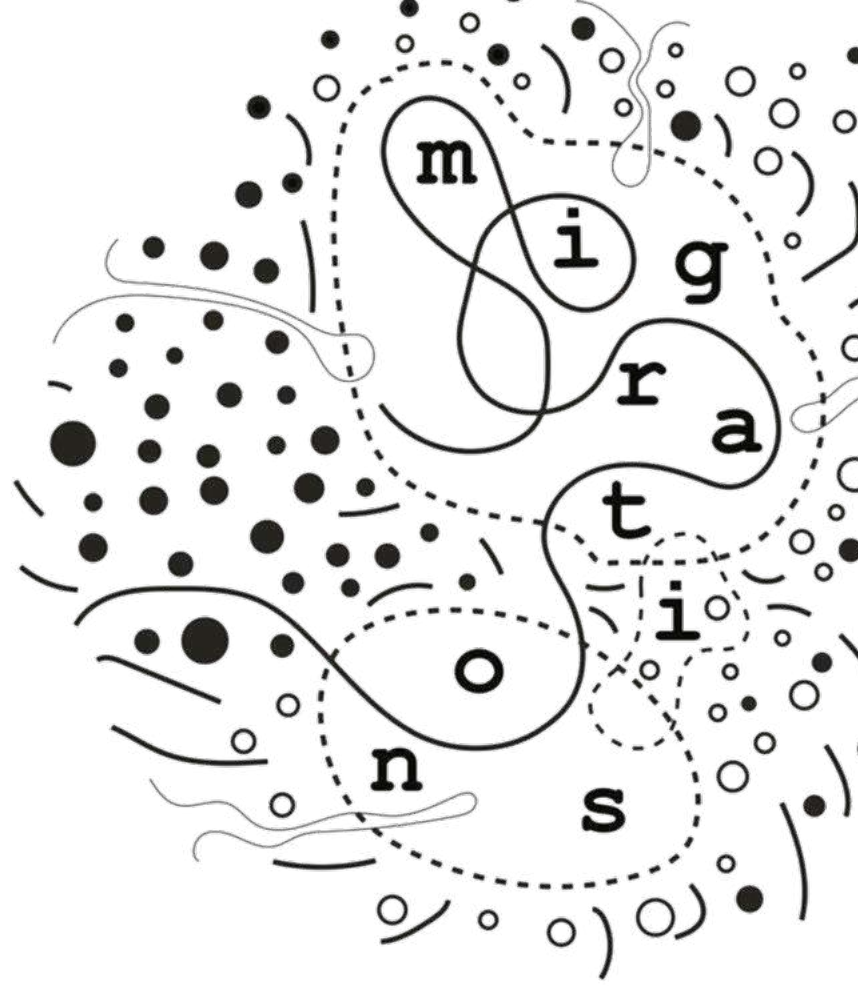


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35th World Congress





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Notes on the Critical Reception of G.E. Lessing's *Laokoon* in 19th and Early 20th-century America

Camilla Froio

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ABSTRACT

When Clement Greenberg wrote his essay, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," a homage to G.E. Lessing's *Laokoon* (1766), he was not fully aware of the complex cultural constructs he was dealing with. His general perception of the treatise resulted from a long and complicated phenomenon of cultural appropriation and negotiation. Around the second half of the 19th century, an intense migration of symbols and paradigms from Germany to America took place, and Lessing's *Laokoon* was an important part of it. This mobility of ideas was favored by the migration of scholars, who played the role of physical vehicles of new paradigms and cultural values. Most important were the intersections and negotiation processes: during this age, Lessing's theories conformed to American cultural needs and expectations. This phenomenon paved the way to the canonization of a precise mythology, as the treatise gradually became the symbol for the strict logic for the separation of the arts. At the beginning of the 20th century, this tradition was canonized by Irving Babbitt's *The New Laokoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (1910): here, the author revised and reshaped Lessing's ideas in order to adapt them to the case of modern art.

KEYWORDS

Clement Greenberg; Irving Babbitt; Gotthold Ephraim Lessing; *Laokoon*; John Ruskin.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Irving Babbitt, and Clement Greenberg: A Common Narrative

In the summer of 1940, Clement Greenberg wrote one of his most emblematic essays on the condition of modern culture, particularly the state of the arts, namely his well-known essay “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” published in the pages of the *Partisan Review*.¹ Greenberg reappraised the original German treatise written by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerey und Poesie* (1766): following Lessing’s main argumentation, the critic noted that modern times were witnessing a debilitating tendency towards the confusion of the arts, a noxious effect of the Romantic revolution, and called for a more strict and rigid separation of each artistic media. As the title of Greenberg’s article highlights, the critic implicitly agreed with one of the most controversial reappraisals of Lessing’s late *Laokoon*, that is the long essay published under the title of *The New Laocoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (1910), written by Irving Babbitt, the leader of the ultra-conservative literary movement known as New Humanism. Babbitt advocated the separation between the arts as an antidote to what he felt as a state of cultural chaos originated by the so-called impressionist literature and, of course, by the avant-garde.²

Compared to other essays written by Greenberg, the critics have always found the “Laocoon” the most difficult to decipher: the author’s argumentations around the necessity to set rigid boundaries between literature and the visual arts, are articulated and clear, but the effective meaning of Greenberg’s reference to his sources (Lessing and Babbitt), has always appeared hard to interpret and to understand in its entirety. As Michael Leja pointed out in his well-known study *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (1993), Greenberg’s references to Lessing as well as to Babbitt are almost absent, even though the title of the essay suggests a close relation to both authors and a direct comparison with their respective treatises.³ As I articulated in a recent contribution published in the *Getty Research Journal*,⁴ Greenberg’s “Laocoon” should be reconsidered in light of the existence of three drafts of the essay,

which reveal that originally Greenberg's ideas and argumentations were quite different in their scope as well as in their content. Following my research and analysis of Greenberg's personal papers, held by the Getty Research Institute,⁵ the "Laocoon" has to be regarded as the result of a series of endless revisions demanded by the editorial board of the *Partisan Review*. According to the editors' opinion, the text, as Greenberg originally outlined it, could not fit for the purposes of the magazine, a politically engaged publication addressed to a Marxist-oriented reading public. As a matter of fact, Greenberg formerly intended to trace back the historical and cultural origins of the confusion of the arts, epitomized by Horace's simile *Ut pictura poësis*, which eventually led to Lessing's treatise and, two centuries later, to Babbitt's argumentations. In his personal correspondence with his friend and confidant, Harold Lazarus, Greenberg lamented the radical changes demanded by the editor, Dwight Macdonald, who found the essay too involved in matters concerning aesthetic theory and literature, hence not in line with the journal's political agenda;⁶ therefore, the young author was forced to abandon his initial plans and to reconfigure the structure and the conceptual framework of the essay, gradually giving form to the definitive version of his new "Laocoon."

The original drafts of Greenberg's essay, as well as other annotations, proved that the origins of the critic's ultra-conservative position, on one hand, has to be related to Babbitt's argumentations around Lessing's original statements, and, on the other, should be traced back to the literary culture of the second half of the Nineteenth century, when an intense migration of symbols and paradigms from Germany to America took place.⁷ Across the century, American culture turned its gaze outward, and the creation of a native artistic and literary canon was actively mediated by the valuation and appropriation of the European heritage. This mobility of ideas was favored by the migration of scholars, who played the role of physical vehicles of new paradigms and cultural values. Most important for the present context, was the processes of intersections and negotiations: during this age, Lessing's theories on the relation between visual and verbal arts were conformed to American cultural needs and expectations. The present paper intends to demonstrate that Greenberg's peculiar choice to reappraise the German

classic at the end of the 1930s was partly due to Lessing's traditional and enduring popularity in America during the second half of the Nineteenth century and the beginning of the Twentieth. Moreover, assuming a wider perspective, I would like to underline a peculiar aspect of the critical reception of Lessing's *Laokoon*, that is the role played by politics and related contextual interests which actually oriented the interpretation of the text: the *Laokoon* then, as we will see, had always been perceived rather as a *tool*, adaptable to the partisan argumentations and ideological orientations of its American commentators, including Babbitt and Greenberg, who effectively legitimized their positions by referring to Lessing's unquestionable and established authority.

As stated at the very beginning, the transcultural mobility of ideas should be firstly regarded as a material process of migration: in the case of the critical reception of Lessing's *Laokoon*, and its further consequences and effects on the future development of American literary and art criticism, the phenomenon should be considered against the backdrop of the migration of young American scholars to Germany in the first half of the Nineteenth century. Men such as George Ticknor, Edward Everett, and George Bancroft formed the earliest group of American-born intellectuals who completed their education at the University of Gottingen, Germany, becoming not only the most competent critics of German literature overseas but also, and foremost, the pioneers in the introduction of German thought in the United States. Their journey abroad was guided by a strong passion for German history and culture, and mostly derived by the reading of a monumental publication of the time, namely Madame de Staël's *On Germany (De l'Allemagne)*, Paris 1813), which held an exceptionally privileged position in the wide framework of the reception of German literature in America.⁸ After the return of the first group of American scholars from Europe, a progressively growing number of reviews, essays, and translations of the most prominent German authors, gradually appeared in the pages of notable American magazines, especially the *American Quarterly Review* and *The New York Review*, reaching the peak in the 1840s and 1850s, with the birth of the first mass circulation press. At the beginning of the century, the passion of the

American scholars for German culture was partly mirroring the political climate originated by the end of the so-called War of 1812: as Merle Curti underlined in *The Growth of American Thought*, ‘the enthusiasm for German culture’ was to be primarily interpreted as the effect of a collective reaction against Great Britain’s politics and, by extension, against its culture.⁹ Born as a form of fascination for a ‘non-British culture’ and as an answer to a sudden ‘cultural void,’ the interest in German culture gradually took the shape of a genuine and shared admiration for the enchanted ground that gave birth to such men as Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Lessing.

The unique openness to the European cultural models and the birth of a mass market of magazines and books are strictly entwined: shared optimism, intellectual curiosity, and openness mostly characterized this *époque*, soon to be disillusioned by the brutality of the Civil War (1861-1865). What defines the Fifties was the effort to actively reach European standards, a collective attitude evidenced by the enthusiastic promotion, for example, of itinerant and comprehensive exhibitions of European art. In this regard, two landmark exhibitions were inaugurated at the end of the decade: the major exhibit of European Art hosted by the National Academy of Design of New York (1859), anticipated by an exhibition of English paintings that toured the major American cities and which included notable Pre-Raphaelite artworks, such as Holman Hunt’s *Light of the World* (1851-1853) and Ford Madox Brown’s *An English Autumn Afternoon* (1852-1853). In addition, these years were marked by the publication of the first American treatise devoted to the visual and verbal arts, *Lectures on Art, And Poems* (1850), written by the painter Washington Allston. This decade witnessed an unparalleled interest in the *Laokoon*: a canon for the reading and of interpreting Lessing’s statements was soon to be established, and a better knowledge of the treatise, its sources and contents, was gradually spreading among the American reading public. Two magazines in particular, *The American Whig Review* and *The Crayon*, attempted to provide a new and accessible synthesis of the *Laokoon*, whose main argumentations were interpreted, as we will see, according to the magazines’ respective cultural and political agendas.

Lessing's *Laokoon* According to *The American Whig Review*

The first one is an article published in the pages of the *American Whig Review* under the title of "Lessing's Laocoon: the Secret of Classic Composition in Poetry, Painting and Statuary," written by one of the editors, James Davenport Whelpley, in 1851.¹⁰ The *American Whig Review*, the official organ of the conservative Whig party, was originally founded in 1845 and run without interruption until 1852, the year of the Whig's political defeat, immediately followed by the disbandment of the party.

As James E. Mulqueen highlighted, 'Political conservatism was a determining factor in Whig literary criticism,'

The Whigs stressed unity and harmony in politics and in art, espousing the organic theory for both society and literature. The true center of moral, intellectual, and social life was held to be religion, an opinion which influenced much of their literary criticism. Stability and reverence for the past involved literary critics in the problem of imitation versus originality.¹¹

Values such as wisdom, steadiness, and obedience to the rules represented a common ground for the critics, while unity, harmony and imagination, were regarded as the leading virtues of artistic creation. The American painter Henry Inman, for instance, was strongly praised in the magazine's pages, being the perfect embodiment of these exact values in art as in life.

The clear echo of the organic theory of art, espoused by the Whig critics, is found in the review of Lessing's *Laokoon*: Whelpley spelled out precisely the German moral and social function of the German treatise, eventually portraying the German author as the true emblem of Whig values. Every aspect of the *Laokoon*, with its declared reverence for Homer and Virgil, was interpreted as the mirroring of the character of its author, who was guided by a unique sense for morality and clarity. 'Lessing was neither a mystic nor a transcendentalist – Whelpley asserted – His characteristics are perspicuity and judgment, and an understanding very free of prejudice.'¹² As we immediately perceive from these words, Whelpley, being a true

representative of the Whig party, strongly rejected every aspect that could be related to the Transcendentalist movement: the German writer was depicted as a champion of balance and judgment, and a potential guide for all the young artists and poets who sought success and collective praise by devoting themselves to discipline. Moreover, an additional feature characterizes Whelpley's essay, namely its recognizable pragmatic attitude: the critic actually translated the treatise into a handbook addressed to the painter who was looking for a rule of thumb on how to represent figuratively the words of two of the most popular American poets of the period: William Cullen Bryant and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

A Highly Romanticized Interpretation of Lessing's Treatise: The Case of *The Crayon*

The second article devoted to Lessing's *Laocoon* was published in 1856 by a journal devoted to art and literature, *The Crayon*; even though anonymous, it was quite possibly written by John Durand, the son of the landscape painter Asher B. Durand and one of the magazine's editors.¹³ Originally founded in 1855, *The Crayon* was addressed to readers interested in the visual arts and art criticism in general, and particularly to readers of John Ruskin and to those sympathetic with the sentimental vein of the Pre-Raphaelite art movement.¹⁴ Both Durand and his colleague, the photographer William J. Stillman, were devoted advocates of Ruskin's thought overseas during a time when the ideas of the English writer gained unprecedented success among the American reading public: as a matter of fact, *The Crayon* was profoundly committed to the popularization of Ruskin's most notable writings through the publication of selected excerpts from, for instance, *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*, which were enthusiastically received by the readers.¹⁵

Since its beginnings, *The Crayon* was strongly influenced by the main tenets of New England Transcendentalism on one side, and by the Unitarian doctrine on the other, which went hand in hand with a profound, almost pantheistic, sensibility for nature. Both editors, especially Durand, fell under the sway of the highly romantic and religious atmosphere that permeated the middle of the Nineteenth century: a spiritual thread run through the essays

and reviews published by Durand and Stillman, which often tended to emphasize the sacred bond between God, man, and nature.¹⁶ In this regard, the journal fully absorbed the new tendencies in American art and literature, which saw nature as a gate that opened upon a transcendental and invisible reality.

A section of the journal was dedicated to German philosophers and poets, and hosted a remarkable review of Lessing's *Laokoon*, introduced by the following encomiastic words:

We do not apologize to our readers for introducing another man of letters into our literary temple devoted to the Fine Arts. The more the influence of Literature upon Art is understood, the better will it be both for poets and artists. Lessing in his *Laocoon* – the same *Laocoon* from which Ruskin quotes so copiously – alludes to the saying of Simonides, that 'Painting is silent poetry, and poetry is a living picture', but, at the same time, he demolishes the brilliant commonplace of the versatile Greek, that, like Voltaire in his days, and Macaulay in ours, loved a dazzling antithesis much better than he loved truth.¹⁷

The comparison between Lessing and Ruskin is fully characteristic of Durand's rhetoric: the writer portrayed the German author as a poet guided by an indefinite mystical sentiment, which inspired him to recognize and to celebrate the existence of an inner fellowship between the arts. As commonly known, the *Laokoon* was, on the contrary, a treatise that theorized the necessary separation between the visual and the verbal arts; Durand, instead, read the treatise as a Romantic-infused work of literature, both evocative and poetic, which emphasized the sisterhood between the arts, to be interpreted, still according to Durand, as a metaphor of the necessary unity among men.

Moreover, the author advocated the existence of a spiritual affinity between Lessing and Ruskin: as he declared, 'Lessing was of the Ruskin stamp of mind. *Immensely suggestive*',¹⁸ and he seized the opportunity to address those critics of Ruskin who were unable to understand the existence of a

common, spiritual thread that united men such as Ruskin and Lessing. As written by Durand,

The Ruskins and Lessings are the pioneers of Art and Literature. But the labor of our own backwoodsmen in Kentucky, compared to the labor of Ruskin in the Anglo-Saxon land, and of Lessing in the Rhine and Elbe land, is mere child's play. They stood only in danger of a neat little Indian narrow, but they stood upon a virgin soil. But look at Ruskin, with the clumsy, savage, myriad arrows of ignorance darted against his ideal aspirations, and standing upon a soil polluted by prejudice, and vitiated by time-brassened stolidity.¹⁹

Conclusion

The conditions surrounding the formation of a collective opinion on the *Laokoon* in America in the middle of the Nineteenth century are quite contradictory: on one hand we find a deeply rooted ultra-conservative account, voiced by the *American Whig Review*, while on the other, an alternative key of interpretation is provided by a completely opposite type of journal, a strong advocate of John Ruskin's thought, mostly inspired by the main tenets of Transcendentalism. The essential fact is the simultaneous emergence of two antithetical views of the *Laokoon*, brought forth by two groups of individuals committed to engaging and extending their respective cultural agendas, and who saw Lessing as the emblem of their political, cultural, and aesthetic values. The formation and promotion of a distinct image of the *Laokoon* tended to be, as I tried to demonstrate, as one process.

At the conclusion of my presentation, I would like to make clear that my intent was not to imply that Greenberg, when he conceptualized his new, American "Laocoon" at the end of the 1930s, was actively influenced by the two essays I just illustrated: quite possibly, he was not even aware of their existence. My reflection here is more of a methodological nature: every act of cultural motion and every step of migration of ideas from one continent to the other, should always be questioned and reconsidered as an act of transmission but, most of all, as an act of cultural negotiation. If Greenberg's

early criticism's most controversial and conservative aspects are viewed against this background, these elements might appear with greater clarity, even though they may remain questionable.

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Endnotes

1. Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review* 7, no. 4 (July-August 1940): 296-310.
2. Irving Babbitt, *The New Laocoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910). About the sources of Babbitt's treatise and for an analysis of its contents, see: Camilla Froio, *Verso un Laocoonte modernista: temi, immagini e contesti del Laocoonte di Clement Greenberg* (Florence: Angelo Pontecorboli Editore, 2020): 19-91. Apropos of Babbitt and the New Humanist movement, see also Thomas R. Nevin, *Irving Babbitt: An Intellectual Study* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1984); George A. Panichas, *The Critical Legacy of Irving Babbitt: An Appreciation* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 1999).
3. See Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 222-225.
4. Camilla Froio, "An Unreleased Laocoon: The First Draft of Clement Greenberg's Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Getty Research Journal* 13, no. 1 (January 2021): 203-217.
5. See Clement Greenberg Papers, 1928-1995, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, Accession no. 950085.
6. Froio, "An Unreleased Laocoon," 203-204.
7. For a detailed analysis of the reception of Lessing's treatise in America during the Nineteenth century, see Camilla Froio, "La cultura nord-americana e il Laocoon di Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: premesse di una fortunata ricezione critica (1840-1874)," *Studi di Memofonte* 24 (2020): 23-60.
8. Madame de Staël's *On Germany* gained recognition in America mostly thanks to the reviews published on prestigious literary reviews of the time, such as the *Quarterly Review* of New York and the *Analectic Magazine* of Philadelphia. See Froio, "La cultura nord-americana e il Laocoon di Gotthold Ephraim Lessing," 25.
9. See Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New Brunswick-London: Transaction Publishers, 2006): 233-234.
10. J.D.W. (James Davenport Whelpley), "Lessing's Laocoon. The Secret of Classic Composition in Poetry, Painting, and Statuary," *American Whig Review* 37 (1851): 17-26.
11. James E. Mulqueen, "Conservatism and Criticism: The Literary Standards of American Whigs, 1845-1852," *American Literature* 41, no. 3 (Nov. 1969): 356.
12. Whelpley, "Lessing's Laocoon," 17.
13. John Durand, "Lessing," *The Crayon* 11 (1856): 325-330.
14. On this regard, see Susan P. Casteras, *English Pre-Raphaelitism and its Reception in America in the Nineteenth Century* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990); Janice Simon, "The Crayon 1855-1861: the Voice of Nature in Criticism, Poetry, and the Fine Arts," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1990); Roger B. Stein, *Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840-1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).
15. For a thorough study of Durand's article on Lessing and the context that surrounded its publication, see Froio, "La cultura nord-americana e il Laocoon di Gotthold Ephraim Lessing," 33-37.
16. On the relationship between *The Crayon* and the emergence of landscape painting in America, including the influence of Ruskin's thought, see Marion Grzesiak, "The Crayon and

the American Landscape,” in *The Crayon and the American Landscape*, ed. Marion Grzesiak (exh. cat., Montclair: The Montclair Art Museum, 1993), 7-24.

17. Durand, “Lessing,” 325.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*