powerful stage presences deliver master
classes in physical tension and vocal control,
as well as convincing everyone that they
share a magnetic sexual attraction. Williams’s
Clytemnestra is an impossible act for Orestes
to follow.
A devastating act towards its climax,
when Orestes is acquitted and the reciprocal
blood feud in his family ended, the setting
moves from the presidential palace of Argos
to Athens. During the trial of Orestes for his
mother’s murder, most of the ensemble
downsized to a large group of people, led by
a disheveled elderly woman, apparently rep-resenting
a Fury or Orestes’ psychosis, wanders
around the stage, adding to the confusion.
Things become increasingly chaotic as the
litigious language flows. There is a rather belated
attempt to make the audience think about insti-
tutionalized sexism, in line with Simone de
Beauvoir’s famous statement in The Second
Sex that the Orestes is the charter text of West-
er misogyny. The argument was first made in
the theatre by Ariane Mnouchkine’s unfor-
taggable troupe des Autres with the Théâtre du Soleil
(1990). Mnouchkine’s was also the first of many
productions, now including Icke’s, to
give Clytemnestra a feminist twist by pref-
acing the Oresteia with Iphigenia in Aulis, and
thus the execution of Iphigenia.
If the patriarchy theme is inchoate and sub-
merged, Icke’s play is clearly motivated by two
philosophical questions which overlap with
psychological crises. The first question is
ethical (how do we make decisions? What are
the limits of our freedom to decide anything?
How far does our identity as family members
put pressure on that freedom?). The second
is epistemological (how can we be sure of any-
thing? What was not incontrovertibly certain
information? What is a reliable memory?)
Agamemnon takes a long time deciding to kill
Iphigenia. But he does so because his priest
tells him that this has been commanded by the
gods through signs. The madness of Orestes
hammers both his ability to deliberate and his
cognitive powers, especially his memory.
Built on this basic philosophical argument is
an oft-repeated insistence on the inter-
connectedness of everything: all actions have
consequences, not just for the agent but for
those who interact with him or her. This is an
Oresteia about the individual’s psychic expe-
rience of nuclear family trauma, but it is also
complex, joined-up morality for a fast-paced
digital age.
This brings us to my second criterion for
assessing a modern production of an ancient
play – its intellectual cogency. An interpre-
tation of the Oresteia as a study of the im-
plement of justice, however engagingly it
exposes the problematic nature of legal con-
cepts such as “intention” and “evidence,” is
rather conventional. It was Katie Mitchell’s
interpretation fifteen years ago. The Oresteia
is a much more political work than most
modern productions succeed in conveying. It
is not only a drama about juridical procedure,
but a constitutional chronicle of unparalleled
significance for democracy. It gives cosmic
authorization to the historical evolution of
society from rule by hereditary monarchs in
Agamemnon, through uncontrollable tyrants
who have swept to power by a coup in Liba-
tion-Bearers, to an astonishingly modern-
looking and monarch-free constitutional
democracy in Eumenides. The jurors’ vote,
taken to determine Orestes’ fate, also symbol-
izes the epoch-making transfer of executive
power from the hands of rich dynasties to the
30,000-plus ordinary citizens of Athens who
were male and free, a revolution which had
reached a climax just a couple of years before
the production of this masterpiece. Athena in
Aeschylus’ Eumenides founds the Athenian
democracy and begs her citizens to renounce
the murderous factional in-fighting which at
the time was tearing the city apart. Orestes
had caused bloodshed in the Athenian streets
and the brutal assassination of the radical dem-
cracy’s leader. The Oresteia enacts the resolu-
tion of something far more important than
revenge killings in an individual family –
specifically of a conflict between the nobility
and the democratic classes and the hereditary
aristocracy, involving
sinister disappearances and acts of terror-
ism, in which the entire populace of Athens
and her international allies had been mired for
half a century. In the 1980s there were indeed
productions which conveyed something of the
magnitude of the trilogy’s societal signifi-
cance – not only those by Stein and Hall but
a pathbreaking performance in post-dictator-
ship Greece, directed by Karolos Koun. It
would be good to see our own brilliant young
actors and directors take this material as a
Greek-inspired drama of equivalent magnifi-
cent scope and profundity.

The most arresting of the two dozen
works on display in the Timothy Taylor
Gallery’s new exhibition Philip Guston:
Start again from scratch
KELLY GROVIER
PHILIP GUSTON
Timothy Taylor Gallery
15 Carlos Place, London, until July 11
with a universal and ultimately indeterminate
pain. The semi-legibility of “Head and Bot-
tle”, created five years before the
American artist’s death in 1980. The work
is dominated by an oversized and disembodied
face or head-shaped form that has rolled into
our field of vision from the right, only to be halt-
ed in mid-tumble by an overturned wine bottle
lying in its way. Admirers of Guston’s late fig-
urative work (of which there is vastly more
now than when he first abdicated his position as
a leading exponent of Abstract Expression-
ism in the late 1960s) will recognize the stub-
by and testicular form that stares with its one
unblinking eye into the emptiness of the bottle
as a recurring shorthand for the artist himself.
At first glance, a cartoonish confession to the
trauma of having to see himself as others may see
him; at a second glance, the image may seem rather:
too blunt and un nuanced in its visual enuncia-
tion to merit more serious scrutiny. Yet some-
thing niggles in the sparse composition that makes
turning away from the painting impossible.
The insolent symbolism of the dangling light
tumbler to the left of the head and the unread-
able pages of a book lying open below its chin
invests the work with unexpected mystery and
elevates its achievement from private caricu-
ture to public rune.
One hardly needs to know the intimate reso-
{nance behind these ciphers to perceive an
emergency packed into their deceptively simple
figuring. When Guston was ten years old, he
found the dead body of his father hanging from
the end of a rope. In the ensuing years, the
young artist would secrete himself in a closet,
illuminated by a single swaying bulb, to copy:
images from a book of old master drawings.
The psychological force of these signs is reg-
tered subliminally, as T. S. Eliot insisted great
must by, “giv[ing] power from below well with the
surface”. Guston’s symbols expose noth-
ing explicit about the artist’s arduous origins:
his father’s failure to find better prospects in
Los Angeles after relocating the family from
Montreal (where Guston was born) or, before
that, his parents’ escape from the persecution
of Jews in Ukraine. Instead, the canvas pulses

“Start again from scratch”

But what sort of storytelling was available
to an artist who had turned his back so reso-
lutely on figurative art once already, in the
1940s, to conjure from the smudgy mist of
dirty-white canvases hasty cross-hatchings of
visionary reds and pinks and blues? Now in
his mid-fifties, Guston forced himself to start
again from scratch. Confronting a terrifyingly
blank slate, he endeavored to plot his imagi-
nation against freshly asserted axes of social
relevance and creative authenticity. “I knew
ahead of me a road was laying”, he later
recalled, “A very crude, inchoate road; I
wanted to be complete again, as I was when I
was a kid.” The result would be a startling
reinvention of artistic self without obvious
parallel in contemporary American culture
and the introduction of one of the most arrest-
ing visual vocabularies in modern art. The
current exhibition of seventeen paintings and
eight drawings enables visitors to meditate on
the clunky and childlike artificacy of Gus-
ton’s signature hieroglyphs: the blood-splat-
tered hoists of cartoonish Klaasmen, hobnaill
boots, spattered light bulbs, stubby cigars,
whirring clocks, and the bulging cycloptic
eyes of legume-like heads.
Though the palette of fleshy pinks, scabby
reds and fuggy greys is largely consistent with
the artist’s earlier abstract paintings (a com-
pelling example of which, “Traveler III”,
1959–60, is in display for contrast), the unex-
pected emergence of bold comic-strip figura-
tion choreographed ambiguously into
hoiacte scenes of indeterminate menace at
once puzzled and appalled critics. When the
first chunky works were finally unveiled in a
now legendary show at the Marlborough
Gallery in New York in 1970, some commen-
tators dismissed Guston’s rebirth as an
ill-judged and belated attempt to enrol in Pop
Art. Others accused him of disingenuously
scouring around for a crass primitivism that
they felt was calculating, counterfeit, con-
trived: a “Mandarin Pretending to be a Stumblebum”, as the critic Hilton Kramer dis-
dainfully contended. In truth, Guston’s new
direction could hardly have been more genu-
ine or sure-footed. And an intuition the
current exhibition helps corroborate.

The exhibition coincides with the publica-
tion of Go Figure! New perspectives on
£33, US $65; 978 1 90017878 2), a fresh se-
lection of fourteen interpretative essays, includ-
ing contributions by David Anfam, Doré
Ashton, Chuck Close and Robert Storr. Wides-
ranging in its preoccupations (from the persist-
ence of Italian influences on Guston’s imagina-
tion throughout his career to the haunting
impact of childhood tragedies, such as the sudden
dead from gangrene of his older brother
Nat, whose leg was crushed in a car ac-
cident), the edition succeeds in compressing
more tightly still the unstable energy of
Guston’s vital, volatile images.