

Mondrian De-Mythologised: Towards a Newer Virgil

I

Je dirai qu'un peu de formalisme éloigne de l'histoire, mais que beau coup
ised ramene.

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Had Clement Greenberg ever questioned Bertrand Russell about the 'essence' of painting, he would have encountered a bemused expression – not, of course, because the British philosopher could not provide an answer, but because he would not permit the question. Being a man with an austere honed vocabulary, Russell would have stated, as he has written elsewhere: 'The notion of essence is an intimate part of every philosophy subsequent to Aristotle, until we come to modern times. It is, in my opinion, a hopelessly muddle-headed notion ... The question is purely linguistic: a "word" may have an essence, but a "thing" cannot'.¹

Although the encounter is hypothetical, the implications it involves for Greenberg's pseudo-positivist concept of 'pure' painting are quite real. A recurrent theme in the American critic's reviews is the emphasis on the 'irreducible

¹ Russell 1945, pp. 162–63. The reader should know the brilliant critiques of philosophical positivism that have been written by Marcuse 1964; Adorno and Horkheimer 1944; and Donald Kuspit 1972. Just as Marcuse has shown that Wittgenstein's acceptance of ordinary language as the arbiter of philosophy represents an implicit conformity to the status quo, Kuspit has revealed that the minimalist emphasis on mute formalism is also a crypto-reactionary attitude. Instead of Tertullian's credo, believe in the unbelievable, Judd and Stella tell us to believe in the inexplicable. Their facile fixation with 'objecthood' in the 1960s, at the same time the French intellectuals and artists were denouncing the use of art as a mere object by a consumer society, underscores all too clearly the use of 'pure' art as an alibi for an impure society. As Walter Benjamin observed in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History': 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism' (Benjamin, 1968 [1940], p. 256).

essence' of each medium – an idea he correlates with positivistic traditions in contemporary science and philosophy.² According to Greenberg, 'The notion of the empirical and the positive has undergone much revision over the last hundred years ... Aesthetic sensibility has shifted accordingly'.³ Consequently, there has been, in his estimation, a specialisation of the arts concomitant with a self-conscious concern for formal irreducibility fomented by an effort to achieve concreteness.⁴

Greenberg's notion of media essences could hardly be classified as a tautology in the technical sense used by the early Wittgenstein – a proposition of which the contradictory is self-contradictory – since this tenet, not its opposite, is self-refuting. Whether one consults Auguste Comte, the French philosopher who was the first to develop a positivist system, Carnap and the Viennese Logical Positivists, or Ayer and the English logical positivists, the verdict would be unanimously supportive of Russell's testimony. As formulated by Comte and employed thereafter both in science and in philosophy, the basic premise of positivism has been an abandonment of the quixotic quest to discover the essences of things, in favour of ascertaining the relationships between phenomena. Thus, Greenberg's precept of essences is confronted with a paradox from which it cannot be logically extricated. If, as he has written, significant art since Courbet has spoken 'for positivism',⁵ then his own anti-positivist theory of medium purity is inadequate to deal with it. If, however, Picasso, Gris, Miró, etc., are not, as he has contended, 'positivists in the best of their art', then they must be significant for reasons other than those he gives.⁶

To ignore Greenberg's remarks about positivism, however, leads to a Gordian knot that Occam's razor cannot cut. On the one hand, the art critic's use of 'essences' is in a primitive, pre-Husserlian sense which implies ahistoricism. That is, they are a priori actual experiences, being givens with which the artist must then work. On the other hand, the American critic is forever assuring us that his *aperçus* are historical judgments. Inconsistencies of this sort have led to unacceptable arbitrariness in his criticism. Having read in one essay that the 'modernist sensibility ... allows sculpture to be as pictorial as it pleases',⁷ we read in another that 'what really spoils Michelangelo's sculpture is ... pictorial illusion', without any effort being made to define the contextual sensibility

2 Greenberg 1993b [1962], p. 131.

3 Greenberg 1986b [1949], p. 314.

4 Ibid.

5 Greenberg 1986b [1946], p. 88.

6 Greenberg 1948, p. 9.

7 Greenberg 1961, p. 143 ['The New Sculpture' as published in Greenberg, 1961].