

The long farewell

T.J. Clark, *Those Passions: On Art and Politics* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2025). 384pp., £40.00 hb., 978 0 50002 526 0

In the introduction to *Farewell to an Idea* (1999) [reviewed in *RP* 104], T.J. Clark imagined modernism as a vast historical ruin, one whose forms of representation seem unreadable to us now, but only because we have come to inhabit the future they prophesied. On this model, the critic of modernist art would be a kind of intrepid archaeologist, rummaging through the ciphered remains of some forgotten civilisation, suffused with ways of living alien to their own. *Those Passions* is Clark's latest attempt to decipher that ruin, to excavate those lost signs. Divided into three parts – 'Precursors', 'Moderns', 'Modernities' – it anthologises material written over the past twenty-five years for exhibition catalogues, essay collections, academic journals and the *London Review of Books*. The anthological form of the book mirrors the fragmentary character of many of its objects, imitating the dialectic that its final chapter finds in Picasso's *Guernica*: a disconnectedness held in unity. By revisiting some of the most important names in the painting of modern life – from Bosch to Malevich, Ensor to Richter, Delacroix to Pollock – Clark's tour de force interpretations mount a firm but chary defence of art's ability to register political realities in ways that refuse transcendence yet surpass mere reflection. A quarter of a century since his fin-de-siècle masterwork *Farewell to an Idea*, Clark has returned once more to the modernist dig, unearthing an art-critical history of the present to make the stones speak.

Clark's writing is a criticism of effects. Which is to say, it is phenomenological, in the philosophical sense of working through contradiction in pursuit of speculative truth. A more or less explicit assumption of *Those Passions* is that artworks embody a kind of knowledge that is unattainable by other means. The watchword of the book may as well be the line from Hegel's *Lectures on Fine Art*: art is 'the extreme that thinking is'. Still, there remains the question of how to disentangle and articulate this thinking in a way that does not do damage to the object in which it is embodied. As Clark puts it in his 2006 book *The Sight of Death*, art writing so rarely convinces because

it tends to overwrite or underwrite what it seeks to explain, 'it strains too hard to see the metaphor in a way of doing things or is too anxious to respect the way's muteness and matter-of-factness'. Clark's own solution to this dilemma is to deliver himself over to the work, which in the case of *The Sight of Death* was quite literal: he visited the Getty Museum every day for three months to look at the same two Poussin paintings and record what came to mind. 'I want this book to be about what occurs in front of paintings more or less involuntarily, not what I think ought to occur', he writes. But the catch is that, without the author's aestheticist self-discipline, his almost cultish reverence for the art object, these aleatory insights would not have been able to emerge, and when they do, they are of a different order to the hard-headed devotion that has brought them into being. This tension between purposefulness and spontaneity is carried over into the style of Clark's prose, which has a planar quality that allows the reader to glide across the page, as much as it invites them to dwell upon the details.

The chapter on Matisse's portrait of his wife, Amélie Parayre, is Clark's writing at its most fluent and familiar. Originally published in the *LRB* in 2008, the piece begins with an observation made by the painter-critic Maurice Denis shortly after Matisse had first exhibited *La femme au chapeau* in 1905, to the ridicule of all and sundry. The criticism – exceptional for its time, and no less incisive today – was that Matisse operates by reducing what is multiple and heterogeneous to the level of abstract generality. In this way, the world becomes fully rational and intelligible as fragments of perception, subordinating the contingent or instinctual aspects of experience to the power of cognition. The vibrant colours and angular shapes of Parayre's face, for example, chafe against one another rather than sinking into a compositional harmony, conveying a sense of coldness and calculation that is at odds with the intimacy in which the painter held his sitter. But the elephant in the work, and the target of contemporary derision, was not the rendering of Parayre herself but the outlandish object sitting on

her head, which looks more like a fruit bowl than a head-piece. To the question ‘What was the colour of Madame Matisse’s hat for you to paint it so garishly?’, the artist is said to have responded, ‘Black, obviously’. Clark seizes on this epigram to illustrate a dialectic that cuts across the history of modernist painting: blackness is always lurking beneath the irruption of colour, the flipside to revolution is the fire of the *ancien régime*, Malevich is the inverse of Matisse. In Clark’s words: ‘Modernism is paradox. It is dialectics’.



The key to Clark’s method is still the opening chapter of his first book, *The Image of the People* (1973). There, he puts forth a quasi-programmatic outline for the social history of art in which he lines up all those versions of what his criticism is not: reducing art to a reflection of ideology, squeezing form and content into a relation of analogy, treating history as mere ‘background’ for the work. The temptation is to rush for the interpretation that imports into painting what lies outside it. Lack of focus in Courbet *means* egalitarianism, fragmentation in Manet *expresses* the alienation of class society. The task for the social historian of art is both narrower and more expansive. They must study the empirical conditions of

art’s production and reception – patronage, sales, criticism, opinion. By this route, they are able to identify moments of confusion or coalescence in the culture, ‘a gesture, or a painting, which is super-charged with historical meaning, round which significance clusters’. From here, the challenge is to discover the ‘processes of conversion and relation’ through which history enters the work and the work becomes historical. But the solution to the puzzle will always be case-specific, for artists make their own encounters with their epoch, albeit not in conditions of their own choosing. It is the totality of these pre-existing structures (which encircle the critic as well) that must be reconstructed through the artist’s attempt to tarry with them. The results will be readily recognisable as much as they exceed familiarity: ‘experience becomes a form, an event becomes an image, boredom becomes its representation, despair becomes spleen’, etc.

The essays in *Those Passions* don’t always measure up to this methodological standard even if they also never strictly depart from it. The chapter on Lowry, for instance, somehow fails to come off. Written for the 2013 retrospective at the Tate Britain, the essay’s jumping-off point is the following conundrum: if British industrialism was such a source of jingoistic pride, then why was it so rarely represented in the nation’s modern art? Clark’s response begins with a broad-brush account of the changes to everyday life wrought by twentieth-century modernisation, which repatriated the production of the new from the class intermixing of Bohemian social space to isolated neighbourhoods at the fringes of the city. If intellectuals and artists struggled to come to terms with this ‘system of separateness’, it was because they had scant access to the new worlds it created, which is why industry seldom featured in the canvasses of British artists. Lowry is the exception that proves the rule. His formation as an upper-middle-class rent collector granted him privileged admission into the culture of working-class life, while also presupposing a basic exteriority to the people he set out to represent. As Clark tries to argue, this dialectic of nearness and detachment permeates Lowry’s pictorial idiom: on the one hand, the closeness of the frontal buildings manages to avoid registering as oppressive; on the other, the artist’s minute ordering of space creates a domineering effect. And yet, although it avoids reducing history to the level of background, Clark’s attempt to track between art and society

smacks too much of analogy to come across as convincing, straining to make a strong political case for this most conservative of painters.

Those Passions marks a departure from Clark's other books insofar as it brings together his occasional political writings, which subscribe to a melancholic vision of capitalist modernity that refuses to prefigure what comes after it. Taking inspiration from the Situationists (to whom he once belonged), Clark tells us that the spectacle of modernity feeds off of vanishing forms of sociality, and in failing to deliver happiness, ruins the materials from which happiness might one day be forged. In 'The End of the Image-World', he argues that what distinguishes today's regime of the image from prior cycles of struggle is the frailty of the social texture in which it sinks its roots, bombarding the individual with unobtainable signifiers when there exist paltry resources with which to articulate effective counter-resistance. By far the most notorious of the political texts collected here is the short polemic 'For a Left With No Future', also printed in a 2012 issue of the *New Left Review*. The gist of Clark's critique is that left-wing opposition to the forces of capital has nothing to gain from predictions about the system's demise. Because they have failed to heed this fact, radical political movements have been unable to offer a convincing perspective from which to make sense of capitalism's failures, as well as their own. Instead of mining the present for millenarian signs of world-ending catastrophe, the spadework of resistance would do better to focus on the apples of discord that shape politics today. The sobering conclusion is that the left is an absence which must look its insignificance in the face, a self-reckoning out of which a mass movement may arise, but only at the cost of jettisoning those big ideas with which the left has hitherto comforted itself. As Clark puts

it in 'Modernity and Terror', the task of left politics is a resolutely negative one: a 'non-orthodox, non-nostalgic, non-rejectionist, non-apocalyptic critique of the modern'.

Clark's political writings foreshorten the future while his art criticism defers the present backwards. This double movement gives rise to the pathos of Clark's thought, which is torn between a melancholic inability to leave modernism behind and an embattled desire to finally be done with it. Orphaned by the intervening shipwreck of modernisation, we no longer have access to the utopianism of El Lissitzky's *Prouns*, the bravado of Pollock's first drip paintings, the brazenness of Picasso's *Ma Jolie*. However, if these works are today distant enough for us to mourn their passing, they also capture something enduring about the disenchantment of the world, encoding the experience of a modernity not yet fully in place. Clark's wager is that to decipher the ruin of modern art is thus to yield the key to our current state of unfreedom, but this has meant blinding himself to the new modes of art-making that emerged in modernism's wake. 'I am no expert on contemporary art', he wrote in 2002, 'I am conscious of living desperately in a modernist past, and of feeling a depth of identification with certain modernist art works, which has made it hard for me to give much of the art of the last two decades its due'. Which is to say, Clark's painterly case for the politics of modernism comes at the price of an increasing irrelevance with regard to the situation of art today. And yet, to make this critique is to risk sounding redundant, for Clark's historicist focus has already sacrificed its claim to contemporaneity. The strengths of Clark's criticism are in this sense also its weaknesses, its insights derive from its shortcomings, it is luminous at its most myopic, and urgent where it fails to ring true. This too is dialectics.

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