...David being not only pinched with extreme distress, but also over-whelmed with long and manifold miseries heaped one upon the other, calls upon God’s faithfulness for help, which was the only remedy that remained for him...1

...like pictures painted on the inside walls of his mind...[Pollock’s] work amounts to an invitation: Forget all, sever all, inhabit your white cell and—most ironic paradox of all—discover the universal in your self, for in a one-man world you are universal!2

Liturgical (e)motions flow according to painterly aesthetics. To introduce an abstract reading of a rather generic individual lament (one Hermann Gunkel designated as “the model of a ‘lament of the individual’...in which the individual components of the genre step forth most clearly”),3 I begin with an art historical debate that will intertwine the biblical object and thinking surrounding it with interpretive twists not commonly found in exegesis. The polarized assessment of certain American painters of the 1940s and 1950s provides a basis on which to rethink a similar split found in the way people write about psalms. The added sensitivity of one critic to judgments he detected against style, subjectivity and interpretation further allows us to rehang Psalm 13 as a protest in poured paint.

The legacy of the so-called New York School4 was for several decades determined by the battle to quantify the value—or failure—of Abstract Expressionism. As the artists’ distinctive styles appeared to manifest mere individual preferences, the question of their work’s ultimate relevance helped draw a bold line in the critical sand. One camp of critics, who

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1 John Calvin, A Commentary on the Psalms of David (first published in 1557; reprinted in London: Thomas Tegg, 1840), 121.
4 The name groups stylistically diverse post-War artists in New York—many of them expatriates—under a deceptively unifying banner.
insisted formal qualities alone gave art its meaning, regarded the work of Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and his ‘drip’ method as a particular triumph. The opposing side regarded the physical act he conducted in his painting to be important for reasons beyond the state of the paint; and so Pollock helped introduce the concept of the event as art.

Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg led the colours of these theorist-troops via “some of the most vivid partisan writing in the history of criticism”.5 Greenberg celebrated Pollock’s role as an avant-garde artist who more than anyone surpassed painting’s representational limits by elevating the medium to a plane far above politics and the common culture. John Berger found universal possibilities in Pollock’s “one-man worlds” (supra) but maintained Greenberg’s focus on his formal achievements; passing over “the pretentious incantations written around the kind of painting [Pollock] fathered”, Berger contextualised the artist’s canvases according to their “colour, their consistency of gesture, [and] the balance of their tonal weights”.6 Rosenberg on the other hand identified existential implications in the method revealed in Pollock’s picture planes; he saw the artist’s action as a negotiation with the human condition. Equally Leo Steinberg brought to light the social significance of Pollock’s irreverent style. Though the two critical traditions valued drip painting for different reasons, they never doubted its importance.

By 1979, Peter Fuller would discredit Pollock for failing to speak beyond his own generation; he found the work “symptomatic of the courageousness of what the Abstract Expressionists tried to do and of the enormity of their failure.” In attempting to realise a historical vision through his painting, Fuller alleged, “his vision became increasingly confined within the universal imagery of psychosis and infantilism”.7 Donald Kuspit quickly exposed Fuller’s generalizations about American culture and his ill-informed assumptions about Pollock’s apparent political apathy. Asserting that Pollock’s work transcends mere self-commentary, Kuspit found Fuller guilty of “bifurcation…with its automatic assumption of content being an objective matter and style a realm of subjective implications”.8

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6 Berger, 67.

7 Peter Fuller, "American Painting Since the Last War", first published in Art Monthly (May–June 1979); cf. Shapiro and Shapiro (hereafter referenced as Shapiro), 172.