be Not I!* Earlier examples, though extraordinarily accomplished productions will appear partially inchoate. Following Guston’s much documented personal depression and sojourn in Italy works such as *The Tormentors* will see the painter’s antithetical struggle morphing and amorphous.

Chapter two posits Guston among New York School contemporaries enthral to the possibilities of paint. Amid a multitude of sketches in search of abstraction in figuration Guston already hovers in some antithetical time-zone Existential to a disparate world. His literary readings taking in Sartre, Camus, and the ubiquitous Kafka, underpin this development. Suddenly gone are the theatrical *Porch II* the lean depressive era of Guston’s search had found a panacea in his Italian epiphany. Following works such as *The Tormentors* Guston’s flight into the Abstract-Expressionist void would begin. This void would be paramount and interpreted here as the transgressive journey catalysed by Guston positive/negative sense. The void is affirmation, a “Hegira to the void” becomes discovery both in control and uncontrol a summit in the pause in the process. And it is in the surrounding peripheral and somewhat transcendental paintings that his figuratively paradoxical images would emerge. Also, it is important to reiterate is the “Hegira to the void” is collectively, when discussing the New York School an initial emancipation from an intolerable society. Guston’s eventual rejection of this is perhaps the realisation that connotations are inevitable in affecting liberty.

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33 Ibid., 82
1950’s *Loft I* is palpably transitional despite being a sketch, this is a study of paramount importance and meaning, Guston is lurching into abstraction. All the familiar elements found in notorious and celebrated images such as *Gladiators* still appear extant. However, the Beckmann-esque shapes are disengaging into some hinterland the seer is trapped amid the desire to construct figuration and the primitive acceptance of the images apparently diaphanous nature.\(^{34}\) By examining images such as these, pinpointed around the beginning of Guston’s transition and later examining figuration’s re-emergence the antithesis should be illuminated. Comparing these images to Pollock and others and assessing Guston’s literary interests and relationships should interleave with Existential thought and Guston’s tendency towards Absurdist manipulations. In this integral period where Guston’s mask seems content with a sort of verism, an exploration of Guston’s nature through literature should counterpose more formalistic readings. Further, by focusing on the disappearance and re-emergence of these forms, though they perhaps never left Guston, a pattern will emerge in paintings such as *The Light* 1961-62, one amongst a series of variations which act to reveal the painter’s philosophical aims, and all of which appear to signal a return to figurative imagery.

In a palpably Sisyphean interpretation of “Nietzschean Affirmation” Guston recounts his own working processes in attempting to attain a “pause” or hubristic moment of “Creation.”\(^{35}\) Citing Piero della Francesca, and even in some regard Dutch de Stijl painter Piet Mondrian and further using examples from such luminaries as Edouard Manet, Guston speaks in Kafkaesque terms of the process. This paradoxical belief in the diachronic nature of process will emerge as a Sisyphean convention. Insofar as Guston’s attaining of this “pause”, despite the image being perpetually unfinished, and resulting from the struggle between purity and impurity, this attaining is doomed to be eternally repeated. This battle is present in Modernism through Manet, and Mondrian, and in the renaissance Piero della Francesca. Present in *If This Be Not I!* and equally overt in images such as *Attar* 1953, is the sense of an ongoing war between theatricality and the figure and images movement is tantalizing. Though approached differently and again amorphously in abstraction the seer’s desire for a conclusion where none is intended is palpable.\(^{36}\)

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 76


Tired perhaps of dogma and yearning to “tell stories again” Guston with newly fecund relationships such as that with poet Clark Coolidge would present semiotic abstractions in refiguration\(^\text{37}\). Though Guston’s radical politics had perhaps been somewhat tempered over the years his exasperation at American imperialism and persecution amid such a tumultuous decade cut deep. In images such as Book 1968 and even prior to this Haven 1967 profoundly saw both the seeds and results of this frustration become manifest. Perhaps not overtly political but veering towards a Topos mistook by untutored and high-brow critics, Guston had reclaimed art from abstraction, but more than that from the manipulation of the corporates. The Marlborough images sought to transcend dogma and finance, to expose the calumny of the market. The abstractions were now ironic, satirical often pointedly and disappointedly poking fun at this twentieth century system of patronage\(^\text{38}\). In these images during the last ten years of his life much can be read and re-read. Further, and perhaps more overtly than ever the convergent point between Guston’s antithetical philosophy was emerging with evermore incisive clarity. This Grotesque return to figuration would confound the critics, and perhaps lead to certain individuals misunderstanding Guston’s intentions, causing them to lambast Guston as a “Mandarin pretending to be a stumblebum\(^\text{39}\)”.

Despite the machinations of critics like Hilton Kramer, a character who displayed repeated scepticism on examining Guston’s works, Guston’s newly literal and perhaps literary imagery was riven with complex motifs behind multiple Tromp L’oeil. In his later Marlborough Gallery images Guston would repeatedly present messages concealing some ironic truth. Further, images such as Book and Hand 1969 were riven with semiotic notions which, like pop-art sat counterposed to Abstract-Expressionist philosophy. It is clear, that counter to accepted painterly fashion Guston is embedding literal messages in his new oeuvre. It will be necessary in the final chapter to understand how messages sequentially appear in numerous images and to understand both Guston’s aims, his final transgression and more pointedly the connection to Sisyphean struggle. Jacques Lacan notes in the above image and in relation to the metonymic structure and semiotic messages in the exhibition when viewed sequentially that “no signification can be sustained other than by reference to another signification\(^\text{40}\)”. In Book and Hand a pointing finger is directed towards a book, when viewed in isolation is perhaps confusing but when conjoined to the correct image or amassed with

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\(^\text{37}\) Ibid., 153-184  
\(^\text{38}\) Ibid., 153-184  
\(^\text{39}\) Slifkin, Out of Time, 32.  
other images within separate works in the sequence begins to appear linguistic as though Guston is communicating through paint. This will become significant in Lacan’s analysis semiotically of the need in language for “desire and repetition\(^{41}\)” when viewing the so-called slippage between the signified and referent. This is interpreted as the need for each symbol to continue to another. And is thus Sisyphean by nature; each of the Marlborough Gallery images when viewed sequentially exposes Guston’s struggle in the motif’s sequence and ultimately Nietzschean in affirmatory terms on understanding the message. It also contends a message within individual images which acts as a \textit{Grotesque} challenge in mid-twentieth century chaos\(^{42}\).

What will be considered in reading the images in philosophical terms is the presence of a metonymic chain within abstract works caught in an ethereal and amorphous mist. And in re-figurative terms this is achieved more literally in Guston’s orbiting of an increasingly cliched art world on a reductive path. Imperative is the interpretation of Camus’ liberal leftist rebellion in the Existentialist sense as Ann Gibson explains that Abstract-Expressionist works must “defy language\(^{43}\)” posit art and painting as disparate from language and thus be obscured from mass-culture perceived as morally bankrupt. Guston perhaps transcends this by allowing the seer to achieve this affirmation in the abstraction by depicting a figurative presence within a nebulous body. His return to figurative works is mystifying but becomes a convergence of the Camusian interpretation which sits antithetically to Sartre’s language of direct action i.e. messages for the masses. Guston desires communication with his audience on a more literal platform though the message is no less abstract and complex than previously. He perhaps inadvertently in his frustration at contemporary political turmoil achieves a middle ground of Nietzschean Affirmation. Using disparate forces in pursuit of truth and enlightenment, and further to achieve reflective communication from the perimeter. Further, in this is perhaps some converging line between art as communication and a purist’s protectionist substance.

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\(^{41}\) Ibid., 56


Chapter One - Alienation

Amid the hurly-burly of the 1920s and economic maelstrom of the 1930s there were seismic shifts in economic and political thinking. From piqued hope and optimism to degradation and despair the American art scene absorbed, evolved and contorted in a bitter eternal battle for the future. Between 1923 and the outbreak of the Second World War Philip Guston’s path was profoundly forged. His environment was one of extremes, 1920s America was a well of contradictions. Grinding inequalities and conflict were juxtaposed to halcyon days of money and debauchery, for all the apparent success poverty still reflected the cruelty of the system. In Guston’s then home of Los Angeles, California, racial tension raged beneath the glitzy veneer. Lynching’s were commonplace, their targets were anyone not sheltered amidst the White-Anglo-Saxon mostly protestant family. Jews, African Americans, Communists, Homosexuals, and any migrants or groups deemed undesirable were potential targets. The America emerging was developing into a land where freedom depended on status, money, and colour. Further, this land of the free was one where money reinforced privilege, and though one could always find opportunities, they were opportunities where class, race and status remained the determining factors fortifying extant divisions.

Seething beneath this milieu were a plethora of underground groups and subversive’s motivated to buck the system. Amongst these were writers, artist, and artisan’s, many aligned with the Communist Party and almost all progressives. Even before “Black Friday’s” stock market crash of 1929 these groups were collectivizing in an attempt to form some opposition to the ruling elites. Magazines such as New Masses and organizations like The John Reed Clubs produced media and protest material undergirded by Marxist philosophy. Further, these rapidly evolving movements, often militant were prompting painters to engage through Social

Figure. 2, Philip Guston, the Conspirators, 1930, 57.2 × 36.8 cm, Graphite Ink, Coloured Pencil and Crayon on Paper, The Witney Museum of American Art, New York.

Realist artworks. From Jack Levine, to Ben Shahn and the likes of Thomas Hart Benton, artists plotted to take the fight to the authorities, exposing injustices in their art. The Great Depression, far from disabling this movement further exposed the rot and inequalities in America and capitalism itself. Many of these individuals including Philip Guston nee Goldstein were consumed into burgeoning progressive movements, seeking to capitalize on political incompetence and forge a brave new Socialist world minus the elite’s abhorrent proclivities. The election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the subsequent development of the “New Deal” programs provided hope for many and work for Artists and Labourers alike. This period saw the emergence and development not only of Guston but also John Graham, Lorser Feitelson, Harold Rosenberg, Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, and Jackson Pollock himself. It is in this period where identities were won and lost and a new world was envisioned and fought for, and where hope sprung eternal searching for a better future.

Born on the 27th June 1913 in Montreal Canada, son of Russian Jewish émigré’s the family would move to Los Angeles in 1919. Guston was six, and his family seeking the promised land on the sticky streets of LA would initially struggle, perpetual struggle would be too much for Guston’s father. In 1923 Louis Goldstein’s depression and his shame at only being able to find work as a refuse collector or “Junkman” would collide; Guston’s Father would hang himself from the beam in an out-building on the family’s meagre property. Philip would cut down the lifeless body. Later in life a drunken Guston would relate the tale to a friend “can you imagine what it’s like? what it’s like to see one’s Father dead, a suicide he went on?” The family’s traumas were myriad even when things began financially to improve, Los Angeles was a hot-bed of Ku Klux Klan activity. Huge crowds would gather bake-sales would be held, a party atmosphere enacted as African-Americans, Jewish residents, and those in the LGBT community were tortured and killed for entertainment. Guston must have been aware of the possibility of harm, philosophical alienation through conditioning; the suggestion here is of an individual whom due to their precocity and innate nature becomes and exhibits this sense by emancipating themselves to some external sanctuary. It could be suggested that this struggle, especially when discussing Guston is

45 Ibid., 254
47 Mayer, Night Studio, 24.
48 Ibid., 14
49 Ibid., 12
nothing if not antithetical in Guston’s works even in this somewhat formative period his images seem to be caught between angels and demons. From the moment a precocious Philip Goldstein became conscious there was perhaps a yearning to draw and create. Perhaps his practising in the closet of his then Los Angeles home, isolated, safe and as usual avoiding his family taught him the sublime. Musa Mayer (Guston’s Daughter) speaks of Guston hiding from his siblings on their serial Sunday visits, hiding in his closet listening to his Mother’s anxious broken voice, “Where is Philip?” “Oh, he is away – with friends”. Guston it seems always preferred alienation? Or perhaps isolation? Perpetually seeking the Existential, initially from his family later from cruelty, political persecution, and poverty, then later still from the art world whose patronage he once relied upon. This craving for isolation was perhaps innate certainly given Guston’s talent and intelligence self-confessedly self-analytical and autodidactic, and with a craven and rebellious attitude, Guston would find safety in his antithetical nature, the isolation of the transgressive.

Years later in archetypal isolation in Guston’s Woodstock kitchen perched a renaissance image which like Guston’s analytical nature nomadically followed the artist into every kitchen he occupied. *The Flagellation of Christ* by Piero della Francesca was a constant presence at the dinner table, broiler on as Guston prepared another lavish meal. This image like so many of Guston’s favourite works by heroes such as Paolo Uccello and della Francesca contains a quality present in contemporary works by other favoured painters such as Piet Mondrian and Giorgio de Chirico. Philip Guston might describe this as the “pause” or in later life approaching his untimely end refer to hubris and artists as transgressors producing a moment of creation. The quality evoked in this image is one of transcendence, I might

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54 Coolidge, *Guston*, 250.
interpret this as sentience, the sense that those represented on the plane seem to wobble and perhaps have been captured in transit. Guston would doubtlessly disagree and point to a sense also present, he claimed in Eduard Manet’s work, as though the image were unfinished. Perhaps implying that Piero della Francesca has found his pause and that the painter and mathematician sensed temporality in the process when this pause was optimal, a moment where affirmation occurs in the eternal process. Further, it is perhaps in this Guston seize[s] clarity in alienation, a cult of the outsider forever working against complaisant dogmatism.

This pursuit of affirmation is perhaps an escape or narcissism, an early life as alien punctuated by tragedy and loss mollified by hopeful totality. So as if an alien migrant’s status and his Father’s suicide were not enough the death of his elder Brother Nat was perhaps a final significant step towards the void. The two siblings, always close were by their late teen’s typical American kids. Both handsome and talented, both outgoing and gregarious; in a freak road-traffic-accident Nat’s legs would be horrifically crushed. The agonizing injuries would develop into gangrene, and once more Guston would be robbed of foundations.

Aside from these traumas Guston’s talents were not unknown to his family. As a birthday present Guston’s Mother paid for him to attend Cleveland School of Cartooning hoping perhaps he might settle into what was after-all a solid job in 1920s America. But Guston’s thoughts were far from his love of Mutt and Jeff and Krazy Kat, Piero della Francesca primarily but also Uccello, Giotto and the Lorenzetti brothers led Guston towards higher ideals in fine art. After dutifully attending Cleveland Cartooning school for only a few months Guston found himself frustrated at the courses direction and dropped-out.

This transgressive behaviour would mark Guston as a high-school drop-out, always finding the curriculum’s laborious strictures and training restrictive and uncommitted to his more painterly passions. When Guston was just fourteen he attended Manual Arts High School, where having befriended the like-minded Jackson Pollock, Guston and his new comrade would find the course structure equally stifling. Guston and Pollock became firm conspirators against the tutors and bureaucratic systems unsuited to their precocity. However, even amid feelings of frustration Guston found a brave new world alongside Pollock and thrived under the influence of lecturer Frederick John de St. Vrain Schwankovsky.

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57 Ibid., 42-68
58 Mayer, Night Studio, 45-71.
59 Ibid., 45-71
60 Ibid., 45-71
61 Ashton, A Critical Study of Philip Guston, 12.
62 Ibid., 12
Schwankovsky revealed a world of European Modernist painting mostly untutored to either student. However, the sense of being external would persist, and given Guston’s nature in these formative years coupled with his wider reading these forces would have doubtlessly converged and spoken to such a strong yet remote character.

Guston’s final foray into formal education would be a hard-won scholarship to Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. Of course, Guston would find little evidence of the panacea he might have sought among the Otis Alumni or student body. Together with new friend Reuben Kadish the traditionalist values espoused at Otis would be even more suffocating. Both boys railed against the sloth with which progress was administered. Otis’s traditional curriculum barred the students from drawing from a live model until the second year, only permitting students to draw from casts. Once again Guston chose to tread a more enigmatic and idiosyncratic path. Having discovered Giorgio de Chirico through new comrade Kadish and his association with Lorser Feitelson, Guston left formal education as a student forever.

The painting Guston discovered when visiting Feitelson’s house was Giorgio de Chirico’s *The Soothsayer’s Recompense* an image where, once again a momentary pause is extant. There is a palpable sense of silence in the vitality of the oil paint’s colour and hue, thick flat geometric shapes cast elongated spectral shadows. Further there appears to be the usual clash of antithetical stillness caught somewhere between the horizontals and verticals, or as Musa Mayer writes in Guston’s posthumous memoir the “de Chirico painting hovers in a terrible silence, caught between enigma and clarity.” This muteness in the plane with the solitary smoke puffing from the steam-engine a footnote in the distance offered Guston an example of affirmation brought about by antithetical struggle. Guston himself comments on de Chirico’s paintings many years later and in comparison, to Piero, “they just hold you off, they demand love.”

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63 Ibid., 12-13
65 Ibid., 19-20
67 Ibid., 15
In 1930, at the horrific outset of the Great Depression, and while President Hoover was foolishly relying on *Laissez Faire* politics, Guston was producing *Mother and Child*. The more one peers at this early yet seminal work by Guston, the same collision of forces in a process occurs, and though the painting is silent, and is not strictly a homage to de Chirico, Guston is unmistakably influenced by those same opposing forces. Guston’s painting in those earlier experiments was hugely indebted to Surrealism *Mother and Child*’s bellicose limbs bloat and distort against the fractured geometric angles on the babel-esque plane. But still, somewhere at this early stage in Guston’s development and however nascent these images might appear sits Guston’s battle with the opposing forces of his art. There is an overt presence of struggle, something on the picture plane, the Mother feeding the infant is perched parenthetically amid protective, yet tellingly open-air grey brick walls. To the seer’s right appears to be a tall streetlamp, flanked this time with brown buildings, and despite the blue sky the scene is somewhat tense, even oppressive. The figures seem the result of a battle to capture some momentary pause, this sense is an uncomfortable one, stressful and awakened and perhaps doesn’t quite achieve Guston’s desired effect. However, the use of colour and perspective, with de Chirico-esque boldness of palette is striking. Guston’s use of chiaroscuro on the figures is impressive and emboldening of this discomfort. The painting appears to be a seismic struggle, it might be suggested that Guston was already woke to discovering some panacea, or perhaps that is Guston’s meaning? In any case the image shown at the Fourteenth Annual Exhibition in Los Angeles Museum was, amongst other Modernist images rejected by the conservative diaspora as “the handiworks of mediocre charlatans and fashionable faddists”. Such was the atmosphere on the West Coast.

The fabled pillars of New York gleamed to Guston and those in the Los Angeles art scene, East Coast sophisticates shone amongst the sharp towers. Surrounded by the crassness of Los Angeles conservatives, Guston and his cohorts interrogated magazines such as

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69 Ibid., 29
Creative Art acquainting themselves with a multitude of artists from Max Beckmann to Derain. In the febrile atmosphere of depression era America, in palpably enemy territory, Guston satiated his thirst for knowledge with Cubism, Surrealism and his beloved Renaissance heroes\(^7\).

Throughout this period Reuben Kadish and Guston remained close, absorbing all they could from Feitalson. Guston would remain loyal to his mentor for having introduced him to Piero and being the individual who “opened up the Renaissance for me”\(^71\). He maintained this loyalty even when Feitalson denounced the two as Communist sympathizers engaging in his own brand of red baiting\(^72\). Guston and Kadish were indeed leaning leftwards the crisis of the Great Depression was now understood to be the new normal. The result being the politicization and perhaps radicalization of huge numbers of people caught up in the maelstrom of poverty and desperation. In 1933 there were 15 million unemployed Americans. Massive movements of the disenfranchised and starving criss-crossed from coast to coast in search of the ever-elusive American dream. Guston’s growing confidence and philosophical tendencies, devouring Nietzsche, and Kafka, would equip him with critical views and paradigms which would both angle his politics and undermine traditional historic narratives\(^73\). There is a perhaps tenuous degree of certitude that such theories like Nietzschean Affirmation could be read as Sisyphean. The need to face one’s tormentor at the apex, presenting them, despite the futility with defiance in the face of misery and dejection seems innate in Guston’s images\(^74\). These literary influences perhaps provided greater ambit to Guston’s emerging talent, acting as an antithetical catalyst in his pursuit of the summit.

Years later in a 1964 conversation with friend Bill Berkson, Guston would evade questions regarding the Sisyphean sense in his works. Though revealingly Guston’s answer would still implicitly evoke the Sisyphean character of determination. “Mostly, I’m Involved with what is where. I am aware of moods, feelings, and so forth, but I really just want to nail something down so that it will stay still for a while.” This underlying tendency to focus and delineate towards a sort of piqued moment in the composition is replete in Guston’s work. Further, Musa Mayer, in her Father’s memoir claims that Guston was more than au fait with Camus and Sartre amongst others. Considering Guston’s oeuvre and personality it is difficult to see how his literary prowess was not underpinning his journey.

\(^{71}\) Mayer, Night Studio, 16.  
\(^{72}\) Ibid., 19–23  
Despite Guston’s claims to the contrary he would in fact not flee to New York until 1935. Guston, while perhaps planning his flight had inflamed his passion for Modernism through avant-garde literature from *Cahiers d’Art* to *L’Art Vivant*. Enthusiastically fingering the pages of these periodicals discovering a litany of continental theories from Leger films to Picasso’s evolving panoply of abstractions. Further, Guston was not unsuccessful in his pursuit of recognition while amid the churlish bigotry of depression era California. Guston was even at this early stage a revered painter, predicted to have a bright future. In 1933, the year Franklin Delano Roosevelt swept into presidential office, Guston was awarded his first exhibition. At Hollywood’s Stanley Rose Gallery, the now lost work *The Conspirators* was exhibited, Guston having sold this work to proprietor Rose for the princely sum of twenty-five Dollars. The foreground Klansman ruminates guiltily over a particularly thick rope. This pencil and crayon on paper image again owes much to de Chirico and more than a little to Piero with its similar perhaps more overt uneasiness alongside *Mother and Child*. A further sense in the composition of the plane is of Piero’s *Flagellation of Christ* the arrangement of the figures as plotters is palpably similar, meanwhile their victim, an African American, hangs from the branch of a dead tree in the far-left background. Furthermore, the presence of an apparently falling cross motif to the right of the hanged man is a clear homage to Renaissance fresco, perhaps to Piero himself. More pointedly the masked foreground figure clutching the overly thick rope has been interpreted as a subconscious expression of Guston’s guilt regarding the death of his Father. Though perhaps the recurring mask, this being an early example, pertains to an inchoate sense of conflict. This appears both Oedipally desirous as the final child to leave the Mother’s metaphoric womb, juxtaposed to the need to recreate an existential self, as a complex amalgamation recumbent beneath a mask while developing into a narrative image of the artist.

**WPA and Murals to Easels**

Whatever the truth this antithesis in Guston’s nature rather than being discarded on his journey into American Art metamorphosed into another conflict as a somewhat Hegelian fuel for Guston’s art. Amid Guston’s self-education and forays into academia, another of

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75 Ibid., 53
76 Ibid., 153-181
Guston’s interests Mexican Muralism developed, with Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco this revolutionary art went from a 1920s ever-present to a guiding light amid the devastating American depression. Guston would lurch to the progressive side and with fellow-traveller and friend Reuben Kadish join the WPA (Works Progress Administration). Perhaps one of the primary progressive influences of the period, Mexican Muralists with their Communist sympathies, and following the Mexican revolution would make an indelible impression on the Californian art scene.\textsuperscript{78}

The revolutionary spirit was by this time rife in Los Angeles’ bohemian quarters, and Guston, already a distant admirer of Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros et al… had heeded the calls of the newly formed LA branch of the Marxist John Reed Clubs. Abandoning the art for art sake mantra, Guston and his comrades began applying for New Deal WPA commissions for murals. Guston and Kadish were unsurprisingly commissioned to decorate the walls of the John Reed Club building itself, perhaps bravely, given the very real danger of the Ku Klux Klan. Further, the murals they undertook were to depict the plight of African Americans particularly pertaining to the case of the Scottsboro Boys, onto the walls of the building.\textsuperscript{79}

These murals were perhaps bound to provoke a reactionary response given the organisations in the area already plotting against the struggle for equality. Both the powerful National Legion of Decency and the Ku Klux Klan had numerous tentacles among the police and officials. This would lead to the defacement of the completed work by the LAPD’s Red Squads breaking into the building and shooting holes in the eyes and genitals of the figures depicted.\textsuperscript{80} In fact, it’s in this period that Hemingway questions the dating of images such as The Conspirators. Hemingway notes the influence of Siqueiros in KKK imagery claiming Ashton’s chronology to be incorrect, dating them as being produced around 1932-3.\textsuperscript{81} Further, these images not

\textsuperscript{78} Ashton, A Critical Study of Philip Guston, 25-33.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 27
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 27
\textsuperscript{81} Hemingway, Philip Guston, 1930-50: From Revolutionary Art to Mood Painting, 5.
only seem to sit under the aegis of the likes of de Chirico but also under the influence and perhaps even tutelage of Siqueiros. Furthermore, Hemingway suggests that this very vandalized mural was produced directly under the watchful eye of Siqueiros. However, once again alienating factors might be seen to reinforce and delineate alongside Guston’s development. America’s confused state in this period sees a multitude of disparate forces battling for cultural hegemony. Guston in this period, the darkly brooding artist obsessed with Piero and de Chirico is already peripheral. Further, despite Guston’s involvement with progressive movements he appears to relish his external position, still balanced between the aesthetics of figured messages and abstraction in existence.

Guston, Kadish and poet Jules Langsner all fascinated by the Mexican Muralists escaped this alienating atmosphere to Mexico in 1934\(^2\). The men having initially enquired about passage to Europe in search of Renaissance frescoes, baulked at the price of steam-ship tickets, preferring to seek solace in Mexico. The three eventually arrived in Mexico City virtually penniless and reliant on Kadish having written to Siqueiros prior to leaving offering-up the budding muralist’s services. In the event Siqueiros had indeed arranged a commission for Kadish and Guston in the vast summer palace of Maximillian in Morelia. The work in 1.024 square-feet of space was to be the site of *The Struggle Against War and Fascism*.\(^3\) The two men produced a magnificent 40-foot fresco reminiscent of Renaissance heroes Piero and Uccello, though for the enjoyment of a more secular diaspora. Guston would later comment in interviews regarding his indebtedness to this period both with the WPA and the Mexican Muralists as formative; and though the frescoes are collaborative and readable within Guston’s philosophical paradigm their construction and overt political message is perhaps too literal. This period in Mexico and the experiences of both easel and mural paintings left Guston contemplating his ideals further. The hiatus in Mexico’s arid dusty political activism

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was tempered by the presence of Langsner. Perhaps one of the first intellectual jousting partners in Guston’s life to truly reflect his analytical thinking, Guston slowly became disenchanted with Rivera and his *confreres.* craft or *metiers* and though complimentary about Siqueiros’ eclectic and diverse methods was lurching back to Uccello, de Chirico and Piero. Having written home complaining that despite the pioneering techniques of the muralists, the paintings themselves were “shitty”\(^84\), later even decrying the Mexican masters for their “expressionism” Guston would find the experience invaluable. Having registered his distaste Guston returned to the pause studying “German and Flemish primitives” and digesting Michelangelo and Raphael drawings, while taking commissions for portrait paintings. Having completed their Mexican commissions Kadish and Guston would return to California; Guston clutching beautifully rendered and clear reproductions of Masaccio frescoes\(^85\).

On returning to Los Angeles *Time* Magazine would render the two in the guise of “parlour pinks”\(^86\)” celebrating their depictions alongside endorsements from Siqueiros labelling the two as “the most promising young painters in the U.S.”\(^87\). This was the moment when Guston would be reunited with his soon to be wife Musa McKim. Having met at Otis, Guston still known as Goldstein had become infatuated with Musa, the distant beautiful art student had at first not fully reciprocated Guston’s feelings. However, McKim had begun to think more and more about the serious brooding young man at Otis and having grown weary of Art School returned to family in Panama. Having experienced a brief but unhappy engagement to an American tobacco merchant McKim, now single pined for Guston seeking him out via a letter to Herman Cherry. The two having re-acquainted themselves would soon be inseparable and McKim talking of Guston would espouse “so tall, so beautiful, with that wonderful look of his”\(^88\).

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 32
\(^{85}\) Ibid., 32
\(^{87}\) Ibid., 20
\(^{88}\) Ibid., 28
Guston now settled would engage, with Kadish in further mural works under the aegis of the WPA, though not without Republican paranoia perched somewhere in the middle distance. Even with the constant alienating threat of White-Angle-Saxon-Protestant hegemony and biased bureaucrats, the transcendence of the Mexican concept underpinning the New Deal WPA commissions had gained ground. Particularly in New York, poorly paid but regular work for artists was being commissioned, at least on the surface. Certainly, the will and motivation existed in the higher echelons of power, advisor to Roosevelt, Harry Hopkins commenting “Hell! They’ve got to eat just like other people”89. These sorts of statements perhaps lend grist to misconceptions around the overarching nature of government projects. In reality, as Andrew Hemingway has discussed New Deal projects were far more fragmented in nature, and distinctly ad hoc perhaps ironically making it easier for artists to acquire commissions. Sadly, this laissez faire nature did not extend to the murals themselves, officials often sought to strictly control the content of murals all too aware of the political zeitgeist90. Under this aegis of various organisations and public bodies, ambitious projects would emerge. From the Civil Works Administration and Public Works of Art Projects to the 1934 incarnation, the Section of Fine Arts of the Treasury Department all vying to employ and distribute artists to create public art91. In 1935-36 Philip Goldstein having adopted the less conspicuous name Guston, a decision he would later regret, finally relocated to New York, Musa McKim in tow92. Under the advice of childhood friend Jackson Pollock who had made his jump to the tumult of the Big Apple in 1930 to study with Thomas Hart Benton, Guston entered the seething cauldron of the New York Art scene seeking more ambitious commissions93.

It is important to note the context and text of this period, Guston is, with his cohorts, in-between philosophical self-education in a peripheral group. His works in this period

89 Ibid., 32
90 Hemingway, Philip Guston, 1930-50: From Revolutionary Art to Mood Painting, 6. (Unpublished)
91 Ibid., 32
92 Mayer, Night Studio, 71-85.
93 Ibid., 71-85
though mostly socio-political are charged and still retain Guston’s balance between conflicting forces despite being under development. Guston is a man on the perimeter lurching away from Social Realism engaging with Surrealism and is in politically alienated groups, his final detachment from family could be read as a sign of his metamorphosis into a creative void. Further, the adoption of the name Guston rather than Goldstein might be a signal perhaps of his reinvention and a conduit for his journey, powered by these antithetical but necessary forces. The name could also be viewed as a disappearance or masking, signalling a point in a journey to totality. Further, Guston’s later comments regarding his wishes to be consider like Mallarme’s the “first civilised man” Un Civilise Edenqiue is pregnant with meaning. Perhaps revealing that in order to affirm and surmount one must find facility enough to perpetrate a journey to affirmation. It is also imperative to remember that throughout this period two opposing political forces are at war, not purely in-terms of the coming conflict. But more pointedly between the slow agonizing death of the white western master narrative and attempts by progressives to forge a new avant-garde narrative rescuing society from arguably more traditional ideologies. The coming storm and arts lurch to evermore eclectic and experimental notions was perhaps a crossing point between Modernism and a brave new world; a vanguard battle fought at some lonely perimeter.

Having recognised this particularity, and the seismic changes taking place in Europe Guston both as easel painter and muralist was in the process of evolution. New York was a revelation to Guston, who consorted enthusiastically with likeminded practitioners in the tumult of leering skyscrapers. Further, with the rise of Mussolini and Hitler in Europe whose intentions and insularisms regarding avant-garde art were becoming daily more pronounced, Guston with his new comrades galvanised. Vanguard artists such as Burgoyne

95 Coolidge, Guston, 48.
96 Ibid., 48.
97 Ashton, A Critical Study of Philip Guston, 64.
Diller, Arshile Gorky, and Guston himself felt a keen sense of embattlement, where the so-called degenerate becomes weaponry, an arsenal antithetical to inertia; the newly minted comrades became aroused further by energetic stirring speeches by the likes of Lewis Mumford. Mumford described this situation in Europe as “a world Catastrophe” demanding firm resistance “to the forces that are bringing on war and conscious struggle against fascism”\(^98\). The atmosphere was febrile and determined with an eclectic collective of artists vying for commissions. Guston was already an established talent, and while still focusing on easel painting won further commissions under the aegis of the WPA\(^99\). As Europe crumbled the Spanish Civil War appeared as a test-case for the growth of fascism. Guston with several cohorts such as Stuart Davis, Burgoyne Diller and Willem de Kooning attended heated rallies with representatives such as Andre Malraux urging support. It is more than likely this plethora of influences gave grist to Guston in terms of politics, philosophy and alienation. It is possible in peripheral works, if comparing the likes of *Mother and Child* to *Martial Memory*\(^100\), images considered formative where Guston marries disparate forces to affect an evolution, to discern a suspicion of dogma, which is manifest in Guston’s later comments regarding Léger and Picasso’s Cubism “they made a revolution, and then they dump it”\(^101\). This in-turn suggests that despite Guston’s political convictions he recognized freedom in diversity and change, understanding the visceral Dionysian content of Nietzschean historic principles. These are manifest through Nietzsche’s suspicion of conventions and permanence\(^102\). The need to manipulate history using multiple and disparate techniques or the need in transgression to effect creation. It is in Guston’s perspectival distortions that fresh views form at the summit, Guston seeks change through struggle, his images yield reflective evolution. His behaviour appears to imply an understanding of the

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\(^{98}\) Ibid., 38  
\(^{99}\) Ibid., 38  
\(^{100}\) Ibid., 22.  
\(^{101}\) Coolidge, *Guston*, 115.  
true impermanence of things and this is the nature of process, creation as Sisyphean rebellion constant questioning, perpetual flux.\textsuperscript{103}

This understanding, as the watcher observing process not unlike Piero is in Guston’s terms an escape, a conduit to the Absurd. And escape is nothing if not Sisyphean, years later Guston conceding to friend Morton Feldman that, in this escape is “bearing witness” as an artist to a world which appeared more and more like a “Concentration Camp”\textsuperscript{104}. Guston’s readings and behaviours return to this escape consistently throughout his career. He seems to ascend to summits to reflect, display and distort society onto itself, a journey to ascend to some lofty peak, detached, reflective and imbued with angst against a purposeless and intolerable world.

Guston produced Bombardment in 1937, created in tondo Philip wheeled the completed work through the streets of New York to the Whitney Museum a year following its initial unveiling at an exhibition for the League Against War and Fascism\textsuperscript{105}. Despite the works appearance and what it owes to Piero. The content accentuates visions of an industrialised wartime dystopia using Renaissance techniques to depict a contemporary hell created by bigotry. The work is overtly political, with an emotional topos depicting fascist bombings of civilians on Spanish streets. The influences of both Muralism and his obsession with the Renaissance are produced with alacrity. The image perhaps lacks the analysis of Guston’s more introspective and Existentialist works, still the sense of a momentary pause in creation caught somewhere between past, present and future almost give a sense of motion in the plane a sort of pause is delivered.

Despite the palpably contrived nature of this wartime work, Bombardment’s facture still yields numerous clues as to Guston’s influences and trajectory. Guston has clearly adopted the use of Tondo to both frame the centrifugal movement of the players and to create renaissance effect. This debt to the renaissance is perhaps to display the characters as martyrs with deliberate allusions to religious fresco. The painting is a more traditional portrayal of the Nazi bombing of Guernica than Picasso’s. Its apparent narrative suggesting the innocent inhabitants are at the mercy of a mechanized pestilence in the guise of the fascist bombers. More formally the arrangement of the players is rather contemporary and revealing of Guston’s developing facility. The image shows six central figures thrown centrifugally by an exploding bomb, the blast of which is spread outwards as epicentre to the composition. The

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 532-533
\textsuperscript{104} Coolidge, Guston, 80.
\textsuperscript{105} Ashton, A Critical Study of Philip Guston, 38.
use of *Tondo* has thankfully not disturbed the geometry of the work, the blast having occurred in an imagined centre of a street in Guernica, the airplanes charting their course towards the very top of the composition. Despite the contemporary nature of the characters, one victim wearing a gasmask, and all wearing contemporary costume, the arrangement of the figures on the plane still owes much to Guston’s earlier work. Similar to *Mother & Child* Guston used *chiaroscuro* techniques impressively. The colours though vibrant in their plasticity, are muted and the edge of the figures and buildings have a softening texture caught somewhere between de Chirico and Piero’s renaissance works.

Guston is clearly at a technical peak, and though this is a difficult work in connection with Existentialist or Absurdist theory to interpret, it does perhaps display a narrative which undergirds Guston’s political machinations at the time. Guston is a first-generation migrant, with painterly ambitions, and prodigious talent. By 1937 Guston is already involved with Marxist groups, reading Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and his beloved Kafka. Further, he has witnessed a lifetime of alienating factors, a Father’s suicide, a Brother’s untimely death and right-wing Klan purges of those deemed degenerate. If these factors are added through the lens of the Great Depression and the terror of yet more right-wing, now Nazi-Fascist atrocities against the innocent, this time on a global stage it’s hard not see this developing in *Bombardment*. True, the distance isn’t there, that remoteness present in later images such as *The Gladiators*. The subject matter is perhaps too Social Realist, too contrived, but it certainly sets a scene for later images depicting the futility of battle. The Existential watcher revealing the Absurdity of human trials and tribulations.

Guston’s ardour like so many was focused by the cultural shift necessary to oppose the fascist threat and win the war. Amid this, Guston spoke of his time with the WPA in the warmest terms and of his development as an artist. Amid heated often drunken New York conversations Guston and his cohorts rattled American artistic provincialism, along with Guston’s own artistic convictions regarding his direction were shifting. Guston’s absorption of these influences perhaps garnered a transgressive movement, his discussions with luminaries such as Diller an unapologetic fan of European abstraction yielded Mondrian, Van Doesburg and Vantongerloo with ever-more clarity\(^\text{106}\). However, Guston repeatedly in his career would retire to some idyll to gradually transition and metamorphose, assimilating disparate influences in isolation. In 1938 Guston was twenty-five and had enveloped himself into New York’s avant-garde. The likes of John Graham, Adolph Gottlieb, Stuart Davis and,

\(^{106}\) ibid., 79
of course the inimitable Diller had gradually, though inadvertently eaten away at Guston’s Renaissance convictions. Diller impressed the developing Guston and Diller in-turn a consummate talent spotter and Guston’s supervisor on several mural commissions was encouraging of Guston’s development. Like Graham, Diller was nothing if not bohemian and eccentric, answering the door to Guston in an overcoat rather than a bathrobe, “Well! You are good in the ancient manner” Diller would confide in the young Guston. Diller’s obsession with Modernist European art is perhaps not formally avant-garde but like so many, Diller was urging towards avant-gardism to force America from provincialism.

Aside from the myriad of bohemians, Guston was being exposed to a diverse plethora of Parisian Modernism and philosophy. Alongside de Kooning, Davis, and others Guston had begun to descend into a period of doubt coupled with experimentation. Amid completing murals for King’s County Hospital, he was intellectually involved with Stuart Davis, impressed with his contemporary’s lavish use of colour. While working on a neighbouring mural for WNYC Radio, Guston would peer intently through a flimsy partition separating the two and marvel at blue, black and cadmium orange being liberally distributed. Davis, with palette knife in hand would step back from his creation and “look at the results for a while in his suspenders, smoking his cigar” Davis’ lavish profligacy with paint often lead to the paint being scraped off if the artist deemed the work inadequate. Meanwhile Guston would be labouring in his adjacent space on Renaissance inspired depictions, or as Guston now torn said, “laboriously working on his big cartoon”. Within this idiom Guston was as usual self-isolating, trapped between two antithetical points attempting to emerge into the light. It is perhaps in this period that his veracious reading took in Kierkegaard, and yet more Kafka perhaps directing his sense of the Existential further. Perhaps inadvertently and incipiently Guston is accepting the periphery and as a means towards some panacea borrowing historic connotations, however antithetical to fuel his journey.

107 Ibid., 38-79
108 Ibid., 39
109 Ibid., 39
110 Ibid., 39
Amid these paradoxes and paradigms Guston like his contemporaries Gorky, Davis, Diller et al... was amid multiple and divergent forces. Aligning his philosophies with the WPA and desirous in his pursuance of European Modernism, and not least Cubism’s noisy and imperative idiom. Axiomatic perhaps was Guston’s intellect and equally in retrospect his slow delineation towards isolation within which praxis would emerge from experimentation\(^1\). Guston would continue to complete murals, though the looming outbreak of war would colour his development and add mutations to future works. His conversations with among others Diller would lead him toward so-called totality in art, a direction Guston would resist, whilst still in the grip of de Chirico and Piero. Guston had of course seen de Chirico in action at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in 1936 furiously squirrelling away at yet another silent creation. Guston had also seen Joan Miro, Mondrian, and Picasso\(^2\). In 1939 Guston saw Guernica this image would be seared into Guston’s memory. These images and experiences were perhaps contributory to the mass of contradictions that was Guston’s incisive philosophy. His analytical mind was constantly at odds and Guston’s malady was remedied within his new-self, withdrawing, and perhaps alien-like, observing his target from afar. In 1939 while in pitch battle with these internal demons Guston was awarded his most prestigious mural commission to date, the decoration of the WPA building at the New York World’s Fair\(^3\). Already an established, and much lauded painter and having enjoyed success previously Guston was gradually being ushered into the art scene’s aristocracy\(^4\). Guston did perhaps somewhat revel in his success his desire to be considered an artist was almost certainly at the forefront of his career. Further, in his daughter Musa Mayer’s biography Guston is revealed as perhaps more than a little bourgeois despite his experiences and progressive politics.

\(^{113}\) Ibid., 41
Glorious Isolation

The New York World’s Fair was a pivotal commission for Guston whose angle was “Maintaining America’s Skills” though both Guston and his confreres were already target’s for anti-Red bias. The building’s owners were the Federal Works Agency and the curvature of the building was particularly challenging. The external political pressures and artist’s political reputations were so notorious that proficiency and discretion were always required. The atmosphere in America was shifting and the conservative wing was stalking its prey, looking for excuses to remove artists and art works. These factors coupled with union bureaucracy were to dog Guston and his contemporaries, but the end-product was, though simplified a masterful depiction of a woman scientist, an engineer, a surveyor, and labourer. Using rubber paint given the outdoor environment, Guston’s creation though hugely restricted by patronage was described as having “Given visual form to a strongly felt abstract idea” Ruth Green Harris, critic at the New York Times. Further to this Guston would win first prize following a public poll. In addition to this an inspector recalls that “While most of the exterior mural decorations are badly faded,”

![Figure 12, Philip Guston, Work & Play, detail of Mural, 1940, WPA Building, New York's World's Fair, New York](image)

Guston’s work remained vibrant months later.

In 1940 Guston completed Work and Play another lucrative commission, this time for the Queensbridge Housing Project in New York. A painting which despite Guston attempting to have his name removed from the work years later, was in part to yield vital clues to Guston’s artistic direction. Dore Ashton noted this, observing a detail which would reoccur in part in Martial Memory and several other seminal works. Again, the pre-McCarthyite anti-progressive bias would emerge in a more acceptable and yet sinister example of absurdity. The ever-vigilant authorities focused on a minute detail of a dog’s wagging tail imagining the semiotic positing of a Hammer & Sickle motif amid the plane; Guston would be hauled from

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115 Ibid., 43
116 Ibid., 43-45
117 Ibid., 44
118 Ibid., 44
the scaffold while the authorities procrastinated\textsuperscript{119}. Despite Guston’s difficulties in terms of conservative voices it is imperative to note that Guston is already a nationally renowned artist.

Guston’s skill would not only be recognised but lauded despite the paranoia of the authorities. In his final WPA commission for the Social Security Building in Washington, Guston would resolve several issues which had been dogging his creations. These shifts would be the culmination of paradoxes around esthetic values and philosophical musings which had troubled Guston since his arrival in the hurly-burly of New York’s art scene. Finally, Guston was able to accommodate Cubist techniques alongside Renaissance concepts and contemporary use of colour and plane\textsuperscript{120}. His use of verticals and diagonals in the plane had begun to form a uniqueness seeming to wobble between abstraction and figurative form. Also, the figures appear flat and literal almost like Batik art from Indonesia shapes placed atop or emerging through a flat rear-ground surface\textsuperscript{121}.

In \textit{Gladiators} 1940, Guston’s progress is explicit, the use of colour is still vibrant but his tendency towards Renaissance softening of figuration and plane has receded. The appearance is overall more affronting, a flat plasticity reigns, the players seem more caricatured or distorted. Further, the positioning of the figures in the work appear on an ever-deepening theatrical gradient. Set forth for the seer are four characters in the tumult of some street battle, accompanied by a dog barking into the malaise. The backdrop to this event is perhaps a New York city street, red brick shopfronts and angular buildings, highlighted by a prominent canopy with red and white vertical stripes. The figures tussle, all hooded with the player on the left clutching the hood of a similarly dressed figure awkwardly positioned on the pavement. The other figures, one upright, wearing what appears to be a red tabard, the other apparently shirtless grapple. The right-hand upright figure has a shield which has apparently failed to protect him from the seated left-hand figure brandishing a rather long broken wooden beam. Meanwhile a dog agitated by the ensuing malaise has burrowed amongst the figures and is barking into the violent abyss.

There is familiarity in terms of Guston’s mural works and a clear delineation from previous easel paintings. Thematically this period saw Guston returning to tussles and collections of figures in various street scenes. Often these scenes would feature children fighting or playing in a perhaps post-depression era city street, tumbledown and with

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 46
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 46
\textsuperscript{121} Leja, \textit{Reframing Abstract-Expressionism}, 49-119.
significant signs of poverty. And though this image was in Guston’s words politically “Ambiguous” re-produced from a childhood memory, it still reflects a stillness painted from what might be described as an Existential perspective. Images such as these were part of wider a trend amongst progressive artists, disillusioned following the Nazi-Soviet pact; these images sought to represent a more general comment regarding the state of humanity.

In *Gladiators* there is perhaps a suggestion that these figures are children, particularly when analysing the weaponry, for instance the wooden sword on the pavement alongside the reclining player. However, if these indeed are children, then their size seems bellicose and odd, too odd to simply be a stylizing effect. It seems that perhaps this volatilizing scene is between adults and perhaps even contains a self-portrait of the artist, this is an image where irony perhaps reigns. Aside from this, two other elements occur, if these figures are indeed adults, then the representation perhaps seeks to pass comment about violence and the futility of war. Comparatively to earlier more narrative depictions of war-time events this image has no specific historic narrative referent. No context is provided, no Social Realist connection is forthcoming. The result of this effect is the seer is forced to further contemplate purposeless and the human need to continue despite the universes’ disinterestedness. The second element is perhaps hidden amid the masks, Guston included humans scrabbling for meaning where there is none. Further, if Guston is present he has taken two perspectives both as artist and watcher passing comment, and hopelessly involved, and incumbent in pursuit of affirmation. The watcher watching himself.

The techniques used in *Gladiators*, show Guston had clearly absorbed Picasso’s *Guernica* within the draftsman-ship to simplify the plane. The figures seem again superimposed onto an angular surface with a de Chirico-esque piling up of things forcing one to read the image in gradients of perspective. The chaos of figures tumble and roll in the foreground, with a note of satire within this absurd situation. Most notably in terms of an Existential reading of the figures and their arrangement, with exception to the dog barking into a human void of conflict, the figures are masked. Open to multiple readings this period of Guston’s work is reaching an initial crescendo in-terms of facture. The masks perhaps add to this and *Martial Memory*’s immutability to conceal not only Guston’s characters but perhaps the painter himself. Both depictions are masterful in the planar field owing much to Piero when considering their stasis. Further, and with regards to the masking of the figures in

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122 Hemingway, Philip Guston, 1930-50: From Revolutionary Art to Mood Painting, 7. (Unpublished)
123 Ibid., 7 (Unpublished)
Gladiators, Guston as messenger/alien is perhaps hidden within this image beneath the masks one gets the impression that Guston’s internal strife is being depicted. Furthermore, Guston revealingly says of Piero, “Piero (della Francesca) is the ideal painter, he is like a visitor to earth, reflecting on distances, gravity and positions of essential forms124”. Gladiators and Martial Memory both converge on this feeling, this sense that Guston is watching, orbiting, marvelling at the absurdity of things from an Existential position. However, in Gladiators Guston’s analytical nature and inner turmoil are perhaps depicted behind the masks as Guston at war with himself. This ability to externalize oneself and observe is nothing if not Kafkaesque, the epitome of the Absurd. The work almost appears as a hybrid self-portrait abstract in its Mia Culpa of internal strife and philosophical evolution. Also, present is perhaps a sense Guston would experience throughout his career of a fait accompli125. Guston is depicting antithetical forces some external some internal126. However, he has moved back in preparation for some sort of hibernation he is observing humanity from the summit before plateauing to regroup and attack once more.

This perhaps explains Martial Memory’s muted tone, the 1941 journey to the plateau has begun and the players have been unmasked, all but one. The tanned Guston himself perhaps with his back to the seer in the foreground, dustbin-lid shield in hand. The eclectic mix of Guston’s comrades discuss and battle anew amid the foreground figure. This image already contains an Absurdity pertaining to the coming war, children with alleyway detritus mingling again in de Chirico fashioned clutter within an antithetical silence given the urban stage they inhabit127. Somehow though this painting really does prophesy Guston’s coming journey both artistically and personally; there appears a note of resignation in the colour and even expressions on the children’s faces. Paradoxically Guston appears, though still as

Figure. 13, Philip Guston, Gladiators, 1940, 62.2 x 71.1 cm, Oil on Canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

124 Coolidge, Guston, 41.
125 Slifkin, Out of Time, 2013), 31-56.
126 Ashton, The New York School, 56.
127 Dore Ashton, A Critical Study of Philip Guston, 63.
orbiting messenger to have focused in on the plane to take a closer look, the image is gentle softened almost nurturing. Having developed his easel painting to such a degree 90 miles north of New York in the Bohemian colony at Woodstock Guston would be offered a teaching post at Iowa State University.\textsuperscript{128}

Guston’s experiences and assimilating of new philosophies was palpable; he needed time to evolve perhaps, why else would he accept a posting so disparate from the burgeoning New York scene? Chosen seclusion would become a theme throughout Guston’s life; throughout his career when the proverbial storm clouds gathered Guston would find solace in isolation. At twenty-eight the multiple high-school drop-out, would now mature, teach his craft in the Midwest\textsuperscript{129}. This would be a more sedentary existence in rural Iowa an opportunity for Guston to perfect further his easel painting. Also, and despite having been married to Musa McKim for some time perhaps the most domesticated Guston had ever been. Professor Guston isolated also from World War Two and with an arsenal of materials and paintings from Piero, Uccello, de Chirico and of course Picasso undertook to educate his new comrades\textsuperscript{130}. The impact of Iowa is palpable in Guston’s works over this period tall angular buildings, Midwestern hermetic and culturally strange landscapes were rhythmically oblique to Guston. More used to tumult and racket Guston threw himself into teaching with gusto and more than a little skill. Though he would later lament this period as too exhausting and restricting of his development, he was a popular and much-loved lecturer\textsuperscript{131}.

Perhaps his closest association in this period was then student and budding artist Stephane Greene, Greene and Guston would hit it off immediately, talking philosophy and art. Guston’s popularity and success was still more impressive given his predecessor\textsuperscript{132}. Celebrated American painter Grant Wood had held the same prestigious post, and by all accounts, the famed regionalist painter was more than proficient. Despite the many challenges thrown-up by this new and alien situation Guston as Greene would attest was “a man of stature by personality and his obvious desire to be a great painter\textsuperscript{133}”. The fact of Guston’s persona was such that he too became a legendary educator to those he encountered in Iowa. Iowa City once labelled by \textit{Time Magazine} as the “Athens of American”\textsuperscript{134} was as

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\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 63-70  \\
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 63-70  \\
\textsuperscript{130} Mayer, \textit{Night Studio}, 71-85.  \\
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 71-85  \\
\textsuperscript{132} Ashton, A \textit{Critical Study of Philip Guston}, 52.  \\
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 52  \\
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 52
\end{flushleft}
Greene pointed out far from able to live-up to this lofty description. Nevertheless, Guston would grasp the loneliness and boredom as opportunity, and live life through his work and development as an easel painter. Guston was perceived in this almost desolate landscape as missionary, come to preach anti-provincialism and fine art to a place perhaps bellicose with just such an atmosphere.

Stories of Guston’s lively and powerful lectures reverberated around the halls of residence leading his sometimes-bedraggled classes across the city. Guston discussed and debated with his students, drinking with them in bars inside and outside of the student campus. This “remarkable looking man”, as Stephane Greene commented held court with students transfixed by his energy and enthusiasm. The Midwest was almost certainly a haven for Guston away from the smoky maelstrom of New York, Guston could develop, wrangle, and overcome his demons. In 1943 Musa Mayer (Guston’s Daughter) was born, the artist doubtlessly loved and adored his daughter. However, the presence of an unplanned child would leave Guston further distraught. Guston, so determined to develop the soul of a great painter was terrified of the loss of his freedom. In Guston’s memoir Musa Mayer recounts discovering her Father’s enmity, not towards his child but at the affront to his carefully constructed Existentialist and painterly image. His time in Iowa was populated by filling the academic hole’s left by his lack of formal education; reading Erwin Panofsky’s writings, and works such as Heinrich Wolfflin’s Principles of Art History. Aside from this, Guston was in the presence of Head of English Austin Warren and intellectuals such as A. W. Janson.

Despite these weighty developments Guston seemed to approach a lull in his work, paintings not quite Mannerist but revealingly conventional were under development. His reading was expanding alongside his philosophical viewpoint. Isolated from New York’s

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135 Ibid., 52
136 Mayer, Night Studio, 71-85.
tumult and exhausted but determined, Guston experimented. Also present on Guston’s kitchen wall. Alongside Piero was Durer’s Melancholia. Significant throughout Guston’s career perhaps more so amid a lull which produced Sunday Interior in which Guston the Existentialist searched for a key to a new kind of affirmation. Significantly Panofsky talks of the “inertia of a being which renounces what it could reach because it cannot reach for what it longs.” It could be suggested that Guston like Harold Rosenberg’s Hamlet is absent from the play. An Absurdist character torn as in Gladiators, to such a degree that chaos reigns; Sunday Interior with its Italianate depiction of Iowa City is again not Mannerist, but is reserved, perhaps signalling a painter battling to perfect his technique, caught between two worlds searching for continuity.

Guston’s grasp of Rosenberg’s “Action” as process perhaps delivers him into the hands of Flaubert always “seeing the future” sensing the “antithesis of everything”. Guston’s works in this period up to and including If this be not I! and perhaps even into his short tenure in St Louis always hold a note harmonizing with a fait accompli.

In 1945 Guston’s final work in Iowa If this be not I! perhaps signalled the painter’s impending crisis. A storm was coming and the title of the paintings meaning, relating to the Mother Goose story about an old woman losing her identity was prescient as Guston battled with multiple perspectives both philosophically and personally. Though in Sisyphean terms identity at the summit, always peripheral is lodged in defiant affirmation. The painting, again de Chirico-esque is a clutter of motifs and iconography from previous works, the sky is Venetian blue, paper hats and masks are replete, and tellingly broken fencing and striped uniforms perhaps evoke the holocaust. Guston is floundering emotionally this work is a goodbye, not the last in this style but perhaps the most revealing. The children

Figure. 15, Philip Guston, If this be not I, 1945, 107.3 x 140.3cm, Kemper Art Museum, Kansas City.

140 Slifkin, Out of Time, 31-56.
142 Ibid., 65
are still posited in an Iowa City background, but the tumult of Gladiators has dissipated. The battle is over, one child laying down on a wooden support, seems lifeless, in the right foreground a child leans over a bannister, hands clasped ruminating with an air of tragedy. Musa Mayer, Guston’s daughter in the centre foreground peers towards the left corner pensively; while immediately to her rear a masked boy pulls mischievously at a rope, perhaps Guston himself directing the play for the audience to read. The scene seems somehow to depict the detritus of a broken past or lost narrative leaving the seer or Guston to reconstruct the world from its horrors. Again, there is antithesis in this convergence of forces a theatricality sits juxtaposed to the painterly mask. These forces sit between “life and illusion”, paying homage to Italian Commedia dell’arte, though the arrangement has something of the grotesquery of a show trial, and as Guston himself said painting or creating is like a trial where the artist plays all the roles. In summum, Guston is Hamlet caught externally between multiple factors unable to find freedom deciding on the best route home, playing all the characters, yet not involved in the play. This absurd Existential figure is in a negative descent learning and deciding how to use these new revelations to progress. And again, looking for further solitude until such a time as he can grasp action in process and find affirmation again.

143 Ibid., 65
144 Ibid., 64
Chapter Two – Crisis (Viaggio: The Journey)

From 1941 onward, and with the U.S on the verge of entering the Second World War Guston seemingly inexplicably accepted a teaching post at Iowa State University. The backdrop to this was both the emergence of an ever more conservative wing of the American establishment, fighting back against what they perceived as Communism in the guise of New Deal cooperation\textsuperscript{146}. And, of course the Second World War, which incidentally gave the resurgent right grit in undermining FDR’s New Deal policies. It certainly was a peculiar decision to make for an established artist, to move to the Midwest, Iowa City was a veritable backwater after the Tumult and hedonism of New York. Whatever Guston’s thinking, the war years were brutal and if the carnage of war was not sufficiently traumatic, the emergence of the Holocaust would perhaps prove pivotal\textsuperscript{147}. Underpinning the American Art scene of the time was an ever-adventurous evolution into abstraction. Amid the diaphanous lurching towards flatness and formalist art condoned by Clement Greenberg and later Michael Fried, government funding receded. Artists mostly fellow travellers found themselves without a political touchstone in the wake of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and perhaps in search of some panacea, or at least a safe space to explore their divergent philosophies\textsuperscript{148}.

Guston amongst his peers found himself buffeted by these new developments. America was changing, its establishment returning to type, and at the advent of the Cold War there was a maelstrom of ever sharper and continuing cultural contradictions\textsuperscript{149}. Abstract painting had become \textit{de Rigueur} by the 1950s in a buoyant New York, a city which now replaced Paris as the Artistic epicentre of global culture. The New York School’s emergence and dominance owed more than a little to the success of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell and no less significant though late arriving Philip Guston\textsuperscript{150}. This was Abstract-Expressionism’s heyday flanked by a booming economy and the success of Pollock’s drip paintings each artist in turn began their pursuit of the void. Further down the road saw the emergence of the Beat Generation and Rock’n’Roll, alternative views were forming from philosophies such as Modern Man Discourse fought amid Camus and Sartre’s wrangling. Pollock’s death in 1956 may have perhaps been a turning point, but Guston and his New York School comrades continued their pursuit of truth through abstraction. It is also

\textsuperscript{146} Brogan, \textit{The Penguin History of the USA}, 178-242.
\textsuperscript{147} Ashton, \textit{A Critical Study of Philip Guston}, 71-87.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 38
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 99-135.
\textsuperscript{150} Ashton, \textit{The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning}, 153-173.
imperative to consider Andrew Hemingway’s analysis of Leja’s portrayal of Modern Man Discourse\(^{151}\). The Abstract-Expressionist group are engaging with an esoteric philosophical model, one more than likely alien to American Blue-Collar workers. And one which fails to track the immediate Postwar workers strikes, and how unions formed a symbiosis with the Democratic Party. Which, in the light of the Cold-War and Republican control of Congress began to abandon “Social Keynesianism\(^{152}\)” throughout the 1950s for more conservative values which would ultimately see the once powerful US unions stymied. In this light Guston’s and his *confreres* were perhaps happy enough in bourgeois isolation.

Though, Guston’s vacillations, perhaps personal though increasingly political could lend grist to the notion of detachment in Guston’s journey. His failure ultimately to reach a politically correct audience, i.e. those in the labour force might be used as explanation for Guston’s violent shifts. Though of course it is difficult to know how Guston was influenced by societal fluctuations other than through his own words. The tumult of this period and what followed during the 1960s perhaps acted as parenthesis to Guston’s own turmoil. By the mid-60s Abstract-Expressionism was becoming more and more a spent force, its success exploited for Cold War propaganda acting as antithesis to the disparate group’s political conscience.

Coupled with renewed Cold War red bating was an ever more paranoid American government intent on eradicating what it perceived as a global threat\(^{153}\). Guston, amid an affair witnessed his humanist ethics torn asunder from the war in Vietnam, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the tragedy of the Kent State University shootings, conventions were falling. But it all perhaps began with the Holocaust, the comfortable western narratives shattered and dispersed gradually revealed as chimera\(^{154}\).

Sometime between 1946 and 1949 two men sit transfixed at a St Louis railway crossing the slow lethargic grumble of a freight-train

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\(^{152}\) Ibid., 5

\(^{153}\) Ibid., 5

\(^{154}\) Ibid., 4
clicks and taps by. Such was the paralysis of Stephane Greene and Philip Guston sometime between 1946-48; sepia footage of Auschwitz perched somewhere in the plane of the scene outside the car windscreen. The impact of the holocaust must have further alienated Guston. However, he was already amid a darkening mood, perhaps partially affected by the gruesome spectre of humanity’s capacity for evil. Perhaps toiling and embattled by doubt about his artistic direction, and the multitude of influences now seeping into his work. Guston and Greene had been reunited following Guston’s posting to St Louis’ Washington University, Greene had been given an equally lucrative position at the University alongside his mentor. This meeting renewed the two’s friendship and dialogue. The paradox of the Holocaust was how individuals could listen to Debussy or Dvorak in the morning perhaps simultaneously reading Kierkegaard, then leave for their job as a guard in a concentration camp in the afternoon.

These antithetical factors can perhaps be identified in Guston’s 1947 image Porch II imbued with a cubist plasticity, and with the familiar perspectival use of the plane the image is littered with signs. There appears to be an oppressiveness in the vibrancy of the image; Guston having taken the image with him on his Guggenheim fellowship following his time in St Louis, was in dire need of catharsis. The end-result is a disappearance into abstraction, spectral figures elongated against a tangled backdrop appear in frustrated tension with the field. Perhaps reflecting the holocaust to the seer? Sharp reds cloud the painting, and though tonally more pastel, colour use is crowded and pregnant with a nervous tension archetypally significant for an Existentialist, perhaps acknowledging the futility in the process. Part of this tension often seen in Guston images is an antipathy between an Apollonian aesthetic in this telling image, and the emergence through abstraction of a more negative Dionysian primitive. One both sees a disappearance and an emergence simultaneously amid fluctuating factors of bad faith seeking authenticity; Guston might be seen as avoiding dogma or at least stepping towards a rebellious amorphousness seen in later images.

This again would be both a peripheral and transitional image for Guston, though not before he and Greene’s philosophical sojourn in St Louis. Guston had reluctantly accepted the post at Washington University, ambivalent but aware of the opportunities in what was a

155 Ashton, A Critical Study of Philip Guston, 75.
156 Ibid., 61-80
157 Ibid., 61-80
158 Ibid., 61-80
159 Ashton, The New York School, 187.
much more bohemian and cosmopolitan city than Iowa. Troubled though Guston was internally regarding his direction as an artist and the distraction of teaching, his students would remain blissfully unaware of their now famed teacher’s conflicts.\footnote{Ibid., 51-55} Again, adored by his pupils as a vibrant, enthusiastic educator with perhaps slightly unorthodox methods. Conducting classes in St Louis’ bar’s or trudging through the streets admiring the city’s architecture, followed by those who became incipient Flaneur’s and Flaneuse’. 

In this interregnum Guston’s growing nervous tension and innate restlessness was serviced by St. Louis’ cultural maelstrom. Amid the white and black ghettos, the city’s fine museum, and the bars, nightclubs, and restaurants, Guston rubbed shoulders with museum director Perry Rathbone, an early fan who had already acquired several paintings for exhibition\footnote{Ibid., 51-55}. The city had a symphony orchestra directed by Vladimir Golschmann, an astute art collector in his own right, it also possessed a charm and grace exploited by the city’s own collection of art-world luminaries. These distractions perhaps served to dispossess Guston of his self-confessedly darkening mood at least temporarily. The multiple antithetical factors were intermingling with Guston’s intermittent self-doubt, and perhaps catalysed further by his reading and subsequent sharpening of his intellectual prowess. In Guston’s idle time, when not teaching, St Louis satiated his thirst for culture. Perched in bars watching “the most venerable black musicians of the high epoch\footnote{Ibid., 73}”, Guston still battled with his demons, while perfecting his technique and producing images which began to imply incipient abstraction.

Guston’s intellect would be piqued further by his first truly emotional investment and experience of classical music. Physicist Martin Kamin invited Guston to chamber orchestral recitals performed by members of the St Louis Symphony Orchestra. Beethoven’s late quintets and quartets were almost certainly further distractions for Guston. Already in a downward spiral perched at the precipice of his “Hegira to the void\footnote{Ibid., 76}” though not quite ready to jump, Guston found reverie in classical euphoria. Meanwhile, viewing Picassos in
Golschmann’s collection Guston perhaps detected the storm through the distorted heads in Picasso’s own transitional works. Perhaps seeing the antithesis in Picasso’s void, explained his own journey and prophesied his need to find affirmation and catharsis in transition and transgression. Further, if Beethoven and Guston’s forays into escapism within the tumult of the city were distractions from the impending malaise. Picasso’s works in Golschmann’s collection and perhaps Guston’s first encounter with Max Beckmann’s 1944 work *Voyage* acted to draw him further towards his painterly milieu\(^\text{165}\). Ever the alien Guston though was aware of his coming transition and perhaps resigned to his Existentialist and Absurd journey\(^\text{166}\). St Louis’ distractions could perhaps be read as bad faith in Sartrean terms, and whatever Guston gleaned from this period was over-shadowed by his own need for affirmation perhaps in preparation for another hike to the summit.

More explicitly Guston’s motivation towards detachment was perhaps already piqued, by now reading Paul Valery, and the ubiquitous Kafka still a close confidant, Guston’s involvement was a mere aside. In a much later discussion at the New York Studio School in 1974 Guston would reveal much of his philosophy to the eager audience. Discussing Kafka Guston comments “Sometimes I think the greatest thing about Kafka was an achievement of a consciousness where he could hover above his own involvement”\(^\text{167}\). This is perhaps a verbal self-portrait, the distant messenger painter seeking escape to “bear witness” to the malaise of a trapped humanity. A humanity transfixed by the shadows of flames on the cave wall to which they are chained, while Guston, and others escaped, try to persuade them of freedom’s possibilities. Guston was perhaps not overtly so conceited but his own pursuance of this goal perhaps reveals a Sisyphean climb reflecting society back onto itself. Regardless of Guston’s emerging philosophy, the need to transcend and transgress was a more and more coercive force and tantalizingly hard to resist.

\(^{165}\) Ibid., 73


\(^{167}\) Coolidge, *Guston*, 250.
These experiences were seismic for Guston and began to metamorphose following his flight to Woodstock clutching his Guggenheim fellowship. An award with such strictures and high standards was perhaps not unusual to a painter already lauded and rewarded for his burgeoning potential. Guggenheim at this stage perhaps acted as a vehicle, Guston desirous of new adventure, now had the financial ambit to enact a disappearance. Further, perhaps tired of formal educational facilities, Guston disembarked from one paradigm in search of another. Despite his apparent success internally Guston was in chaos racked with self-doubt, searching for another angle or painterly medium with which to express his message. In this period a major study of Guston’s work had been conducted by the perceptive critic Mary Holmes. Miss Holmes had cited and discussed Guston’s use and apparent obsession with masks, particularly in psychological terms. Indeed, the half-masked child was identified by Miss Holmes as Guston himself, again present peeking through the gaps a mask within a mask perhaps, watching the world watching him\textsuperscript{168}. The fearful self-portrait trapped almost macabre, representing Guston’s turmoil and need for escape. Woodstock would provide itself as a bastion of isolation, at least initially; in reality, Guston’s descent into internal strife would be exacerbated further in isolation.

\begin{wrapfigure}{r}{.5\textwidth}
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\includegraphics[width=\linewidth]{Figure_18_Philip_Guston_The_Tormentors_1948_oil_on_canvas_103.9x153.7_cm_San_Francisco_Museum_of_Modern_Art_San_Francisco.jpg}
\caption{Figure 18, Philip Guston, The Tormentors, 1948, 103.9 × 153.7 cm, Oil on Canvas, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.}
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In 1947-1948 Guston would produce one of his most ambitious forays into abstraction to date. The Tormentors perhaps produced under the influence of new sparring partner Bradley Walker Tomlin, the image appears as opaque, a darkening. And though relying on elements of earlier more literal depictions of street conflicts, these figurative images were being absorbed into abstraction. The plane is pitch and textured, the painting throughout, oleaginous with white lines tracing the outlines of the familiar Klansman from earlier images. Perched immediately in the foreground sit three sharp red structures brazenly painted in red cadmium medium. Intermingling with the outlined figures is a mustard yellow disc and beam like object

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 81-95
reminiscent of the shield and wooden beam found in *The Gladiators* image. Tellingly two eyes appear at the base of the central red structure and having registered Guston’s affinity with masks what this represents is perhaps crucial.

The image appears pessimistic and interleave with Guston’s tendency towards disorder, its oppressiveness perhaps further interleave with both Guston’s mood and response to the holocaust. The work is riven with anxiety and rather than approaching balance gradually introduces a schism revealing a path to future abstract works. *The Tormentors* cleaves towards some journey, and not unusually given contemporary discourse perhaps foretells Existentialism. Further, when viewed considering Guston’s Abstract-Expressionist works and his arguably deviant position in the New York School, *The Tormentors* leans towards Guston’s belief that figuration was always present, even in abstractions. Also, still apparent in the image is Guston’s tendency to read images like books and books like images.\(^1\) Guston reads paintings as he reads Kafka, in so doing he presents the seer in *The Tormentors* with a journey darkening towards the Existential, anxious, complex and pessimistic, a disruption in the narrative.

*The Tormentors* was a painting which would be completed during Guston’s time in Italy and almost entirely abstract. The image perhaps recalls Kafka’s comment “I carry the bars within me all the time,”\(^2\) in its claustrophobia. Guston’s fascination with Kafka is somehow manifest in the journey. Like *Porch II* but further into the mire Guston’s literalism is disappearing into the void, not quite gone but recoiling into itself.\(^3\) In a less literal and figurative sense *The Tormentors* like *Porch II* is perhaps about identity and a searching for a mask that propels Guston towards an imagined affirmation; a vehicle to effect a retraction inwards, Guston is the antithesis to the past a distant speck reaching for the summit. But this image is a foreshortening, for Guston to find this chimerical self, a withdrawal must be affected, the painter must become the rebellious Other. An alien attempting to distort reality between antithetical forces at some summit, to perhaps forge a path through the nothingness. The atmosphere is suffocating the mask and Guston are now crushed within the flatness only present in vague lines, diagonals, and verticals. The structure is tensile, with Guston’s erstwhile presence torn as would be an earthquake, between opposing forces. It is almost as though Guston is straddling shifting tectonic plates strenuously trying to grasp at the forces between literal and abstract to affect some staggering feet of discovery or understanding. An

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\(^2\) Ibid., 78

understanding which might alleviate or ameliorate a sense of identity from its reality, and to achieve this, a disappearance must be enacted before some new plateau is found. What is also disappearing is connotation the literal self and notions are gradually becoming opaque. This image is the fear one experiences at the precipice, a fear of the unknown.172

Even when in contact with New York School cohorts Guston is antithetically caught, and in search of some resolution to his malady. Billeted in Woodstock, in need of perhaps of a more urban tumult, Guston appears parturient, on the verge of some breakthrough, which might provide a panacea. A panacea perhaps more likely to be found in the smoky pollution of the New York art scene. Guston perhaps seemed lost in the woodlands and rushing brooks of Woodstock, but the award of a Prix de Rome and the opportunity to escape further was perhaps the true panacea Guston needed.173 The prestigious award of the Prix de Rome coupled with a grant from the American Academy of Art and Letters was indeed escape for Guston. Perhaps an opportunity to finally explore, in person the Renaissance works Guston had so adored and analysed from afar. This of course would mean a painful and elongated time away from his wife and child. But one suspects Guston’s ardour and enthusiasm propelled him, caught somewhere between hysteria and melancholy.

Guston spent much of his life examining, extrapolating, and delighting in Renaissance images particularly those of Piero della Francesca and Paolo Uccello. Following the award of the Prix de Rome and a grant from the American Academy of Art and Letters, a lavish leaving party was thrown in Guston’s honour. Many of the New York School’s protagonists would attend Gottlieb, Stamos, de Kooning and of course Rothko. These, inchoate luminaries were perhaps perched in Guston’s thoughts before his departure to Italy, and doubtlessly pivotal to Guston’s centripetal descent. It would be in Italy that Guston would battle the tumult of the vortices within which he sat between the object and subject debate. Despite the idyll of post-war Italy Guston’s year was still punctuated between nervous tension and jaw-dropping excitement. Guston flitted about the Renaissance masters, “It was thrilling to go to Arezzo and Orvieto for the first time” he enthused.

Perhaps Modernism had in the contemporary and temporary sense eclipsed the Italian masters, but Guston found their presence beguiling. Further, post-fascist Italy, and for Guston particularly Rome with its confused position as home to iconophilia in an increasingly iconoclastic world was an eclectic mass of influences. Guston however was entrenched in

172 Ashton, A Critical Study of Philip Guston, 84.
173 Ibid., 82
174 Ibid., 82
The Tormentors, otherwise only working sporadically. Amid the Roman art scene, breaking bread with local artists and artisans let alone his fellow academics, Guston returned to his character of the Flaneur. Wondering the ancient city still attempting to converge on some cogent artistic path, something which satisfied Guston’s need to affect a sort of painterly confluence in his work. Rome also was the site of Guston’s ever more rapid descent from Realism; the still “image ridden” city, Guston’s words, was stained with political imagery, which perhaps recalls Guston’s comments “I’d rather be a poet than a pamphleteer”. The city’s art was Gestalt but riven with the kitsch remnants of a broken past which haunted the alleyways and narrow streets of Rome, but perhaps this was true of everywhere? “In a sense I was searching for my own painting” Guston would later confide in an interview. Excited by Siena and Florence as well as Rome the treasure trove of art exhausted Guston, eventually retiring to the island of Ischia to escape what had become an avalanche of images and influences. In the event, one of the few notable images Guston produced was that of Ischia itself. Simply entitled Ischia the ink on paper image was produced during Guston’s hiatus from the tumult of mainland Italian cities and art. If one looks closely there is perhaps just a hint of de Chirico within the pinched spires and narrow lonely alleyways. Guston’s Italian education converged in numerous of his works From Mother and Child to the tight streets of Ischia somewhere within these creations Piero looms, Uccello peeks and de Chirico who would emerge in Guston’s final re-figuration, orbit as flaneurs.

Before embarking home from Europe Guston would embrace Manet in France and marvel at El Greco and Goya in Spain. Unpicking their works and techniques Guston’s reading would lurch towards the tragic. The spectre of Existentialism must have seemed particularly prescient in 1949, perhaps galvanizing for Guston in terms of his position as alien

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175 Ibid., 82
176 Ibid., 61
177 Ibid., 82
178 Ibid., 72
depicting creation. And tragic writers would visit nihilism through Camus and Sartre on Guston’s works and direction. It seemed that these pressures were converging on Guston’s dark mood, pushing towards a void-like struggle against his tormentors. 

The Disappearance – Lost in Abstraction

“The books we need are of the kind that act upon us like misfortune, that make us suffer like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, that make us feel as if we were on the verge of suicide or lost in a forest remote from all human adaptation. A book should serve as an axe for the frozen sea within us.”

Guston’s metamorphosis coincided with his involvement and increasing dialogue with founder members of the New York School. A band of strangely divergent abstract artists who themselves conceded they had artistically and philosophically little in common. Perhaps one avenue the loosely associated group did agree on was their involvement philosophically in Existentialism and more pointedly the Nietzschean Paradox. Or at least a variation of such, which mingled between an interpretation of the Dionysian primitive and the Apollonian aesthetic. This discourse was intrinsically linked to Sartre and Camus, Guston was by now entrenched amid control and uncontrol. This would result in images bereft historic connotation searching for pure facility in a world infested with untrustworthy conventions. Intrinsically tied to these theories was a return to the flatness of the primitive, in-terms of the growth in interest throughout the 1940s in pre-Columbian art. Particularly, its flatness and growing understanding of the divergences in perspectival analysis between western perceptions of art and those considered tribal.

These often wildly distorted theories permeated the New York School artists in the form of Modern Man Discourse. Culminating in the notion found in Pollock, De Kooning and Guston et al… in the guise of a balance between control and uncontrol. This is manifested in a search for some affirmation from the antithetical forces between primitive and aesthetic, humanity depicted as forever torn. In the case of Guston’s cohorts particularly Robert

180 Ibid., 52
182 Ibid., 187
183 Leja, Reframing Abstract-Expressionism, 49-119.
184 Ibid., 47-119
Motherwell these hybridized theories had woven a paradoxical path which linked neatly with Motherwell’s Catholicism. Motherwell’s adoption of the negative positive forces led him towards the depiction of the eternal\textsuperscript{185}. Guston however, was in his painterly fashion in search of some other panacea, despite having begun to adhere to the abstract interpretation of art’s position in a muddled post-war, perhaps emergent diaphanous and volatile society. Certainly in-terms of abstraction as a cultural vehicle for the humanist, perhaps progressive ideology a somewhat recalcitrant and pseudo-political holding position was favoured. Abstract-Expressionism, at least in this version of events was anti-establishment, bearing their flag to the void in the face of an increasingly manipulated consumerist society\textsuperscript{186}.

Guston having returned from Italy in the autumn of 1949 was already involved with these concepts and developments. Initially returning to Woodstock positing himself in his austere lodgings with outdoor pump and outhouse, Guston would find these isolated surroundings suddenly intolerable. By winter Guston and friend Bradley Walker Tomlin had decided to flee to the city, thirsty for culture and inspiration. The two men took a loft apartment and studio at University Place, New York on 13\textsuperscript{th} Street. Tomlin would soon depart to another loft to work and Guston would find more appropriate lodgings at 51 West 10\textsuperscript{th}\textsuperscript{187}. The two remained close and along with Mercedes Matter spent bawdy often drunken evenings in heated discussion. This was where Guston finally began to acquiesce to the urge to “see if I could paint a picture without stepping back to look at it”\textsuperscript{188}. Guston wished to test his own innate grasp of structure, to see what might emerge through abstraction with paint as the expression of self.

Analysing Guston given his predilection for tumultuous process over the inert, and notwithstanding his involvement with primitive and aesthetic discourse delivers his

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure-20-philip-guston-loft-i-1950-43-2-x-55-9-cm-ink-on-paper-museum-of-modern-art-new-york}
\caption{Figure 20, Philip Guston, Loft I, 1950, 43.2 x 55.9 cm, Ink on Paper, Museum of Modern Art, New York.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 49-119
\textsuperscript{186} Ashton, \textit{The New York School}, 153-164.
\textsuperscript{187} Ashton, \textit{A Critical Study of Philip Guston}, 83.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 84
peripheral works as the most revealing. At the

![Image](image-url)

*Figure. 21, Philip Guston, Red Painting, 1950, 86.4 × 158.1 cm, Oil on Canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York.*

beginning of Guston’s journey the seer tends to receive Guston’s internal, perhaps unconscious transmissions as Kafka’s sense of literary discomfort. Kafka and Camus imply and aspire to the need for a negative concealed within a moment in a process to achieve the works apex. Guston understood that human perception of a finished work whether literary or through painting was not an end. But purely a moment when an optimal sense had occurred in the process whereby a work would become detached and almost sentient as Other from the maker. Particularly in Guston’s work one perceives a crossover of the literal concealed amongst abstraction. In *Loft I* a literal studio interior is being absorbed into a blank yet diaphanous space, the abstraction is so severe that the seer squints to attempt recognition. This frustrated discomfort is a deliberate distortion of perspective, the image is concealed as a rebellion into flatness. Recalling Marshall McLuhan’s observations in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* regarding tribal perceptions of humans when first encountering film. Guston in this and many images, reverses or distorts human perspective forcing the seer to consider the work from an alien perspective. This is repeated in *Red Painting* also 1950 though the colours render the image with more subtlety, in their obscuring of the literal even further, the seer is still caught in the observance of Guston’s positive and negative Nietzschean catalysts. The result being the summation of a pause or movement in the process where Guston has found affirmation enough to stop. In a sense the seer through

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189 Ibid., 88
altered perspective experiences Guston’s journey, captured in process, unable to mediate the slippage to its formal conclusion.

The plethora of red cadmium medium is even at this early stage a mishmash of erasures and corrections where literal forms lurch from the darkness. These forms appear as a growth from the flatness, centrifugally reaching towards the viewer, leaving one perplexed in determining the identity of the shapes. This style persuaded some critics to label Guston an Abstract-Impressionist, drawing comparisons to Claude Monet, an artist Guston had little interest in. In this development by Guston as an artist, and his pursuit of the void and its qualities of affirmation are literal expressions of Guston’s internal attempts to capture transient substance and defy political readings. However, it is hard not to recognize Guston’s literary influences as Existential and ultimately Absurd in his uniqueness as a painter in search of abstract absolution in a politically hostile environment. Since, amid the fight between form and abstraction Guston seems to accept a nihilism in-terms of the journey, whilst clinging to Camus’ Sisyphean humanist rebellion in the presence of some undefined figuration. Implicit in this observation is that throughout Guston’s so-called Abstract-Expressionist period some literal figuration remains lodged in his work, appearing as positive, negative catalysts in the process. Guston seems to want the finished painting to perch in its sentience, communicating some oblique but emancipating message to the seer in the hope of affecting epiphany.

Amid these revolutionary developments Guston, having moved to New York was appointed to a teaching post at New York University by former Iowa colleague Janson. Further, at Guston’s request Janson allowed him to teach a freshman drawing class rather than a graduate painting class. This allowed Guston to concentrate on his further development and forays into the void, rather than exhaust himself shedding his knowledge to individuals who knew his reputation. This anonymity and non-involvement eventually would become tiresome, and though Guston would teach graduate painting for a semester at Minnesota University, he would avoid teaching at this level again until the 1970s. Guston had spent three years absorbed in painting, extrapolating every gram of creativity within his antithetical nature. Further, still reading Mallarme and Flaubert, Guston perhaps observed their analytical natures corresponded with his and like Flaubert, Guston had accepted that he had a “deplorable mania for analysis”.

This was the period where the New York School developed their philosophical theories further. Guston already dialectically equipped and engrossed in works from Kafka to Flaubert joined in the Sartrean and Camusian fashion further in his painterly development. Guston, though considered a late comer to this band of avant-garde artists was finally involved in the flatness of painting abstract distortions. Perhaps in search of another panacea, or simply attempting mimesis in the plane at least with the likes of Mondrian. In an interview with long-time friend and musician Morton Feldman, Guston cites Mondrian as having the “Ability to seize the total”, unlike Kandinsky, whose works were “full of notions”. Guston was trying to achieve a seizure in the process, one perhaps previously observed in this essay. Guston’s antithesis is aiding a process that aims at achieving the

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196 Ibid., 65
197 Ibid., 58
198 Ashton, The New York School, 53-75.
199 Coolidge, Guston, 119.
200 Ibid., 35
201 Ibid., 35
“anxiety” Piero imparts on works like *The Baptism of Christ*. Except in Guston’s journey he strives like Flaubert for a sort of “creation” one which achieves an undoing of himself. Or in Flaubert’s words “what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style, just as the earth”. Guston would attempt this release in the moment, alongside, but still disparate from New York School cohorts, embellishing his style through drunken discourse in the Cedar Tavern in New York. Later Guston would claim in his works, a painting is a “continuing argument” to achieve this pause.

Guston had already departed from the structures of his literal past, which had yielded so much in-terms of adulation. There were perhaps multiple factors contributing to Guston’s flight from the traditional and soon to be malign American art scene. But this risk was a risk as stated previously which appeared to set Guston on a trajectory whether towards self-discovery or an escape into Guston’s alternative painterly self, painter as alien.

Another peripheral drawing which exhibits evidence of Guston’s internal strife and development is *Untitled* from 1951. Still in a transition period for Guston there is again a mass concealed with the abstraction. The seer continues to peer through an enmeshment of both sharp and thick lines in order to grasp some form which refuses to emerge from the sepia plane. An eye appears to be posited in the left central foreground, giving the drawing the appearance of a mask obscuring a centripetal hidden portrait. The image honours Guston’s tendency towards placing the viewer between the antithesis of abstraction and figuration, though this time perhaps returning.

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202 Ibid., 41
203 Ibid., 35
205 Ibid., 85
207 Ibid., 80-109
however amorphously to the mask motifs Guston became famous for. This image perhaps posits itself as a self-portrait, Guston’s face still just visible a darkly brooding eye peers as if from behind a mask in the centre of the mass. Despite a very human presence in this image one still feels that this personage is retreating perhaps carried away by some unknown gravitational force, into the void.\footnote{Ashton, \textit{A Critical Study of Philip Guston}, 84. The term void or “Hegira to the void” is used by Ashton and here used to denote Guston’s journey. Particularly in terms of approaching a Sisyphean form of affirmation. The summit being repeated pauses denoting progress in the void/journey; acting as vanguard moments in an eternalist process (life) and acting as catalysts to progress.}

In the event these figural images never completely disappear, a variety of objects whether read as self-portraits or other literal imagery remain\footnote{Slifkin, \textit{Out of Time}, 21-29.}. By 1952 in \textit{Untitled No. 9} Guston’s mood or comfort with the journey appears to have lightened. Ochre’s absorb and reach out to the seer, and though the mass is present it has been reduced to spits of reds, greens, browns, and yellows which demarcate the familiar central focal point. The customary discomfort remains but is now revised into a much more hopeful form, perhaps a rebellion to some other peak. Guston indeed appears to have settled into a journey, however never quite relinquishing the central form or figure. This places Guston as disparate from his New York School colleagues in-terms of his grasp of some distorted presence. Also, another element which might yield Guston’s new understanding philosophically of transcendence in form, a form which appears to lurch leftwards within the planar-field, perhaps is more-so being viewed from above, the artist panning in an ark above the disappearing distant shapes.

This naturally differs from Pollock, in so far as Pollock’s web-like metaphorical images such as \textit{Number 26A 1948} distort in terms of the whole flat space, abandoning perspective; any figural presence is lost in exploration of an unconscious Jungian universe\footnote{Leja, \textit{Reframing Abstract-Expressionism}, 258.}. \textit{Number 26A} is spatially distorted to force the seer to pivot their heads to fully appreciate the
images meaning and complexity. By comparison Guston in-terms of the Existential has retreated towards a journey, lost in a process seeking out the previously discussed moment of release. Pollock’s internal observations are externalized as an infinite universe kaleidoscopic and chaotic. Guston remains always tied to form and in such explores a more traditionally painterly abstraction, always reluctant to concede to chaos. Guston’s affirmation is amid negative and positive planes reaching for the unique, and furthermore appreciative of Piero’s “anxiety”. This perhaps reveals the more literary nature in Guston’s work particularly his reading of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard’s antipathy towards the Status Quo and conformity is ever-present in this period, commenting “As soon as a man appears who brings something of the primitive along with him, so that he doesn’t say, ‘you must take the world as you find it’ but rather, ‘Let the world be what it likes, I take my stand on a primitiveness which I have no intention of changing to meet with the approval of the world’ at that moment, as these words are heard, a metamorphosis takes place in the whole of nature”.

Metamorphosis and the Chameleon

In the 1950s Guston, amid the tumult of a rapidly changing America began to enjoy sustained success, perceived as a first generation Abstract-Expressionist Guston’s reputation was burgeoning. Though the likes of critic Hilton Kramer amongst others were rarely convinced by Guston, his work regardless of even internal strife continued to evolve perhaps even because of this strife. The combinations of malevolent and angelic forces were reaching a perhaps fuller pitch in Guston’s works during this period. Further, Guston’s reading was developing and underpinning his approach, his admitted need for a mysticism was fed not merely by Kafka but Paul Valery. At one point comparing the two, regarding their talent

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211 Ibid., 258
212 Coolidge, Guston, 41.
214 Ibid., 89-90
for detachment “I think a poet like Paul Valery has achieved something like that. About a super-consciousness.” This, however, is nothing if not indicative of detachment, a necessary struggle to shape character in the void. Furthermore, his developing friendships with composer John Cage and later Morton Feldman would see him attend lectures regarding Zen Buddhist philosophy by Suzuki. This perhaps contributed to the sense of their being a trial in-terms of Guston’s producing of images, which was also fundamental to his antithetical journey.

At the Peridot Gallery in New York in 1952 Guston was awarded his first one-man exhibition since 1945. The paintings were lauded by fellow artists and critics for their calligraphic amorphousness. The lightness and structure though present were now further muted as Guston took it upon himself to find his beloved pause. In White Painting 1951 these spectral glimpses of form are mute and illusory. The sparse browns and greys recoil into a diaphanous void. The literalness is disappearing centrifugally into a subversion of form, though still allowing the seer to battle and toil to rationalize or perform their own exegesis. The “Action” though could be read as a frozen form adrift in the process of the creation of an Existential Other. Despite the continuing presence of this antipathy between primitivism and Guston’s structural or craft the image maintains its ability to centre the seer in a futile Existential attempt at reconstruction. This work is perhaps one of Guston’s most accomplished, though hardly transitional its gentle wobble is almost autumnal and the antipathy almost a coercion into a Guston inspired counter-universe of semi-formlessness.

217 Ibid., 92
Many of the images exhibited contain this flux and Metiers, Guston’s search for a freedom and some primary expression of arts capacity for rebirth is perhaps axiomatic; Guston himself confessed to his pursuance of this moment of freedom in his work 219. “But imagine what a process it would be to un-numb yourself, to see it totally and to bear witness, 220” Guston is again affecting an escape using antithetical forces as catalysts for some valiant struggle. Caught between these primal forces of negative and positive motion Guston’s works espoused, in Valery’s terms, a Sufi mystic’s escape. Guston is so entrenched in this search for a sort of Abstract-Expressionist Acheiropoietas that the images appear as slippage into individual journeys charting a struggle to myriad summits 221.

The plane in works such as Painting No. 9 1952, also exhibited, has abandoned the autumnal, adopting a starkness which exudes a winter-scene. Its archetypal glimpses of form almost flicker, as though viewed through some amorphous mist. What is perhaps represented is Guston’s disappearance; masked amid the reds and spits of yellow and the single fleck of blue, busily contemplating his beguiling feat of strength.

The plaudits and acclaim awarded would give Guston a place at the Egan Gallery in New York. The painting’s Guston produced had an impressive vibrato style which perhaps owed much to his association with Feldman and Cage, their sparseness of tone and experimental vignettes intermingled with Guston’s own affirmatory philosophy 222. The images produced in this period would remain light and sparse, and the Egan Gallery’s patronage would platform Guston alongside his New York School confreres 223.

Outwardly Guston should have felt whole and accomplished, yet again a celebrated avant-garde artist, in intellectual company, evolving and searching for some purity within an ever-more commodified world. But Guston’s analytical nature would make internal strife as axiomatic as the journey Guston had embarked upon. It is important to note that within Guston’s intellectual

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219 Coolidge, Guston, 81.
220 Ibid., 81
222 Ashton, A Critical Study of Philip Guston, 92-93.
223 Ibid., 101
development, cited by Dore Ashton, was fusing however briefly with the acceptance of a constant evolution antithetical to Darwinian understanding which related to his reading of Teilhard de Chardin. A man who had discussed in The Phenomenon of Man that humans were still evolving, contrary to Darwin’s claims. Guston’s painting and understanding seems to correspond strongly with Teilhard de Chardin’s eternalist’s suggestion; a sort of philosophical struggle into the evolution of art appeared to be underway. Vanguard philosophy was banishing narrative in the face of the New York School’s success, depriving them of resonance as process rendered images as discredited. Suddenly, Guston alongside his confreres found himself in some diaphanous formless stew, their power to engage slipping away.

Within this ongoing discussion it is important to highlight that in concordance with his New York School confreres Guston, as Rosenberg purported was not an Existentialist. Alongside and in common with his cohorts, Pollock, Rothko, Newman et al…… Guston used Existentialism and perhaps Absurdism as facility to enact his art. Contained within was internal and external torment and the acceptance of some balance between control and uncontrol. These delineations previously discussed are part of an ongoing battle to maintain a version of humanist art in the face of a perceptibly intolerable world, both personally and politically. Each painter’s facilities were in Rosenberg’s sense Hamlet-esque characters, who, in some cases having chosen an appropriate mask continued their exploration. In Guston’s case constantly shedding and returning behind various disguises in search of some panacea. For Guston to affect this he had to acquire and utilize motion in his struggle to attain affirmation. Part of this attainment was a philosophical acceptance of a balance between the negatives and positives. In Camus’ terms any progress could not be attained by loyalty to either the Apollonian aesthetic favoured by those in “art for art’s sake” circles; or by maintaining a primitive tragedy riven visceral, and somewhat esoteric approach favoured through figuration. Camus himself states that “I shall certainly not choose the moment when we are beginning to leave nihilism behind to stupidly deny the values of the creation in favour of the values of humanity, or vice versa”. Guston always beset by antithetical forces, and alongside his New York School colleagues would embrace this charge; in Dore Ashton’s words to “serve suffering and beauty simultaneously”.

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224 Ibid., 122
226 Ibid., 227-246
227 Ashton, A Critical Study of Philip Guston, 89.
228 Ibid., 89
In Guston’s acceptance of process and his abandoning of an *a priori* approach even amid his fundamentally important Abstract-Expressionist period he perches in his studio as metaphoric judge, jury, and executioner of his creations. And even amid this, the most celebrated commercial period of Guston’s career, his drawing and works concede a literalness which, as another mask slipped a newer more elucidating mask began to re-emerge. In 1963s *Untitled* Guston uses lithograph to produce a study which appears both heterogeneous and homogeneous in illusive measure. Comparatively to works such as *Painting No. 9*, and though a different medium, the almost vanishing spectral figures have lurched centrifugally closer. The image is almost stripped bare, and fascinatingly, minus the customary amorphousness, the seer is invited to again attempt the extrapolation of form where abstraction rules. One can almost make out a bird perched on the top right of the edifice, and key, the form of a dog in the right lower foreground fades between figure and abstraction. This familiarity is perhaps a sign of Guston’s figural return, the obscured and tantalizing mass is all too reminiscent of images such as *Gladiators* and *Porch II*.

Having embarked in his transgressive malaise on a brief affair Guston would, scandalized by politics return to wife Musa McKim desperate for moral redress. Returning both to his family in Woodstock and to his pursuit of an affirmation. Confessing he wished to paint like the “only civilised man in paradise” Guston would strive and evolve despite secretly tiring of an art scene which had absorbed an alienated rebellious art and commodified even the sacred. Working tirelessly, rarely sleeping Guston became obsessive, painting without stepping back until the wee hours of the morning then finally collapsing next to Musa as dawn approached. Now reading Dostoyevsky, Guston’s position as crusader for truth was appearing more Absurd. Sat as plaintiff, defendant and judge the void was perhaps lacking in yield and skirting the periphery no-longer adequate for Guston to attain

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229 Ibid., 126
absolution\textsuperscript{233}. Manifest in this quest for affirmation, and amid the struggle discussed, was the Absurd truth that the void was human density filling emptiness, and frustratingly impotent if speaking truth to power. Guston though would produce perhaps his final abstract works of this period ever darkening and constantly within personal and intellectual discourse, form would begin to emerge\textsuperscript{234}.

This shift in focus can be highlighted from the early 1960s. Even as early as 1961’s \textit{Close-up III}, its filigree like hidden structures seem shrouded in amorphousness. Guston’s previous optimism and affirmatory winsomeness has disappeared, to be replaced by a withdrawal. This new affirmation sees the return of more literal, yet still abstract forms couched in erasures and a darkening transgressive ambit. The image appears a mess of textured corrections once black, as Guston claimed constantly amended and scraped to grey, of varying shades in framing, reveal some figure. As was Guston’s custom structures hover halfway between the plane, and almost provide the illusion of perspective. These new forms when compared to images such as \textit{Attar} have centripetally moved into the foreground, and though still shrouded in some diaphanous ether are emboldened. \textit{Close-up III} still appears oleaginous, a seemingly chaotic collection of violent proposals, inviting the seer to engage. The central black shape focuses the viewer seeming to collect the assorted structures coercing one into a futile attempt at recognition. Below the central form a mustard slash demarcates a smaller black mass. To the right of this figure a vertical black lamp-like structure, with green appendage frames the activity. The lower plane of the image features further mustard glows which give the impression of a background perspective on the plane as if light were emerging from behind some screen.

As always in Guston’s abstract work a journey is being undertaken, towards some shrewd revelation. The darkening palette perhaps yields Guston’s growing doubt and

\textsuperscript{233} Ibid., 129 \\
\textsuperscript{234} Coolidge, \textit{Guston}, 258.
disgruntlement with both his surroundings and the New York School’s portrayal. Further, within this withdrawal is a pursuit of the Existential. An emancipation from that which is lurching towards the staid, and a need in Absurd terms to break the “frozen sea” now exploited by “the long ears of the mob.” The structures emerging sit within the paradox of the visceral and aesthetic, caught in a process, perhaps moving towards another metamorphosis.

This image seems familiar, perhaps if recalling Loft I; buried in Guston’s battle and antithetical pursuits a lamp vertically demarcates the right side of the plane. The central daub of black is perhaps a self-portrait again a broad bellicose hand holds a spectral paintbrush. The background mustards flicker in the lower sector of the images, and a fleshy horizontal slash further demarcates the larger black form from a more distant lower figure.

This and other images from the 1966 Guggenheim exhibition are reminiscent of Guston’s conversation with Harold Rosenberg. Guston revealing his antithetical nature in comments regarding the irrelevance of preconceived images; though Guston’s further alienation is clearly leading to another transgression, he is yet to fully rid himself of this disguise. Guston in interview is paradoxically still avoiding figuration claiming it to be too abstract and returning to Valery. “A bad poem is one that vanishes into meaning” Guston confides, going further in comparison stating, “In a painting in which this is a room, this is a chair, this is a head, the imagery does not exist – it vanishes into recognition.” Both at the Guggenheim exhibition and Guston’s later retrospective at the Jewish Museum in New York the media were as usual less than enthusiastic. Hilton Kramer’s comments about Guston’s gentility were followed by cutting vitriol claiming that a “painter so limited in range of feeling who restricts himself severely to slender and much-repeated vocabulary is not the ideal candidate for an exhibition of the sort currently installed.” The ever commercial and insular New York press had failed to understand, and under the hurly-burly of the emergence of Andy Warhol’s pop-art and his acolytes the media had naively disappeared into bigotry.
Others though including British critics of the time had taken a more nuanced view of these images David Sylvester commenting “the paintings are intensely withdrawn and private, with the privacy of the dark not the ivory tower”\(^{243}\). These critics recognised a truth emerging from images such as \textit{Inhabitor} 1965 and somewhat corresponding with the theory that abstract art produced a series of self-portraits. Guston’s emerging, still diaphanous forms were representations of shifts in the struggles of dark and light. The erasures in \textit{Inhabitor} still pertain to an evolving dimension, bereft clear form though appearing again centrifugally to dare the seer to lift narrative from otherwise opaque almost colourless images\(^{244}\). Perhaps this affect is even more damning in \textit{The Light} 1964 the grey erasures which Guston claimed were distorted corrections, originally black conceal ghosts of his increasing discomfort with his alien surroundings, perhaps erasing himself towards the promontory of some other mountain to conquer. Also, perhaps the evermore amorphous forms paradoxically and especially comparative to images such as \textit{Untitled} 1963 see the emergence of Guston’s need to depict literal figures despite his claims to the contrary\(^{245}\).

There is certainly a retraction back into some ether in these images, an archetypal Guston-esque antithetical preparation for change or transgression. \textit{The Light} though has a warmth perhaps a back-ground optimism or hope which underpins Guston’s trajectory. The three central figures are emerging despite the apparent gloom of Guston’s mood, and change to hectic darkness, there is a question in the looming of figural identity and a need to communicate. And within the paradox of the amorphous grey this hope suggests new forms might arise as Guston’s final mask dissolves.

\(^{243}\) Ibid., 134
\(^{244}\) Coolidge, \textit{Guston}, 48-49.
\(^{245}\) Slifkin, \textit{Out of Time}, 29-100.
Chapter Three - The Great Vacillator

“Out here in the perimeter there are no stars, out here we IS stoned immaculate”246.

Amid the intensity of the 1960s the American propaganda machine galvanised, the Vietnam War was a Public Relations disaster, and the public took to the streets in outrage.247 All in all, Guston’s environment could not have been more antithetical to the ideals espoused in the likes of Kafka and Paul Valery, and amongst the progressive circles prolific before the Second World War. With Pollock dead the New York School’s dominance and relevance was waning, and worse its direction had been commandeered by a veraciously anti-progressive government fuelled by the Cold War. America was rapidly returning to exceptionalism, rendering Abstract-Expressionism’s progressive “Hegira to the void”248 opaque whilst cowering under the umbrella of anti-Russian propaganda. Guston, of course pursuing his own agenda, witnessed the tumult of ever-deepening enmity between the USA and the USSR. From the 1961 erecting of the Berlin Wall to JFK’s assassination in 1963, political tensions escalated between the two incumbent superpowers.

Despite the images of liberty expressed by the American propaganda machine the reality of American life, especially for African Americans was appalling. Dr Martin Luther King is perhaps a tragic symbol of a period where progressive change appeared to be on the march, and where freedom and equality for all seemed to be within society’s grasp. In reality, and no doubt partially thanks to the Cold War, American conservativism and the old racial and socio-political structures not only remained extant but were perhaps ultimately reinforced. Further, amid this chaos and what seemed like a genuine cultural revolution, the authorities stamped down any dissent aggressively where possible. “The message” so to

246 Jim Morrison, “Stoned Immaculate” (Elektra Records, 1970)
speak, “was the medium" for every progressive gain the establishment tightened their grip on political discourse, while counter-cultural individualism circumvented collective action. In the wake of the Kent State University shootings, and the horrors of the Vietnam War American Art, particularly abstract art seemed tepid, out of sync, and despoiled by establishment exploitation. Of course, other artistic deviations were emerging, not least Minimalism, and perhaps more pointedly, in terms of message Conceptual Art. Both political events and the increasingly generic nature of the art scene must have seemed for Guston as though his ethics were being discarded for a retrograde chaos. Guston himself observed about this emerging new order, and buffeted by personal frustrations that the world seemed like one big “Concentration Camp.”

As the 1960s begot the 1970s Guston and the remains of the New York School were, at least in the eyes of the critics becoming cliché. Andy Warhol’s generation sought perhaps to excise Abstract-Expressionist purity, replacing it with the now, the current the ever tangible. Guston’s darkening moods returned, his art enclosing around its pollen rich fecund centre. The world outside of Woodstock was changing too, the Vietnam War and student protests buttressed against Richard Nixon’s incumencies in the Whitehouse. Amid this tumult Guston grew ever more frustrated and perhaps felt the yearning of the amorphous and transitory world between the purely aesthetic and some form of avant-garde. The Abstract-Expressionist movement for all its success was not only becoming staid in the eyes of the critics but seemed to have acquiesced to the dogma of the market. The esoteric experiments in colour and internal voyages into the void were to yield, perhaps unsurprisingly, little but the emptiness of time. Guston’s comment regarding Einstein’s notion that “density is man’s invention” was perhaps prescient to the slow demise of Abstract-Expressionism. The political maelstrom of the period exacerbated Guston’s frustration, he and the remaining abstractionists could still command staggering market values, but their audience was ever high-brow and insular. The absurdity of and ever narrowing void was not lost on Guston commenting “The war, what was happening to America, the brutality of the world. What kind of man am I? sitting at home, reading magazines, going into a frustrated fury about everything, and then going into my studio to adjust a red to a blue.” Guston complained at the time of feeling “schizophrenic” caught

253 Ibid., 178
between opposing worlds, yet unable to choose which mask to don or which road to take.

This is perhaps key to Guston, or a key in-terms of Absurdity. True, the positives and negatives are a vehicle for progress and change. An aid to Guston’s achieving affirmation\textsuperscript{254}. But the Absurd is a constant watching and alienated consciousness in transcendence changing the pitch of the primitive and aesthetic paradox to remain in Existential orbit. Caught between mundanity and the crest of a vanguard wave to affirmation. This diaphanous space in the depths of Guston’s depression is a paradigm of constant flux and buffeting, a universal soup of transgression and creation which needs to be agitated. The result of this stirring of the cauldron, somewhere in the periphery between form and un-form is key. The emerging shapes of Guston’s experimental works from 1967 to the Marlborough Gallery opening lurch towards storytelling, highly literary but complexly abstract. There is a deviant energy pulsing through these images which speaks of an epiphany in Guston’s depressive state\textsuperscript{255}.

Interwoven with Guston’s transient, agitated state were newer relationships to compete with the old. Guston had befriended American poet Clark Coolidge in 1968 and the pair’s debates and interests would reflect Guston’s direction\textsuperscript{256}. The sense of a \textit{fait accompli} had re-emerged even prior to this meeting, Guston’s pause became ever more linguistic. Following the Jewish Museum Exhibition Guston became irascible in his transient dissent, America and Guston’s world were becoming ever more detached, the art world becoming ever more guided by profit. In those two years after Guston’s final truly abstract exhibition, Guston could be found toiling over paintings which would ultimately yield nothing the artist deemed worthy.\textsuperscript{257} He would, however produce a series of remarkable drawings imbued with an abstract oriental calligraphy, and definition no less effecting than his previous works.

Executed in India Ink on a stark white plane or sepia cream parchment, these images perform

\textsuperscript{254} Ashton, \textit{A Critical Study of Philip Guston}, 177.
\textsuperscript{256} Ashton, \textit{A Critical Study of Philip Guston}, 160-161.
\textsuperscript{257} Ashton, \textit{A Critical Study of Philip Guston}, 177.
an abstraction of minimalism. Appearing, even in their apparent simplicity, weighty, dense, still toiling with some transgression, perhaps finding a fresh route towards a summit with even more alacrity. 1967’s *Off Center* is one of this plethora of silent almost poetic contemplations, still abstract but parturient with form. Perhaps this could be read as less literal and more literary the image appears a statement of Guston’s Absurdity, dually predicated on the artist’s gargantuan shift in direction and an emerging need to communicate in a more literal style. And again, in this summation antithesis reigns supreme even amid an inchoate paradigm shift.

Guston himself confided in an interview the conflict of the time and their particularly paradoxical and fractious character.

“It wasn’t a transition in the way it was in 1948, when one feeling was fading away and a new one had not yet been born. It was two equally powerful impulses at loggerheads.”

Dore Ashton goes further still in a quote where Guston states that this battle between the abstract and the emergent need for the literal occurred “on the level of drawing not only because one’s impulses surface more rapidly in drawing but because the drawings seemed to symbolize the issue.” These images though are suggestive of a lurching towards something antithetical to minimalism distanced from non-art and pop-art oozing aggression and conflict; thick black lines seem branded into their antithetical interpretation. Guston retired to his studio, perhaps in preparation once more to coalesce as much as was possible for someone defined by their duality of force and form. The tumult in Guston’s world was perhaps beginning to emerge from the diaphanous ether. This tumult is perhaps at an aggressive apogee in Guston’s 1967

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258 Ibid., 154
259 Ibid., 154
Preparatory Drawing for in Memory of my Feelings Frank O’Hara’s book colluding in calligraphic violence with O’Hara’s elegant prose.

The Silent Perimeter and The Great Reveal

Ultimately, these developments are perhaps symbols of Guston stalking another precipice. One where his angling and position as peripheral Existentialist figure becomes authentically Absurd, particularly when considering the unique direction Guston chose. In 1968 Guston whether through conflict or transgression discarded his past once more turning antithetically towards images and actions which perhaps found connotative facility in the Grotesque. Guston’s retreat was again to Woodstock; still pursuing clarity of line, again refusing to step back from the canvas. What Guston yielded in this new adventure was a return to what was an amalgamation of influences which contentiously emerged as literal figurative creations. Now painting on small panels with acrylic Guston produced what he referred to as “common objects”. This began with the incisive vertical lines and horizontal ledgers of books, or what appeared to be stone tablets or heavy tomes with biblical yet caricatured edges. This tendency toward caricature was sewn into the fabric of Guston’s work, particularly if viewed within the paradigm of his 1930s paintings. Here this repressed tendency towards what he referred to as “Crappola” began to emerge as at least one element in the new distortion. Recalling Guston’s childhood love of Krazy Kat though riven with irony and satire these earlier forays into literal comment are a palpable release for Guston, perhaps now freed from the insularisms of what had become a tired repetitive art scene.

The images rapidly began to metamorphose into other illusively mundane objects. Drawn as Guston would later confide to new collaborator Clark Coolidge within an Absurdist’s antithetical sanctuary caught between the fully formed and the mere spectral idea of its existence. Again, Guston’s catalyst is caught in a prism between the primitive and aesthetic, where neither is an absolute and the sense of ongoing process and of the result as un-finished is key. This anti-determinism is echoed in conversation with Coolidge in 1972.

260 Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 303-368.
262 Ibid., 157
263 Slifkin, Out of Time, 29-100.
“If the image locks itself in there too quickly, or if I’m aware of it too much before I do it, then it’s boring and I wipe it out”264.

The new images suddenly transform into loafs of bread, buildings, cups and canvasses themselves. Lurching towards the seer with lurid colour the critic’s response to these images would perform as Fellini’s clichéd characters in a dogmatic circus misunderstanding and misinterpreting Guston’s sly yet angry wit.265 Guston was still steeped in Kafka and Kierkegaard urging his own primitive rebellion against the so-called “Objective”266 world, perched on the promontory of a Sisyphean hill smirking at those entangled in the maelstrom below. These images, in their evolution begin to mock, satirize, and expose the ironically Grotesque character of an anesthetized culture.

The above Untitled image from 1968 perhaps bares out Dore Ashton’s comments in A Critical study of Philip Guston positing himself as Eiron “who knows but pretends not to know”267. Guston’s literal image is punctuated with an affirmatory elation when reaching the pinnacle of his climb. Untitled almost seems to speak to his observations regarding the propagandized art scene, caught in a malaise before defeating his Alazon, perhaps embodied in Guston’s multiple foes not least the disappearance of painterly values in the hurly-burly pop-art atmosphere of the 1960s.268 One also cannot but observe in Guston’s figurative unmasking the emergence of those same ephemeral fluctuations abstracted in images such as in Untitled 1963, discussed earlier. The suggestion in Guston’s earlier abstraction has been revealed perhaps in Guston’s, by now seething need to pass comment on a culture he perceived as disintegrating into banality and artifice269.

In achieving this metamorphosis Guston’s process was reversed, sketches such as Untitled 1968 were produced without Guston stepping back. Guston had arrived at a

Figure. 34, Philip Guston, Untitled, 1968, 45.7 × 60 cm, Charcoal on Paper, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

264 Coolidge, Guston, 185.
265 Dore Ashton, A Critical Study of Philip Guston, 156-158.
266 Ibid., 157
267 Ibid., 159
268 Slifkin, Out of Time, 20-29.
269 Coolidge, Guston, 184-212.
transition in his processes where, like the stymied culture and art scene Guston observed, his own emotions had been posited as a distant colour pallet for the artist to manipulate. In wanting to create works which achieved the desired sentience in their own orbit Guston now “no longer permitted” even “the process to determine the meaning\textsuperscript{270}”. Even in literal images Guston’s alienated Existential persona was still hamlet-esque, without facility, attempting to manipulate the players.\textsuperscript{271} In this pursuit Guston would further claim to not want “emotion and ambiguity to stick to me like seaweed\textsuperscript{272}”. However, familiar motifs seem to appear repeatedly, notional slippage occurs as hands denoting a new narrative; and throughout Guston explores a new reflective un-totality, one where historiographic connotation is diffuse.

The forces controlling Guston in 1968 were cathartic, and a literal figurative purging of previous masks to reveal those influences inhibited by the emptiness of the void were burgeoning. The politics of the period was as discussed, tumultuous serving to hasten Guston’s transgression towards an antipode position as reflection of America’s decline. From student protests to the Vietnam War, Guston witnessed an ever more distressing picture, one which perhaps found its destructive apogee at the chaotic 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago.\textsuperscript{273} Amid this furore Philip Guston’s ever variegating mask began to slip, surrounded by the\textit{ Grotesque} Nixon administration, Guston’s relationships and paintings began to reflect this emergence from inertia.

The antithetical nature which fuelled Guston’s success became perhaps more overt, less intangible particularly when considering his relationships. While Coolidge would appear as representative of the high art Guston had previously been exponent, writer Philip Roth would appeal to his need for “Crappola\textsuperscript{274}” surveying “acres and acres of junk\textsuperscript{275}” in city emporiums. Roth, having also escaped himself to Woodstock was equally intransigent in the face of the contemporary maelstrom and political tumult. The two men had formed a bond when Roth having also felt the need to “depart from our culture\textsuperscript{276}” billeted himself in Woodstock’s bohemian atmosphere. The men talked and shared a love for distorting the credo of those in the upper echelons, through a satire and grasp of the\textit{ Grotesque} all but

\textsuperscript{270} Dore Ashton, \textit{A Critical Study of Philip Guston}, 157.
\textsuperscript{272} Dore Ashton, \textit{A Critical Study of Philip Guston}, 157.
\textsuperscript{273} Ibid., 156
\textsuperscript{274} Ibid., 157
\textsuperscript{275} Ibid., 157
\textsuperscript{276} Ibid., 156
absent from the now arguably blinkered cultivated classes. Guston though as Roth confessed was “onto something” elated by the isolation, Guston would make his final break from the establishment. The two men’s bond was perhaps not simply in alienation but that Absurd sense of detachment. Able to perceive the Absurdity of their surroundings while maintaining an Existential distance from those without the capacity for introspection and self-analysis. In Roth this manifested itself in *Portnoy’s Complaint* and later the satire inherent in *Our Gang*.

The elation and euphoria Guston experienced from his Absurd *Eiron--esque* position was perhaps the temporary eradication of doubt. This euphoria is perhaps present in the sharp satire in Guston’s caricatured depictions of President Nixon. Produced in the autumn of 1971, after the much-maligned Marlborough Gallery exhibition the images are joyful, cutting and sequenced almost in story-board format. The most obvious joke apparent in 1971’s *Untitled* image of Nixon; the mood of abandon and hedonistic freedom are rife. The metaphysical shackles are off, and Guston’s literalism and figuration suggest Nixon as an incompetent asleep at the wheels of power. The parchment sits at the bottom centre foreground of the planar field, a litany of signs and symbols; characters unseen by a napping “Dick” Richard Nixon, the fountain pen dormant, perhaps characterizing the wilful ignorance of the administration.

Throughout this period, happily isolated Guston’s alienation and new freedom yielded him as the messenger once again leaving him gloriously immersed. This paradoxical position had perhaps become Guston’s *lingua franca* throughout his career, but perhaps never more so than pre and post the Marlborough Gallery images. Within this later oeuvre Guston’s *Topos* re-emerges amid the *Grotesque* distorted vision posited *ex-voto* morphing into

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277 Ibid., 157  
278 Ibid., 156  
279 Ibid., 158  
buildings, clocks, houses like pueblos and hands. This sense of a genuine panacea guiding Guston’s actions is echoed by his comments, “Until now, I haven’t felt ready – not to prove anything – just to be ready, or rather, to be in a position to feel I have done something worthwhile.”

This position was perhaps always accessible, even in Guston’s most abstract works, in their attempts to distort and disturb find a truer medium in this period. As in his youth Guston had found facility, though not in terms of Rosenberg’s Hamlet-esque facility as an action painter, instead Guston conveyed multiple facilities in his observance and comment on the socio-political environment. Guston’s reading from Kafka to Gogol yields the Absurd; outsider’s aware of the world as a contradictory bubble, distant, alien and in Guston’s case yearning to depict or reflect truth in the face of dogma and artifice. There is in this emergence a converging of ideals, Guston the Abstract-Expressionist never quite convinced of non-figurative flatness, has observed it becoming trite and parodied. The “Hegira to the void” yielded an esoteric vacuum exploited by profiteering, and given Guston’s expressiveness was a spent force, one which, in the face of a world abandoning Humanism was incapable of communicating effectively. Another yielding presence throughout Guston’s post-war career is perhaps expressed best as a Camusian sense of rebellion, and though previously expressed in abstract terms now needed figurative motifs to expose Guston’s increasingly stymied conception of art and truth. This re-figuration perhaps marries the Motherwellian need to abstract as progressive saviour of an intolerable world with a Sartre-esque need to effect change through reflecting injustice in images.

This is of course conjecture, Guston’s outrage is facility transformed into a need for both his own freedom and to comment on the world around him. After all what is an artist besides a frontiersman delivering the unseen beyond the perimeter? The abstract art world had been indoctrinated into an establishment which ran increasingly counter to Guston’s ideals, perhaps politically as well as artistically. An identifying mark of those deemed Absurdists in their development from Existentialists is the protection of authenticity in Sartrean terms. In Guston’s world Art is produced by free Artists in search of affirmation and by using a mosaic of positive and negative forces to affect their Sisyphean climb. Art in

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these terms cannot be represented by profit or greed, in short, the vacillations of fashion and money cannot dictate and stymy the message.

**Marlborough the Grotesque and Fading Humanism**

Much of Guston’s panoply of works which appeared at the Marlborough Gallery Exhibition was informed still by Harold Rosenberg’s definition of “action painting”\(^{285}\). Its metamorphosis is inherent in images of buildings transforming into boots, chairs and desks into hands and other literal imagery. These though are evolutions and distortions of grotesquery “action”\(^{286}\) parodied in figural representation, the searching for line and abstraction in imagery with deliberate clumsiness. The images appear as a paradoxical usage of broken absolutes of truth now deemed indeterminate in the face of new philosophical distortions. The staging of these events had materialised during and leading up to the Nixon images. In many ways’ straight satire and caricatured outrage, which might appear in the *New York Times*. Earlier more peripheral images like *Haven* 1967 yield multiple readings, these images though, are experimental and emerge as the artist disengaging with the diaphanous world of the now arguably staid Abstract-Expressionists. 1967 is a time of both personal and external crisis, Guston was approaching the climax of an affair with a younger woman.\(^{287}\) The images produced hover tentatively between literal form and the fast disappearing abstraction. *Haven*, presented Ink on Paper, is a filigree of lines within which Guston’s literary inclinations and experiences flirt with the seer\(^ {288}\). One accurate line could force the emergence of several objects a building, or chair might communicate its presence, if formally introduced, and were Guston to manipulate the images correctly. The adding of line in this image is contingent


\(^{286}\) Ibid., 87


\(^{288}\) Slifkin, *Out of Time*, 29-100.
with a growing frustration and need to deviate from accepted parlance. One mark performed on this image might yield absolution communicating connotative facility, or historic notions.

From this early point to the Marlborough images appears a tangible linguistic development, still better news Guston and wife Musa had reconciled; Guston was settled again. Following the opening of the Marlborough Exhibition, Guston accompanied by his family obviated both the critics and former comrade’s excoriating judgements from sight and mind, fleeing to Italy. Other comrades such as Harold Rosenberg would remain positive in their readings; astutely commenting in his review for The New Yorker, that the images represented a “liberation from detachment”289.

Italy then had been a stereotypical escape for Guston, detachment literally from the milieu and a chance to recuperate and reflect. Commenting to a friend on his return Guston said “you didn’t hear from me in Europe because I didn’t have anything to say”. Continuing “I became so depressed – deflated and low over the reception, rejection, misunderstandings of the show that the only thing I could do to mitigate my bitterness was a resolve to clam up and travel extensively”290. Guston perhaps wished or hoped at least for those claiming to be experts and critics, or at least fellow-travellers and artists to grasp his complex message in images such as City Limits 1969. Paintings such as these and Studio also 1969, are now lauded as seminal works of the late Modernist period; however, these images were further maligned as a “mandarin pretending to be a stumblebum”291 by ubiquitous critic for The New Yorker Hilton Kramer. Guston’s message far from reductive was a subversion of the establishment doctrine, they appear now as perhaps found moments pinpointing the crises of twentieth century culture.

The Marlborough images appear to earmark a realisation rather than an emergence of newer paradigms, in that they seek to reveal how previous attempts at conveying truth in abstraction were futile. Further, that from Guston’s Absurdist position the “Hegira to the void”292 was fruitless and one of the most effective methods by which one can predicate a true reflection is through grotesquery, using the historically notional to affect a re-positing of substance. This is a response to the discredit of words, contemporary late twentieth century philosophy’s advent has in McLuhan’s terms created a universal distortion, one where

290 Mayer *Night Studio*, 158.
information technology has rendered the world narrative chaotically free and subsequently untrustworthy.

In *City Limits* 1969 Guston with few of his typical erasures has practiced an antithetical art in discarding his own plethora of painterly techniques in search of some new narrative. In the faux-clumsily applied red cadmium medium, and literal yet caricatured *topos* hides a Humanist attempting to relay frustration at a lost narrative\(^{293}\). Though once again motifs materialize, the ubiquitous hand, now smoking a cigarette adds to the confusion, these would reappear as slippage in related works. Meanwhile the image simultaneously exhibits, through the *Grotesque* a need for the freedom to continue reconstructing a new narrative which might communicate a passage through the chaos. Robert Slifkin likens Guston’s Marlborough Gallery images to Bob Dylan *Self-Portrait* album. There are as Slifkin contends numerous similarities between the two men, not least in their angry discarding of previously successful methods in deconstructing and protesting their macabre discovery. A discovery revealed by modernism’s demise, though only presented in the two men’s epiphany’s, that far from producing truth in art, their identities are collective results of conventions. Notions of influence which have failed in previous incarnations to communicate a collective narrative which could maintain Humanist faith regarding purpose\(^ {294}\). In essence why not assimilate the notional and forbidden. Indeed, why not learn to manipulate these conventions to affect change?

The facture of *City Limits* though deliberately caricatured as if in naïf-rebellion is still executed with the supreme skill of a painter perhaps woke to some new purpose. The image appears to have a diaphanous pink hue almost like a patina shrouding the narrative. This affect coupled with the pastel shading of the plane adds to the sense of caricatured

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\(^{293}\) Slifkin, *Out of Time*, 29-100.
\(^{294}\) Ibid., 29-100
exaggeration. Further, the sloppy unmanicured application of paint paradoxically draws the seer into some *Krazy Kat* benevolence, while simultaneously undermining the literalness of any message. Furthermore, the structure of the car is not merely a caricature but also an abstraction of figuration. Its unevenly drawn wheels and simplistic cartoon flying saucer appearance contribute to the images’ sense of irony. The reappearance of the Klan figures commonly believed to be a denotation of Guston’s pre-abstract past seem squished together clumsily. The figures are focused on some perhaps nefarious pursuit, eyes cast to the right of the image. As to the identity of the figures, commentators having suggested Pollock, Rothko and of course Guston himself, though this is perhaps still somewhat debatable. However, the rear most figure is almost certainly readable as Guston, still masked embarking on some journey smoking one of his customary Camel cigarettes.

Further investigations into the vehicle’s position on the plane yields the impression of it being almost static, the image is bereft a sense of motion, though the *topos* implies a journey. The perspective of the plane is a customary Guston cityscape hence the painting’s title. With buildings, notwithstanding the partially obscured skyscraper to the far left of the image a deep almost terracotta blur which appears to envelope the figures’ comedy vehicle. In terms of Existential properties or the presence of Absurdism, Guston has by this composition strongly recorded his disgruntlement at both global and domestic politics. Further, he has become estranged from an increasingly insular art scene within which he was never wholly accepted. Guston’s literary nature and previous painterly vacillations speak of a character frustrated by the doctrinaire and seeking to pursue some avenue capable of engaging more pointedly with an audience. It’s as though Guston, tired of the void, and perceiving a changed exploitative environment has chosen to deviate, destroy and in so doing create chaos anew.

In Existentialist terms of course purpose is perhaps lost and Absurdist’s striving for the act of rebellion is integral to human agency. For Guston, these tumultuous surroundings reflected by the chaos and failure of art to affect its empiric surroundings yields nothing but impotent cynicism. *City Limits* amid the profusion of images in Guston’s final decade is antithetical in acceptance of circumstance and yearning to find agency in this new milieu. Elemental in Guston’s repudiation of past images is the acceptance of the pop-art chaos perhaps refined by the likes of Saul Steinberg or Andy Warhol\(^{295}\). Perhaps where it differs is in the inadvertent sense in the seer that rather than toying with this new world of mosaiced

\(^{295}\) Rosenberg, *Art and Other serious Matters*, 137.
reality, Guston is still attempting to posit a subtle convergence message in the so-called kitsch representations bursting from the canvas.

It is not my intention to suggest however that Guston has joined this new movement of art as materiality, rather that he has recognised the futility of previous attempts to emancipate himself. Guston in this is not capitulating but using newer dialectics to search for affirmation. Further, with cohorts Roth and Coolidge, Guston is still in antithetical space caught in another Nietzschean paradox between the “Crappola”296 of the kitsch and the refinement of high art. Again, these forces now centrifugal rather than centripetal are perhaps encompassing of a burgeoning milieu of emerging philosophies, using chaotic forces to deliver art anew. Inadvertently, and paradoxically intentionally Guston rips up the accepted lingua franca of Minimalist anti-logorrhoea and its pursuit of affirmation297. In its place Guston is revealing a newer mask perhaps, and in a more conceptual manor apes Steinberg and his comrades. Rather than choosing from the medium of modern culture as in pop-art’s, Guston instead yields to cherry-picking from modernism’s chaotic history. The result though is astonishing, and intrinsically linked to the hostile response to the Marlborough images. In subverting high art through grotesquery, Guston has, not for the first time ascended and affirmed himself anew. Predicating his position on a unique pinnacle Guston rejects pop-art’s materiality of the now, while still using its facility, meanwhile rejecting Michael Fried and others, in the emptying out for the seer of historic connotation. This balancing act posits Guston in a malign position. However, the images yearn to repatriate literal meaning through the abstraction of figuration’s marriage to historiography. Both honouring “action painting”298 involved methods of creation through paint and manipulating figural images to communicate human agency.

297 Slifkin, Out of Time, 29-100.
298 Harold Rosenberg, Art and Other serious Matters, 74.
The Apotheosis – Pinpointing the Process

“History is a well of conclusions to be drawn from”

The Marlborough Gallery and other images from the last decade of Philip Guston’s life deal both directly and indirectly with numerous subjects. They succeed in revisiting Guston’s own internal strife and yet manifest themselves as contemplations of society and its growing confusion. In terms of the Absurd not simply in images but in Guston’s behaviour and deeds, alienation appears deeply embedded in Guston’s experience and directed by his reading. From Kafka to Camus and a plethora of other isolated intellects multiple readings lurch forth and interleave with Guston’s experiences. In every Guston-esque paradigm there are certain givens which reoccur and are perhaps deeply psychological. Though what appears in Guston’s imagery is, whatever he intended, riven with the detritus of his experiences. And so, it becomes purely a matter of reconstructing both Guston’s documented experiences and forging an argument around how these historiographic and dialectical positions appear.

In images such as Studio 1969 Guston is perhaps reaching his apogee, finally freed from his chains and in open rebellion these images reveal the true extent of Guston’s facility. Despite the recondite elements in these images there has been a repatriation for Guston into temporality. However, each image seems incomplete, perhaps tied to process hidden within repeated motifs. On one level Studio is a straight satire, a self-portrait depicting an art scene

corrupted by its success and hobbled by its philosophy. It is a repudiation of arts denial of history and its agency, this attitude is apparent in the likes of Donald Judd’s 1965 Untitled which according to the artist “would provide a credible experience for viewers, free from any external connotations”. This though sits antithetically to Paul de Man’s view regarding figurative images in that Judd’s work is still a “mystification”. In that when literal images are deemed arbitrary and conventions, “products of power relations” the minimalist response fails to break these relations, becoming a benign tool; only serving to provide further “mystification” in its near malleable impenetrability. These images are far from challenging precepts by pursuing freedom and progress taking measures against “mystification” they have become recondite and inchoate failing in their distortion as a referent without a signifier. In Guston’s Studio, regardless of kitsch, a deliberate medium, an attempt to force original progress is being made. It has no avant-garde or art scene and protests apparent contemporary inertia in pop-art while rejecting the conciliatory tone of artists like Judd. Guston is begging the question, if this new culture provides inertia in the face of discredited words and images and the loss of truth, a chaos of the hybrid; is there no new narrative which might be forged from history’s broken pieces.

These questions though are far from unique in Guston’s oeuvre in terms of previously discussed notions by Kafka. Guston’s Marlborough images are perturbing in just the way Kafka comments, they break the process and create discomfiture. This disturbance could be read as an attempt to present society at large with portraits of its Absurdity. Caught between the purist past and bric-a-brac pop-art of confused inert outrage, Guston is subverting the present. These images arranged in narrative form subvert the

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Ibid., 19
Ibid., 12
Ibid., 12-13
Ibid., 12-13
McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy, 71.
Coolidge, Guston, 250.
pretence in the failure of the pursuit of totality, as narcissism\(^{307}\) in affecting the world at large. Not by discarding all hope but by adjusting and manipulating societal and historiographic detritus exposing the Absurd in the credo Guston abhorred. Perhaps in the hope of finding new substance in art which might jolt progress and hope back into arts domain.

Slifkin talks of apostasy and correctly so, but in the iconoclasm present in the Marlborough images sits a deep Grotesque\(^{308}\). In much of the Marlborough Gallery works, images are a literal lambasting of Modernism’s failure. In a society where the deepest feelings are exposed as abstract conventions, any attempt to find substantive purity is doomed. Images and words appear as a chaos soup a confusion of referents where the signifier no longer trusts the signified\(^{309}\). All Guston’s later panoply of works affects a revealing of necessity of connotation even in abstraction. The figures act in deliberate Grotesque theatricality, more reminiscent of Signorelli than Piero. Whether discussing the Studio or Edge of Town 1969 Guston’s assertion of the futility in obviating authorial content is clear. And viewed sequentially in Lacan’s terms the literal motifs demonstrate, through slippage that process as eternal evolution is immutable. Art always connotes and denotes reproducing itself from its historic detritus\(^{310}\).

In Edge of Town the now familiar cigarette smoke is a reminder of Guston’s abstract past. Further, in this image the theatrical backdrop in pale blue is an allusion to images such as Attar 1953. Perhaps not specifically, but in terms of the use of a purely abstract backdrop to the scene in the foreground of the planar field. Still imbued with flatness, and as with all Guston’s later images, the contrast of fuliginous colours and antithesis between abstract and literal are paramount. Guston’s mid-1960s imagery with emergent figuration has reached it apotheosis. The caricatured plotters, a

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\(^{307}\) Dr Briony Fer, On Abstract Art (London: Yale University Press, 1997), 53.

\(^{308}\) Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 303-368.

\(^{309}\) Slifkin, Out of Time, 29-100.

\(^{310}\) Ibid., 56-57
hooded Guston at the wheel trundle past this abstract unrecognisable horizon in an equally abstract vehicle which appears to morphologically be caught between a tractor tyre, car, and boat. The vehicle laden with planks of wood some with nails through them, as if the two had deconstructed some previous structure, might perhaps be perceived as Guston’s past oeuvre or the purity pursued in abstract art destroyed\textsuperscript{311}. The characters travel towards a demarcated abstract ivory paradigm to the left of the image, as if towards some void where perhaps some new future could be constructed. The detritus in the vehicle begs the question is this indexical of the connotations of history in art? For Guston extant in all imagery, with he, the re-emergent author speeding towards its reconstruction in another paradigm.

What is deeply apparent in these images, and throughout this period of Guston’s final rebellion, is the continuing antithesis. Further, this is manifest in Guston’s continued interpretations of works by Gogol and Kafka. Guston himself stresses the influence of Kafka “Sometimes I think the greatest thing about Kafka was an achievement of a consciousness where he could hover above his own involvement\textsuperscript{312}”. This is integral to the Absurd and refined in Guston’s approach, it marries him to his alienation and allows him to construct himself afresh and as Grotesque\textsuperscript{313}. These images, such as Studio and Edge of Town defy clear readings in their complexity. But Guston as in previous comments regarding Piero as messenger always reveals himself as just such a messenger. In the Marlborough paintings he has reached a very different affirmation and seeks antithetically to reflect the Absurdity revealed by the emergent philosophies. What is unique though in his intent is that far from having conceded defeat to this new milieu, Guston seeks to use the debris of Modernism to find a grander yet more deviant panacea.\textsuperscript{314}

The Grotesque resurfaces in images such as Flatlands 1970, interwoven with the Absurd, Guston continues to expose purposelessness while antithetically planting narrative

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\textsuperscript{311} Ibid., 52-57
\textsuperscript{312} Coolidge, Guston, 250.
\textsuperscript{313} Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 303-369.
\textsuperscript{314} Ashton, A Critical Study of Philip Guston, 169.
within the image. However, this is an image of time a constructed detritus, a literally deconstructed piling up of things. The seer struggles to construct a narrative instead perhaps transfixed with what appears to be a series of painterly doodles. Despite this there are elements of Guston attempting to apply literary influences from those authors he most admires. Together with Kafka, poet Paul Valery is another author capable of detachment, “Some artists can maintain it” Absurd detachment “longer”. “I think a philosophical poet like Paul Valery has achieved something like that. About the Superconscious” Guston has depicted this brave new world’s effect presenting this new world like Hamlet again, devoid of facility.

Flatlands appears thus, a hodgepodge of junk in a soup of chaos posited in no order and yielding no explanation or route through the debris of a deconstructed Modernism’s apparent demise. Amid this chaos of things are the by now familiar hands impelled by Guston as disembodied members, more slippage? And perhaps this time recalling the Kent State University shootings. This incident which occurred on the 4th May 1970 disgusted and angered an already seething Guston, perhaps yielding the myriad of objects in the plane as aftermath. Despite the seemingly ad hoc nature of the planar-field’s arrangement the clutter is again perhaps a homage to de Chirico’s piling up of things. Or as Dore Ashton comments related to “the Surrealists constant play with detached human members, particularly hands”. The images imply a direct representation of the shootings, the bloodied stumps of two legs, torso concealed by a clock reading 8:05, PM or AM is difficult to discern, sit perched in the foreground. A book is depicted a few centimetres to the right of the detached limbs, amid various book or tome like objects. In the right middle distance of the plane sits another clock reading 4:00, denoting the passage of time if the first clock is read as AM and the latter as PM.

Perhaps key amid smoking towers, and the accusatory hands pointing towards what could be perceived as a painting hung in the clouds, is the now ubiquitous Klan members cruising amid the turmoil. Open again to multiple readings the figures stark caricatures mingle amid the chaos, are they the National Guard members surveying their crimes? Or Guston and some unknown cohort? Perhaps as Slifkin contended Guston’s purported partner

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315 Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, 303-369.
316 Coolidge, Guston, 250.
317 Slifkin, Out of Time, 56-57.
318 Ibid., 29-100
319 Ibid., 156
in crime from Manual Arts High School Jackson Pollock, both men guiltily shuffling amongst the savagery[^321]. The two lamenting The New York School’s failure to communicate their lost Humanist message amid Modernism’s downfall[^322]. It is perhaps in the chaos portrayed in *Flatlands*, to all intense and purpose an image which feels peripheral, experimental that Guston’s realisation of the modern paradigm’s impact is most keenly observed. The world broken into pieces of memory and connotative debris, cluttered in confusion unable to choose a new narrative from the remains of the old. The old narrative is dead, the *Pandora’s Box* opened, and its contents spewed into an eclectic terrifying non-future, where no-one can or wishes to find a way through the darkness. Further this is perhaps the result of Sartre’s terrifying Existential freedom without notional historic facility, a mess of referents in need of trustworthy yet rebellious signifiers and the signified.

**Into the Night**

Whether reviewing *Flatlands* or the myriad other of Guston’s voracious output from the Marlborough Gallery paintings to his eventual death in 1980, Guston’s faith in process and antithetical motivation rarely waned. The presence of a journey of discovery is an eternal in Guston’s works, and always the result is a detached yet tumultuous duality of forces in constant conflict. In most Guston images resides a fraught discomfort, an undoing, an attempt to re-present something eternal, through struggle to find some affirmation. Never quite enough though the artist returns repeatedly to this peak however cumbersome the burden. Perhaps this is to experience the escape yielded by the relief of safety in detachment from materiality, or reality? The Marlborough paintings differ then in only one pivotal sense, freedom and perhaps a genuine self-affirmation. Guston as the

famous de Kooning comment about the meaning of the images testifies, discovered freedom in antithesis again. A need to use the abstract nature of figuration with its multiple connotations, to lambast and critique the impotencies around him. Guston achieves two paradoxical things in his figurative literal images. Through grotesquery and rebellion, he exposes a world without purpose in a confusing paradigm, the detritus strewn in the amorphous black. Meanwhile the re-figurative images imply a possible method of further affirmation in an experimental future. This perhaps inadvertently yields to a convergence between the causes of Sartre’s direct action, imagery as communication is freedom from the void of abstract art. An art malign by dogma, insularity, and an exploitative state, an esoteric idealism ultimately unable to form a vanguard against an ever more intolerable world.

In short Guston discovers freedom from tragic action moving to another Hamlet-esque facility, avoiding his own exile returning to affect some pre-figurative ending. What occurs in the sequence of images from the Marlborough Exhibition is almost the ultimate rebellion, unpainterly images in defiance of interpretation. Not quite non-art, perhaps unlikely given Guston’s agenda and reading habits, more an attempt to reclaim facility in the most subversive sense. The deliberately garish colour scheme is a grotesque affrontery, not just to the seer but also to critics and patrons still absorbed in Greenbergian notions of purity and objecthood. Images such as Central Avenue 1969 and A Day’s Work 1970 are predicated on a refutation of Michael Fried’s art as an anti-notional experience devoid of connotations. These images are anathema to this in their pursuance of freedom from the insular experience of abstract art. Rather than holding the seer captive in some encasement without the encroachment of arts historic baggage, and the artists interpretation of his own conventions.

323 Slifkin, Out of Time, 29-100.
Guston’s images in sequence manipulate numerous connotations to present the seer with a narrative within the plane.

In 1970’s *A Day’s Work* Guston conspires to use his new armoury of “Too Muchness" as a refutation of an arguably stagnant abstract art scene, and its insistence on purity, revealing it as so many empty doctrines. The images’ plane, as with other Marlborough Gallery images is uneven, this is affected in a pink so shallow one is reminded of eggshells. The narrative’s location is somewhat, and no doubt deliberately opaque, the presence of the partially obscured dustbin implying a Guston-esque street scene, perhaps in some alleyway. Running antithetically to this impression is the presence of a clock, set at two minutes past the hour alongside other unidentified geometric objects. Four variably sized white rectangles seem tacked to the plane, appearing to transform the location into something more akin to a gallery space, though albeit unidentifiable and pointedly decorative in appearance. One further image appears on the plane, only half revealed, a black square dominates the image from the left. Were this to be interpreted as Guston’s depiction of a gallery one can almost imply Malevich’s iconic *Black Square 1915* as a somewhat telling presence in the *Topos*.

The central activity, perched in the foreground is complex, and made up of literal edifices set in two perspectives. Partially hidden behind the now ubiquitous smoking Klansman is a caricatured dustbin, dressed in red cadmium medium, and containing various familiar items. Mostly these items as previously observed are wooden objects reminiscent of stage props. A wooden beam with nails still attached, is accompanied by other similar pieces of deconstructed junk, perhaps signalling an allegory for Guston’s deviance in discarding an arguably corrupted Modernist medium. Most tellingly two legs also appear protruding almost comically from the same dustbin. In the immediate foreground the Klansman appears to be sat awkwardly on a pink chair peering to the left. Finally, and significantly in interpreting this image correctly the pointing hand returns in a far more accusatory tone, black sleeved with corporeal red hand.

Once again though, Guston’s humour and irony are woven from an Existential perspective. Absurdity is present too, the Klan figure, perhaps another self-portrait seems almost flippant perhaps owing to the stiffness of the holding of the cigarette. While the accusatory hand associated with slippage seems no longer to denote this metonymy but rather to castigate the figure. The detritus including up-turned human figure contains the implication

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of guilt in the Klan figure. Which, if perceived as Guston himself, perhaps depicts Guston’s rejection of a staid art scene. Further, if the dustbin and its contents are viewed through Guston’s affinity with process as eternal and grotesquery, then that which is destroyed is also created anew. This acts as Sisyphean allegory in that each time Sisyphus rolls the boulder to the summit, his efforts are destroyed on his trudging back down to the plateau. In so doing this creates a metonymic chain in Sisyphus finding a fresh path to repeat his heroics in attaining a new affirmatory summit.

Центральная Улица, по сравнению, пронизана воспоминаниями и опытом Гастона; коннотации его ранних работ явно выражены. Маскированные члены Клана, преследуя некую мистическую загадку, курят в красном кадмийном среде в мифологической обстановке "Кэти Кэт". Несмотря на яркость Живописи и предположение Сливки, что фигуры Полька и Гастон снова в ходе видах на трансгрессивное предприятие, в этом есть ее в стиле. Гастон отвергает фасцилиость Абстракт-Экспрессионизма, почти как в терминах Розенберга Гамлет нашел себя отослан к Англии. Вместо этого, герой возвращает чары находясь в новой ситуации. Гастон "организует свое эмоциональное и интеллектуальное энергии, как если бы он был в живой ситуации". Увлечен в мир политической неурядицы и деградации ценностей Гастон напрямую отвергает нон-арт и иллюзорность современной артистической отсрочки и выбирает использовать образы как предложение. Предложение, присутствующее в изображениях Галерии Марлоу, при использовании паратаксис в современном смысле, есть что некоторые коммуникация может появиться, которая могла бы избежать Гамлета трагического исхода и доставить новую надежду. В этом надежде Сартр и Камю сходятся, обнаруживая, что общество не готово к революционным изменениям, но защитное от своих идеалов. В то же время, одновременно пытаясь через восстание найти некоторые спасаемую историю, которая могла бы вдохновить на прогресс и возобновление в процессе еще раз.

327 Ashton, A Critical Study of Philip Guston, 122-123.
328 Slifkin, Out of Time, 145.
329 Ibid., 145.
Conclusion - Guston’s Affirmation

“In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer”\textsuperscript{330}

Philip Guston’s career and search for affirmation are manifest in a tripartite scheme of tumultuous personal biographical paradigm shifts. In Guston’s impressive early period oeuvre, his searching for answers in the abstract void, and final denouement, one theme recurs. Guston’s works hinge on multiple complex influences perhaps inter-connected to elements of his psychology which remain forever silent. However, the recurrent theme of alienation and an Otherness which transcends even his family are palpable. Further, having isolated works, both peripheral and central to Guston’s aims and themes this Existentiality appears repeatedly. Like heroes Piero and Kafka, Guston remains not so much aloof as distant an eternal watcher perched in Absurdity, like Fellini compartmentalising his observable surroundings. Further, in this silent detached position, Guston is predicating his work on reflections internal and external. A true “action painter”\textsuperscript{331} acting as conduit in his interpretation of the process all around him. Furthermore, this positing of his work from the perspective of the synchronic, (the watcher) yields affirmative moments which manifest themselves as the diachronic, (reflection of the process)\textsuperscript{332}.

The complexity of Guston’s methods and naturally analytical nature are found throughout his works and lectures. In his understanding of Nietzsche and the necessary antithesis between positives as portrayed in the Apollonian aesthetic, to the negatives apparent in the Dionysian primitive. Guston’s painterly direction in line with his obsession with the messenger\textsuperscript{333} Piero della Francesca, and the surreal silence of Giorgio de Chirico utilizes these paradoxical forces to attain some perhaps euphoric pause or reflection in the process. A victorious attaining of the summit, followed by the inevitable and ineluctable descent, in rumination towards the plateau below. This struggle for Guston is an attempt to reveal truth in the process. Whether in earlier works or during his abstract period and up to and including the much-maligned Marlborough Gallery images Guston is positing substance for both the seer and Artist. This continued detachment perhaps exacerbated by his Father’s

\textsuperscript{331} Harold Rosenberg, \textit{Art and Other serious Matters}, 78.
\textsuperscript{332} Coolidge, \textit{Guston}, 80-109.
\textsuperscript{333} Slifkin, \textit{Out of Time}, 29-100.
suicide and the brutality of the Great Depression continues throughout Guston’s career. Its Absurdist implication is clear, in this purposeless process the temporal becomes a series of conventions, constructs to be rebelliously manipulated. Manipulated in pursuit of, and alongside so many New York School comrades, some fleeting panacea, a communication with some eternal truth to anesthetize the maelstrom. In Guston’s case whether in his experimental yet cultivated beginnings, and throughout the antithetical “wobble” inherent to abstract art, or even in his final foray into figural abstraction and literalism is all presented from some ethereal distance. The result is a constant Kafkaesque disruption, a deliberate disturbance and distortion, performed as a series of tromp l’œil; and forever anticipating a fait accompli in the journey to the plateau.

In Guston’s earliest formative works, and with the backdrop of the Great Depression and multiple factors not least the threat of Klan violence in the tumult of latter-day Los Angeles, Guston develops amid an antithetical environment. An environment where the reality of family and normalcy are forever deferred and sometimes threatened. Amid this chaotic atmosphere, art and Guston’s obsession with Renaissance images perhaps acted as buffer between the threat of poverty, violence, and suppression. What Guston produces in Mother and Child 1930 and The Conspirators also 1930 are perhaps initial, tentative steps in piecing together some identity which might act as a defining panacea for Guston. Antithetical forces are already extant in these images, Guston appears as guilty witness to natural atrocities, both distant and yet involved. Guston’s catalytic use of troubling imagery and a developing painterly facture aspire to capture the seer in some stolen moment a pause, perhaps betraying a witness’s guilt at inaction? Or merely attaining affirmation at having achieved the summit which might yield further secrets.

The adventurous developments which followed Guston’s initial success, through mural commissions both in the United States and Mexico are cultivated yet experimental periods of development. By the time of Guston’s tenure at Iowa State University and St Louis, Washington University images such as If This Be Not I 1945 a seminal moment as personal transition approached, Guston’s mask was beginning to become more prominent. The image yields multiple motifs and iconographic and semiotic pointers, a culmination of Guston’s learned facture and skill. However, amid this apparent celebration is an iconoclastic

336 Coolidge, Guston, 80-109.
element an emerging flatness which antithetically appears to cross with the artist’s gradual disappearance into some amorphous background. Guston’s works up to and including The Tormentors 1948, continue to be absorbed into abstraction. Performers and images such as Performers foretell transgression and whatever the tromp l’oeil both in terms of subjective readings amid historic connotations and Guston’s disappearance into abstraction the tortured figures are being absorbed into an abyss. Guston’s precocious talent has reached its initial apogee, and no longer satisfies the Existential understanding of purposeless in an intolerable post-war environment, rife with political betrayal and jingoism some other medium must yield affirmation. An affirmation minus temporality, preserving hope amid confusion and inertia, a journey to new summits through abstract distortion and The Tormentors is perhaps the first troubling step. The growing plasticity in images such as Porch II was not merely the result of Guston’s spiralling plethora of images. The spectral forms, now increasingly abstract owed more than a little to Guston’s processing of the holocaust. The period at St Louis alongside Iowa State University sparring partner Stephane Greene was nothing if not cathartic. Amid a perhaps incipient period of metamorphosis Guston divided his time between St Louis’ cosmopolitan milieu and his developing art. These distractions though would be short-lived and Guston having escaped once more this time to Woodstock would begin preliminary sketches for The Tormentors.

Considering The Tormentors as a gateway image to abstraction, Guston’s disappearance becomes antithesis. Within Images such as Untitled 1963 or Attar 1953 Guston’s distortion reaches another apogee, one where purity lurks. These images are affirmations for Guston, at this stage amid a journey towards creation, aware of the antithetical catalysts which drive towards the summit. Guston is using Kafka to deliver

Figure. 45, Philip Guston, Performers, 1947, 121.9 x 81.2 cm, Oil on Canvas, Private Collection.

338 Ibid., 99-114
339 Ibid., 74
340 Ibid., 99-119
internal and external woke moments from an Existential position. Perched aware of society’s Absurdity attempting to converge forces, which deliver messages at optimal moments in the process. Images remain unfinished challenging the seer to epiphany and affirmation as arranged by the artist, and perhaps this is where Guston begins to lose faith in the abstract. As the 1960s progressed and old Humanist beliefs began to yield to the contemporary cultural paradigm shifts and political turmoil, Guston’s images began to darken once more. The honourable course of Abstract-Expressionism had itself yielded to dogma and media manipulation, worse and tragically by 1970 Rothko and Pollock were dead. Images such as The Light 1964, among a series of similar grey almost colourless paintings began to see the emergence of figures. Still beyond literal cogency at the apex of subject and object sentient images struggled to detach themselves from the artist. Guston was retreating again, always peripheral, now becoming frustrated at the impotence of contemporary abstraction he would transcend and transgress for the final time. Becoming ever more literary in his literalism Guston began to yearn to speak with a clearer voice. And having finally observed the Absurdity of previous processes he would leap to a convergence aimed at redressing the lost balance, reimbuing his art with fecundity.

In Guston’s final metamorphosis, as Dore Ashton rightly observes the painter is playing the part of Eiron. And this vacuum between what Guston’s Marlborough images meant and how they were perceived is key. Underpinning the tromp l’oeil of many of the Marlborough images is an antithetical attempt to both reflect Absurdity from some pinnacle and an underlying comment on the death of Humanism. Guston finds dogma abhorrent, he flees from Mannerisms in search of some more substantial avant-garde comment. In Studio or City Limits both 1969 the seer is misled; social comment is used as grotesquy to restart the carnival. The reflection as Grotesque is present exactly because from the perimeter in affinity with silent Absurdity and Existential from the whole, Guston perhaps sees futility in a world and art scene bereft a true avant-garde. The Marlborough images exhibit the confusion and irony of a scene which appears to have mislaid its ability for retrospection and critical self-analysis. This perhaps partially explains the critics outrage, Guston was painting them.

341 Coolidge, Guston, 250.
342 Ibid., 250
343 Slifkin, Out of Time, 20-29.
345 Coolidge, Guston, 250.
346 Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World, 303-369.
There is perhaps some truth in the sense that the Marlborough images were a protest in opposition to an increasingly intolerable world. This “too-muchness” as Slifkin ponders manifests itself as a kitsch literalism “too much” for a community Guston perhaps perceived as culturally redundant. The palpable indecorousness though is the irony of a cultured elite drawn into Guston’s tromp l’oeil smirking at Guston’s gauche-ness in kitsch social comment, while missing their presence in the images, the eviscerated elite revealed as clowns not kings. The critics had misunderstood Guston’s intent, once again at some transgressive summit revelling in the silent air of freedom, balancing antithetical forces while revealing the Absurdity in what they had become. Entangled within the complexity is Guston snickering realization that perhaps this tranche of unstable conventions, revolutionary in the 1960s had always been so. Further, that knowledge of this is power in manipulation, a chance to choose to progress by exposing the folly of the doctrinaire. In this Guston does reach affirmation, and at least give an example of how the antithetical forces of literal and abstract imagery need connotation to affect their surroundings. His method of performing this Grotesque is present in previously discussed comments by Kafka regarding books (art) that disturbs or distorts to alter perspective giving fresh vision to the recipient. In Rosenberg’s terms Guston as Hamlet having escaped exile does not return as king, thus avoiding tragedy, instead he exposes the futility of impotent facilities as a sham, while suggesting radical alternatives.

In the Marlborough images Existentialism is maintained through rebellious Absurdity, it testifies for the process, as eternal evolution. Guston exposes a primal truth in the process in images where the implications of the pause reflect society back onto itself. And in this reflection, even when viewing the images in sequence the apparent mid-twentieth century levelling of history is manifest. In this final 10-year performance Guston, as he believed Pollock would have approved of, takes the malaise of this period, and distorts the image again. Perhaps in the hope of revealing some fresh avenue by jolting his subject into viewing itself, art might find grist to reclaim substance from a dominant Apollonian aesthetic.

Running like a seam through Guston’s tumultuous career is antithesis and an understanding of the forces necessary to affect an event of creation in a process of perpetual time. These forces are manifest for Guston on multiple levels some palpably personal, others like the Great Depression external pressures. Pressures which served to galvanise or

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348 Ibid., 100-165.
reinforce Guston’s alien presence, and forces which are manifest in earlier works as a convergence and sometimes divergence. These forces claim the painting as a distortion, giving the seer the sense that the images are on the verge of some tumult. This sense of positive or negative crisis, and distance from an intolerable world is carried over into the 1950s and New York School discourse. These forces seek the expression of Existential torment to reflect and grasp all in its wake and to preserve and champion the substance of art in a period where reality was ever disappearing into Gutenberg’s galaxy. It strove to create art through the emotion in paint and individual purpose bereft of societal and historic connotations deemed ever more untrustworthy at the apex of a new paradigm shift. Guston is posited at the epicentre of this movement because of his distortion of the temporal in pursuit of some substantial aesthetic. But the attempts to preserve this aesthetic were, as Guston realized doomed by the very notion of a facility subsumed into establishment doctrine and empty of historiographic facility.

The Marlborough paintings speak to this frustration and abstractions failure to retain and evolve sufficiently to avoid dogma. The paintings in all their grotesquery are Absurd, they posit themselves not as Duchamp’s Fountain as anti-art. But antithetically, through the myriad of paradoxes and Nietzschean need to affect change through shock. Guston’s work is an attempt and suggestion for a new society, perhaps like Fountain designed to open a new discourse amid stasis and turgid inertia. Antithetical in connotations and historic bias they act as rebellion borrowing from so-called kitsch to alert the seer to the malaise of complacency Guston perceived and abhorred. In the event either individually or sequentially the Marlborough images both portray a confused and ambiguous world with an amorphous future and attempt to claim the most infinitesimal possibility of a new narrative. More importantly and perhaps inadvertently Guston’s Marlborough images leading up to his untimely death in 1980 create a clarification. They maintain the abstract Camusian holding position through a literal and subsumed comment neither directly political nor covertly abstract, while simultaneously providing an example of a Sartrean art still capable of comment and opinion yet not aligned to any form of establishment gospel. In short Guston’s Absurdity posits freedom back within the realms of art perhaps too early for critics and dealers to appreciate. But who would accept themselves satirized in a world where retrospective thought is obscured by self-congratulatory myopia?

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351 Slifkin, Out of Time, 29-100.

352 Ibid., 29-100
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