

INTRODUCTION

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“Create, artist! Don’t talk!” the aging Goethe counseled his contemporaries in 1815. The painter Degas seconded the old sage when he told the young poet Paul Valéry that when the muses finished their day’s work they didn’t talk, they danced. But then, as Valéry vividly recalled, Degas went on to talk of his own art for hours on end. Painters have always talked, and some, such as Delacroix, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Malevich, and Motherwell, also wrote. Certain painters, Goya, for example, also deftly used language to augment their imagery. Like Degas, who liked to talk with poets and even engaged the inscrutable Mallarmé, Guston liked talking with poets, and they with him. Among his most attentive listeners was his friend the poet Clark Coolidge, whose ear was well attuned to Guston’s sometimes arcane utterances and who has selected some of the painter’s most eloquent sessions of writing and talking, resulting in a mosaic of a lifetime of thought.

I was also one of Guston’s interlocutors for almost thirty years. I recognize with pleasure Coolidge’s unfurling of Guston’s cycles of talk and non-talk; his amusing feints and dodges when confronted with obtuse questioners, his wondrous bursts of language when he felt inspired, his sometimes playful contrariness, his satisfaction in being a provocateur, and his consistent preoccupation with serious aesthetic questions throughout his working life as a painter. Above all, I recognize Guston’s fundamental rebelliousness, which manifested itself not only in his artistic preferences but in his politics, his choice of artistic battlefields, and his intimate studio life. His intensity was mesmerizing.

I once heard someone ask Guston whom he had studied with—meaning, of course, which painters—and he shot back: with Dostoyevsky and Kafka. Guston was, proudly, an autodidact. His recital of his early experiences as a burgeoning artist and rebel always began with his life as a recalcitrant schoolboy in Los Angeles, where his parents had brought him from Canada at the age of six. By the time he was twelve he was already drawing obsessively, prompting his mother to give him a full year’s correspondence course from the Cleveland School of Cartooning for his thirteenth birthday. After about three lessons he found instructions about cross-hatching tedious and quit—one of his earliest acts of rebellion. He already craved broader horizons. He found them when he entered high school, where he and his eventually famous classmate Jackson Pollock found a sophisticated teacher who inducted them into the world of higher arts, both literary and painterly. But Guston’s inherent rebelliousness soon brought him into conflict with the school’s authorities, whom he and his willing partner in transgression, Pollock, had pilloried in a pamphlet. Both were expelled. Pollock eventually was readmitted, but Guston never went back.

Guston was not quite sixteen when he was expelled from high school. Soon after, he won a year's scholarship to the Otis Art Institute, where again he could tolerate formal education for only a few months. He dropped out and embarked on a hectic round of menial jobs, encounters with other nonconformists, and voracious reading. By that time, the Depression was upon the United States, inciting young intellectuals like Guston to ponder their social and political situation. Guston's response was to turn his work toward a public idiom derived from his study of the Mexican muralists and his increasingly deep study of Renaissance painting, undertaken largely in the evenings at the public library. By the time he was eighteen, Guston had packed in many diversified experiences. He had also, precocious as always, had his first one-man exhibition in the only avant-garde bookshop and gallery in Los Angeles. He showed, among others, accomplished paintings depicting Ku Klux Klan conspirators in a style visibly influenced both by Renaissance painting and Giorgio de Chirico, the modern painter who most moved him. All his life he liked to quote Chirico's motto inscribed in Latin on an early self-portrait: "What shall I love if not the enigma?" (p. 126).

Enigma is a curious word apparently derived from ancient Greek, in which it meant "to speak darkly." Those familiar with the arc of Guston's life's work will recognize that, despite moments of lyrical flight, especially in the delicate abstractions of the early 1950s, there was a consistent undertone of darkness. His shifts in idiom reflect not the mere *enfant-terribilisme* of the ostentatious rebel but a sense of tragedy sponsored by his keen observation of his life's circumstances. Enigma was his true muse.

Naturally, then, his inner dialogue often brought him to the enigmatic climate of thought he revered in the writing of Franz Kafka. In one of the earliest citations in this anthology (p. 13), he presents his interviewer with a quotation from Kafka's notebooks: "The true way is along a rope that is not spanned high in the air, but only just above the ground. It seems intended more to cause stumbling than to be walked along." (This calls to mind a disconcerting late etching by Goya, *Bailando en una cuerda floja*, circa 1824, depicting an equestrienne dancing on her white horse, who is balanced on a very low tightrope.) Since Goya was one of Guston's important touchstones, I like to imagine that he knew this strange print, just as he knew almost by heart all of Kafka's oeuvre that had been translated into English. Years later, toward the end of his life, Guston would again allude to Kafka, calling Kafka his greatest influence. He reiterated the gist of the early note: "Sometimes I think the greatest thing about Kafka was an achievement of a consciousness that he could hover above his own involvement."

Guston's loyalty to his early reading of Kafka was buttressed by his concurrence with other artists in New York, where he arrived in 1936 and remained during the turbulent years of the WPA, until 1941. On the project, as they used to call the immense adventure of the New Deal, which gathered and paid artists as respectable members of society for the first time in America, Guston met and engaged in talk with most of the painters who would later gain renown as abstract expressionists. By all counts there were furious discussions, as there would be again after the war when the Artists' Club, a weekly talkfest sponsored by the artists who were rapidly becoming known as the New

York School, got under way. It was during the early 1950s that Guston again met up with his old comrades from the project and with others, such as Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko. With them Guston could share his deep allegiances in poetry and literature during mutual studio visits and long nights of talk. With Motherwell and Rothko particularly, Guston could share his literary enthusiasms, above all his engagement with Kafka, who in turn led these painters to Kierkegaard—one of Kafka's great enthusiasms.

It became apparent to his friends that Guston had taken Kafka's attitude toward himself for his own. How often Guston declared, as he did to the poet Bill Berkson in 1964, "The act of painting is like a trial where all the roles are lived by one person" (p. 35). And again, a year later: "The canvas is a court where the artist is prosecutor, defendant, jury, and judge" (p. 53). He said more than once that when he thought of his studio he thought of it as a court. In his conversation with Coolidge in 1972, he again brought up his analogy—"in painting, creating, it's a court"—and he qualified it: "But unlike a court, you're the plaintiff, the defendant, the lawyer, the judge, and the jury" (p. 210). This aesthetic judiciary, concocted by Kafka and taken over by Guston, was already apparent in one of Guston's early public statements in which he adopted legal diction: "What is seen and called the picture is what remains—an evidence" (p. 10). Guston often said his movement as a painter was like that of an inchworm, so that these intermittent reiterations of the deepest preoccupations of his adult life must be taken as the authentic scaffolding of his creative life.

The full range of Guston's culture is amply illustrated in his talks over the years in which he referred not only to his comrades-in-arms among painters but also to artists working in every medium—poets, novelists, composers, and essayists. His concourse with other painters had intensified during the years between his return to New York, in 1950, and his permanent removal to Woodstock, New York, in 1967. By the mid-1950s, he and his closest allies had been identified, and to some extent celebrated, by the rapidly expanding art world. In 1955, when Guston joined the Sidney Janis Gallery, his fellow artists included close friends such as Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Motherwell. Between exhibitions they would meet in each other's studios, respond to each other's work, and indulge in frequent nightlong conversations at the Cedar Tavern. Guston, whose youth in Los Angeles had brought him into close proximity with the movie industry (he had even earned money as an extra on several occasions) added long excursions to Forty-second Street to his studio routine. I can remember going with him to the theaters there specializing in foreign films, sitting through one double feature, going out for a hotdog, and returning for another double feature. Guston never did anything by halves.

Among Guston's most significant interlocutors was the composer Morton Feldman. Guston, in his previous wanderings as a teacher in universities in Iowa and St. Louis, had exposed himself to classical music and learned something of its history. He especially valued an introduction to late Beethoven quartets. His wide-ranging acquaintances in New York had, early on, included the composer John Cage, who had introduced him to Feldman. During the early 1950s, Feldman was rapidly gaining a reputation as a unique

and daring composer. He, like Guston, was an agile conversationalist. The two formed a very close friendship—so close that Feldman was among the few who were welcome to hover in the studio as Guston worked. It is not surprising that when Feldman later wrote about Guston’s work of the 1950s he would implicitly compare him to Beethoven, noting that his brief motifs “disappear almost immediately into the larger idea” (Morton Feldman, “After Modernism,” *Art in America*, November–December 1971).

The camaraderie among painters and composers was rather unusual in New York during the 1950s and 1960s, creating a robust cultural situation of mutual aid. I can remember concerts of John Cage, Stefan Wolpe (one of Feldman’s teachers), and Feldman himself, in which most of the audience consisted of painters and their wives or girlfriends. The coming together of kindred spirits led to an audacious attempt to counter the increasingly academic vanguardism burgeoning in universities after the war. The painter Mercedes Matter, one of Guston’s closest allies, and a few other artists decided to create a new art school that would be pure, uncorrupted by grades and degrees. Both Guston and Feldman were active supporters when the New York Studio School opened in 1964, and Feldman later even did a stint as director. Many of the public events—usually informal conversations modeled on the debates at the earlier Artists’ Club—were, and still are, magnets for serious practitioners in the arts. Fortunately, these sessions were sometimes recorded; they became key documents in the history of American art. Coolidge includes several of them in this anthology.

In their spontaneous colloquies, an attentive reader can discern the rich compost from which these artists—now mature and well established—had grown. Often the talk went around and around, and in the circuitry ideas were freely borrowed or elaborated. One instance: in a symposium moderated by the distinguished critic Harold Rosenberg—another of Guston’s important conversational intimates—Guston said: “I believe it was John Cage who once told me, ‘When you start working, everybody is in your studio—the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all your own ideas—all are there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you’re lucky, even you leave’ ” (p. 30). Perhaps it was indeed Cage who told Guston the story, but Cage himself very probably found the image in a note of Wallace Stevens, one of Guston’s favored poets, intended for a lecture on Picasso. Stevens has Picasso sitting with several men before beginning a painting; one by one the others leave, and Picasso picks up his brush and begins painting. In the end, then, even the circularity of these public discussions, particularly at the Studio School, always served to expand the range of references that, in turn, exposed the deepest preoccupations of these singular artists.

How Guston coveted significant allusions is evident in the frequency with which he mentions a conversation with Rosenberg in 1965, in which the critic offered him what would become for Guston a key concept: “You know Mallarmé’s formula for the poet? He calls him ‘un civilisé édénique,’ a civilized first man” (p. 48). Guston thought that was “marvelous”—one of his favorite exclamations—and pulled it into his own interior thought, to be retrieved frequently thereafter. His foraging in literary sources was ex-

tensive. Everyone who spent any time with Guston soon discovered his familiarity with all the original sources of modernism, among them Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Apollinaire, and T. S. Eliot. He could cite them unforgettably, as when he explained Baudelaire's idea of modernism. The poet commanded, "Be modern at all costs," Guston said, and then, with his own unusual capacity for heightened metaphor, explained: "And he meant *modern* like a sardine can in a poem."

During the war in Vietnam, Guston's ruminations became more somber, especially after the ruthless suppression of protesters at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, which he had watched on television. He turned more frequently to satire and caricature, as in his fierce skewering of Nixon in 1971. As I recall from my frequent conversations and correspondence with him, he thought more often about precursors in painting who had expressed pessimism in their work, Goya above all. As he said in 1974, he was impressed by Goya's late so-called black paintings in the Prado, and he spoke of "the monstrosity of humanity, the distortion of their faces, and the way he piled them all up in these pyramids, in these hills, these big black shapes and threatening clouds" (p. 235). Shades of Goyesque darkness began to appear in Guston's own paintings in the mid-1960s. In a large one-man exhibition at the Jewish Museum in 1966, he had shown canvases of turbid grays and blacks with strange masses suggesting human heads. The show was greeted with scorn by much of the press and even by some younger painters who had rejected the moody psychological climate found in many paintings of the abstract expressionists and had turned to the sunnier vistas of so-called pop artists and the surface enchantments of the op artists.

It was around this troubled time Guston turned his thoughts more often to the late work of Rembrandt, whose world was the very opposite of the bright-colored world of the pop artists. Guston's musings about Rembrandt always emphasized the mystery inherent in the master's use of impasto. In the 1960s, for example, he told David Sylvester, a British critic of keen sensibility, that in Rembrandt "there's an ambiguity of paint being image and image being paint which is very mysterious" (p. 26). More than a decade later, he again considered Rembrandt's late work and tried to describe its effect: "What he's done is to eliminate any plane, anything between that image and you."

Guston's allusion to the plane, sometimes called the picture plane, is extremely important in his aesthetic evolution. He sustained a prolonged quarrel with what he called the shibboleths of modern art, above all the demand that artists respect the plane. His dissent is one of the most important leitmotifs in his writing and talking. His attentive study of cubism while still a very young painter had given him the tools he needed to dismantle the modern tradition of flatness and to retrieve older conventions for indicating depth. In the 1960 interview with Sylvester, he insisted on the "imaginary" plane and the "metaphysical plane that painting exists on" (p. 21). Almost twenty years later, he reacted to a young painter's statement, "What you see is what you see," by calling it a popular and "melancholy" cliché, remote from his own concerns. He declared: "The painting is not on a surface, but on a plane which is imagined" (p. 278).

Despite his disdain for the clichés of modernism and its stultifying obedience to the

law of the picture plane, Guston could always respond to the modern giants who were at the origin of planar painting, most especially to Mondrian, who, for Guston, in one of his public discourses, was “that magnificent crank” (p. 119). I’ve always thought that Guston was concerned with Mondrian because he himself was engaged with certain propositions that considered the cosmic aspect of painting, or the quest for an imaginary wholeness. Mondrian, Guston remarked, “had the ability to seize the total” (p. 35). Guston tried to describe Mondrian’s strength on many occasions. A few months before his death, Guston again delved into the strange power of Mondrian’s paintings. He attributed Mondrian’s pictorial prowess wholly to his “passion.” As a man of passion himself, Guston had no trouble recognizing it in others. Also, he was no stranger to the desire to encompass the many in the one. “Reality is one,” he told Feldman (p. 103), and guardedly described his own departure from abstraction, in which frequently the “multitudinous” resigned. “There’s no other way but then to get involved in the many . . . in order again to arrive at the one. Because one’s total hunger is always for the one” (pp. 103–4).

During the late 1960s, outward events had made deep incursions in Guston’s thought. They had much to do with the renunciation he announced in the shocking and now legendary exhibition of 1970. Immured in his Woodstock studio, Guston had begun to draw and paint grotesques, recognizable things—shoes, cars, junk (which he called “crappola”), and, as he always said, anything at all he saw around. Sometimes they were single images presented with deliberate, primitive-looking simplicity, such as a single lightbulb or an open book. As he said to me in 1958, he did not want “emotion or ambiguity to stick with me like seaweed.” It was around that time that old figures in his repertory began to reappear—hooded Ku Kluxers, now seen riding around in comic-strip cars, or, equally comical, showing up in Guston’s own studio, sometimes painting. The clock, reminiscent of Chirico, became an ominous avatar, as it had been metaphorically long before: “Painting is a clock that sees each end of the street as the edge of the world,” he said around 1957–58 (p. 19), painting at the same time an abstraction that he titled *The Clock*. During the late 1960s he repeatedly talked of his compelling need to cope with “tangible things.” And on various occasions he referred to “the thickness of things” that he now craved to portray. Probably he had read in one of the journals he regularly perused, particularly *Partisan Review*, of the French poet Francis Ponge, whose mantra was that he was exclusively interested in the thickness of things. Or perhaps he remembered William Carlos Williams’s famous dictum, “No reality but in things.”

In the new paintings and drawings he showed in 1970, Guston took back the prerogative of past painters and openly declared his will to be a storyteller or, better, a movie director. On the day the exhibition opened—clearly the bombshell he had intended—his stunned viewers were properly appalled. The critic of the *New York Times* wrote in a rage, under a headline that declared Guston a mandarin pretending to be a stumblebum.

There were a few, however, who recognized the seriousness of Guston’s volte-face.

His intimates at the time, including the writer Philip Roth, were also deeply alarmed by the exceedingly violent turn of events in the world. To them, Guston's new work was absolutely appropriate. For Guston himself—observing from the fastness of his remote studio—the war in Vietnam and the riot in Chicago called up the most horrifying events of his own lifetime, particularly the Holocaust. In the 1968 conversation with Morton Feldman recorded at the Studio School, Guston opened with a long description of what was on his mind—a book he had been reading about the concentration camp Treblinka. It was one of the few camps, he said, where there had been a successful escape. He described the inmates arguing interminably about the meaning of an escape and then spoke especially of a doctor “who makes this magnificent exegesis about why do it, trying to convince this small band of the others.” The doctor put forward that the only reason to escape, Guston said, “is to bear witness,” to which Guston himself added, “Well, that’s the only reason to be an artist: to escape, to bear witness” (p. 81).

From then on, Guston's work can be seen as an extended act of bearing witness, not only to the horrors of the world but also to its occasional ridiculous or risible turning, its moments of pleasure, and above all its diversity. Hidden behind his continual probing of the world is his primary question: What has it to do with the act of creation? Guston never forgot his urgent need to question the act of painting and what might be called a philosophical inquiry into its origins. In his more rhapsodic commentaries he declares that art is magic. Sometimes he used to call the painter an alchemist. Sometimes he would tread on dangerous ground (at least he thought so) and announce: “But I do have a faith that it is possible to make a living thing, not a diagram of what I have been thinking: to posit with paint something living, something that changes each day” (p. 54).

But if he thought that he could make a living thing, he quickly challenged himself, and all artists, by bringing up the conundrum: Who has the right to make a living thing? In this question, which can be traced back to ancient sources, Guston revealed his philosophical bent. In my experience, very few painters have gone so far in their self-questioning as Guston, and I believe he was unique in worrying so seriously about that Greek curse, hubris. The dialectical nature of his inner thought, his concern with the exposed and the hidden, which he discussed at length with Clark Coolidge, prodded him to ponder the notion of the demiurge. He had long before acquired the habit of seeing something diabolical in the painter's quest. He often remarked, as any reader of this anthology will find, that painting was “the devil's work.” But at the end of his life he thought concertedly about the myth of the demiurge.

Since in biblical sources the demiurge was identified as a workman god (God himself was too lofty to dirty his hands making things or beings), Guston could easily play with the notion that the working artist aspired to be a demigod and, as such, would have to experience a peculiar kind of hubris—Guston's own idiosyncratic hubris. This was one of his most distinctive leitmotifs, expressed in another way when he spoke of “a third hand” doing the work. That metaphorical hand becomes shorthand for describing an experience every true painter knows—that of transcending himself and his

tools, as if following some ancient imperative. Sometimes Guston couched these thoughts in terms of the Sung painters, whom he deeply admired. He thought they did “something thousands and thousands of times . . . until someone else does it, not you, and the rhythm moves through you” (pp. 284–85). Picasso knew the experience and late in his life declared: Painting is stronger than I am, it makes me do what it wants. Guston says very much the same thing when he repeatedly refers to the “third hand” that usually takes over when the painting is nearing completion. In his very last interview, Guston again brought up the issue of hubris: “We’re not supposed to meddle with the forces—God takes care of that,” but “the hubris in you has to deal with a very strong compulsion ‘to make’ ” (p. 307).

Many saw Guston’s last works as fundamentally tragic. Gone were the comic slapstick scenes that evoked a smile, albeit a wry smile. Now his own baleful eye, which had appeared in his paintings even in his youth (for instance, in the important work *If This Be Not I*, where it can be seen peering above a mask in the middle ground), is everywhere, surveying scenes of desolation. The painter, his paintings, his wife, and his friends were often depicted as a seething mass of heads, drowning. Always the rebel, Guston, in his quest to test the limits of art, wound up deeply distrusting the art of his time. As he said to Coolidge in 1972, during their penetrating discussion of Melville, whom they both felt had blasted many literary taboos, Melville was “somewhere else.” For Guston, that somewhere else was, he suspected, beyond art. His paradoxical view of the artist is made clear in the same dialogue when he alludes to one of his literary heroes, Samuel Beckett: “I think the greatness of Beckett, really, is that deep and life-long profound disgust with art. And, paradoxically, that’s why he became a great artist” (p. 209).

But as Guston well knew, he was himself an artist and would die an artist, one who perfectly understood Unamuno’s tragic sense of life. But he also knew the “self-trust” that he said Picasso had taught him. In the late notes in the last pages of this book, we find his acknowledgment of the great twentieth-century master: “Picasso, the builder, re-peopled the earth—inventing new beings. We believe his will” (p. 313).

And I can believe Guston’s will. I am gratified to see that the last entry in this book is an undisguised testament to his all-consuming love of painting, of art: “Thank God for yellow ochre, cadmium red medium, and permanent green light” (p. 316).