

Narrating the hand / A Discourse on Twombly

Essay by Marjorie Welish

A DISCOURSE ON TWOMBLY

Emerging as a young Abstract Expressionist in the early 1950s, Cy Twombly received strong critical acclaim when, by exchanging his brush for a pencil, he further clarified the Surrealist notion of drawing as the rudimentary source of both writing and painting – that is, of both visual and verbal impulses. A quarter of a century later, two New York exhibitions – a modestly scaled retrospective at the Whitney Museum and an ambitious new multicanvas work at the Heiner Friedrich Gallery – revealed how Twombly's vision had developed and where he stood at mid-career.¹

Cy Twombly: Paintings and Drawings 1954-1977, a show at the Whitney, was what guest curator David Whitney intended it to be: "an intelligible encapsulation" of Twombly's career.² Moreover, since several European collectors and the artist himself lent many of the forty-five paintings and forty drawings that were on display, this retrospective also provided Twombly connoisseurs with a chance to gauge his achievement in light of numerous then-unfamiliar works. This selection tried to persuade those who identified Twombly with a free calligraphic abstraction that color and symbolic content were at least as characteristic in his work.

Among the earliest works on view was *Panorama* (1955), an outsized, white-on-black composition that might be compared to certain Pollocks, although it is more evanescent in the extreme delicacy of its markings, which are derived from a kinesthetic impulse. While a forceful side to Twombly's gesture was elsewhere evident, this show forced one to conclude that Surrealist irritability, not Abstract-Expressionist action, informs Twombly's handwriting. One untitled painting in particular recalled late Arshile Gorky, with his luxurious painterliness reduced to faint but intense sensual points of color and pencil. In other works traces of totemic and biomorphic schema inherited from Surrealism emerge from Twombly's automatic writing – along with considerable explicit sexual notation.

What is remarkable about these early canvases is a sensibility that registers minute expressive and formal distinctions. The viewer was encouraged to tour the show with this awareness, prompted not only by the particular selection of works but also by the exquisite deciphering of Roland Barthes, the Structuralist philosopher and critic who wrote the catalogue essay.³

This retrospective put the most weight on the work of the early 1960s and followed the course by which Twombly's concurrent Surrealist and Abstract-Expressionist tendencies narrowed to only the latter as his canvases became more physically expansive, with a clear, very light palette and a generous, if sporadic, application of paint. *The Empire of Flora* (1961), on an Ovidian theme, is one of his most emotionally charged and physically free works of that phase. In it, agitated spots of pink, red, yellow, and black pigment applied directly from the tube, along with pencil scratches and crayon scribbles, generate visual excitement while setting up a correspondence of implication between this *tachiste* stabbing and the creative/destructive forces by which, according to Ovid, heroes die and are metamorphosed into flowers.

Another noteworthy work of this energetic period is *School of Athens* (1961). Painted the same year as *Flora*, it marked a departure, because – as Heiner Bastian explains – it features the artist's first symmetrical composition, a device which will recur as – and which in fact becomes – a major structuring principle in his recent work.⁴ Penciled arches – schematic reductions of the architectural perspective in Raphael's fresco – alternate with globs of paint that thwart the spatial illusion, as if the original School of Athens were presiding over a dialogue between the New York School and the Academy of Rome. A problematic painting which focuses on the central image while allowing intervallic relationships to slacken, it is nevertheless an enthusiastic announcement of the code of line versus color that Twombly had been developing. Although in some respects unresolved, *Athens* is more interesting than *Nine Discourses on Commodus* (1963), a series in which one saw the rival principles of color and line narrowly and self-consciously upheld. Coincidentally, this seemingly doctrinaire series demonstrates what had been true of Twombly's growth during these years: that as sensuous and aggressive qualities were strengthened, so too were the structuring principles that opposed and sometimes undermined these qualities.

The next significant phase of Twombly's career occurred in the late 1960s when, abandoning color, he turned to entirely linear compositions and produced the well-known white-on-gray rows of calligraphic loops that so resemble old-fashioned handwriting exercises. Perhaps influenced by Johns's literal and "empty" hatching, which was applied to his targets and maps, and by his deadpan use of numbers and letters in series, he produced these works, which were widely acclaimed by Minimalist partisans who especially valued their blunted sensibility and lack of mythic reference when they were first shown.

Twombly's works utilizing collage feature centrally placed photographic elements as well as sketches in pencil and oil that are based on such elements. Typically, postcard reproductions of art (e.g., an anatomical drawing by da Vinci or a visionary landscape by Frederick Church) and anonymously photographed landscapes that are apparently clipped from magazines or books are the collage elements. But in extending the "found" reference out into the much larger field of the drawing or painting as a whole, Twombly disregards the subject matter of his sources and instead imitates the color and gesture transmitted through reproduction, extracting the style from content and context alike. Often, on another paper mounted

alongside as part of the same work, these abstract studies after "nature" (the reproduction) again might be abstracted to a scrawl that reads as both essence and final reduction of the formal and expressive implications of his source. Linking all the elements is a verbal inscription that provides a key to Twombly's further intent. For instance, accompanying the Frederick Church landscape and a pink wash by which Twombly summarizes Church's crepuscular scene is the shakily lettered word "Epithalamion," a type of nuptial poem whose invocation here refers to the marriage – or inevitable interdependence – of nature and art. Often visually slight, some of these collages depend on the viewer to make the metaphoric connection between a verbal idea and an image.

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In general, the collages furthered Twombly's pictorial language of condensed form. In this aim, his authority is often more easily grasped in works from the 1970s, those that adopt a dramatic structure – most notably, *Fifty Days at Iliam** (1977–78), in which the visual narrative earlier attempted in the collages was developed along the lines of a Homeric epic (see Figure 4).

Twombly's work from this period particularly reveals his growing involvement with myth, although classical references had appeared both on his canvases and in his titles themselves since the 1950s. Although Twombly is a contemporary of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg (who, in 1951, urged that he attend Black Mountain College), his symbolic orientation separates him from them. Although all of them have humanistic underpinnings to their work (Rauschenberg's prints, those that accompany Dante's *Inferno*, come to mind), myth is far more central to Twombly's art; and, despite the intervening years of stylistic assimilation, Twombly maintained his aesthetic connection to the Surrealist and Abstract-Expressionist impulses of the early 1940s, impulses from which Pollock, Rothko, and Gottlieb forged an abstract art of archetypal content. Especially since moving to Italy in 1957, Twombly made this synthesis of form and content his prime quest.

Had it been arranged as Twombly originally planned, his ten-part painting *Fifty Days at Iliam* would have been mounted along both sides of the long art gallery, giving the viewer a palpable sense of walking into the epic space of the painting itself. But as it was

* *Iliam* is Twombly's rendering of the historical city Ilium (Troy).

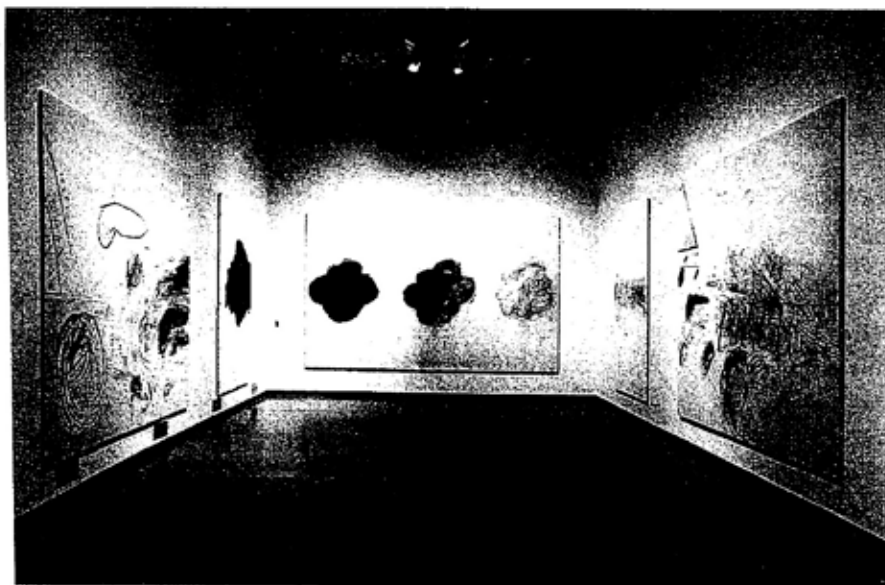


Figure 4. Cy Twombly, Installation of *Fifty Days at Iliam*. 1977–78. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Museum views.

actually installed at the Heiner Friedrich Gallery in 1978, the painting hung mostly along one wall – an arrangement which, if diminishing the spatial drama, increased the continuity from part to part and encouraged viewers to follow the thematic and formal sequence.

Twombly's version of the *Iliad* is based on Alexander Pope's translation. In the introduction to his translation, Pope attempted to persuade his eighteenth-century audience to be tolerant of the "invention," both historical and aesthetic, by which Homer deviates from "rule" in his account of events. By condensing the ten-year war between the Achaeans and the Ilians (Greeks and Trojans) to approximately fifty days, Homer could focus on character, especially that of Achilles, whose anger over his feud with Agamemnon dominates political events.

For his part, Twombly no more reconstructs Homer than Homer does the Trojan War. Even more summary in his handling of "facts" than Homer, Twombly concentrates on a few vivid images from Homer that, for him, evoke the essential emotional content of the epic.

The key image is Achilles's shield. Whereas in Homer, the shield, which was lavishly forged with symbolic scenes, is made for Achilles

late in the war, in Twombly's version the shield – or its abstraction – appears first (on the left) as the generative image. Simply an orange-red scribble surrounded by reeling blue and black lines, the shield element is the work's thematic and formal core.

If there is a narrative to this painting, it unfolds in the visual metamorphosis of the initial shield form – that is, in the media of oil, crayon, and pencil. In all ten parts, proper names or descriptive phrases limned in the artist's distinctive hand accompany the images on the canvas. Following a powerfully crude catalogue of names in the panel titled *The Heroes of the Achaeans*, the shield's fiery energy is taken up again by *The Vengeance of Achilles*. Here its power has uncoiled aggressively, and the phallic shape it has assumed is made explicit in the following panel, *Achaeans in Battle*, where line, color, shape, and density are brought into furious activity. This momentum continues in *The Fire That Consumes All Before It* as the bulging mass reaches its most substantial phase.

In *Shades of Achilles, Patroclus and Hector*, the central and climactic panel, three quatrefoil-like shapes seem to weigh and balance the passing of substance and color, and, indeed, in the second half of the work, the active line and touches of color (blue) outweigh the impastoed red. Ratiocinative processes rather than impulse now have the upper hand, and the route toward stasis is made complete in *Heroes of the Ilians*, a section in which a final catalogue is accompanied by an ossified contour of the quatrefoil that the shield has become.

What Twombly presents, then, is the transformation of raw, undifferentiated energy shared by literary hero and living artist alike to energy's sublimated aftermath. While the painting may be called literary, insofar as it is based thematically on a work of literature, it is hardly illustrational. By focusing on symbolic images rather than story, by universalizing the affective content of these images through formal abstraction, and by giving visual continuity and structure precedence over verbal narrative, Twombly has managed to transcend his source without abandoning it.

Twombly's handwriting – the word made visual – contributes significantly to the vitality and success of this series. More generous and direct in its touch than the delicate and sometimes devious automatism of his Surrealist-inspired works, this present Abstract-Expressionist mode is appropriate to the spirit of his epic subject matter and is an excellent means for energizing its fixed and inert historicity. Ultimately, it is the apparent spontaneity of his brush-

work that is crucial to Twombly's art. He did in fact paint all the canvases in this cycle more or less simultaneously. But it is as if, after having planned the series as a whole – even going so far as to determine the specific brushwork each area would require – he approached the canvases fresh, with an unpremeditated attitude. What is remarkable about this complex serial painting is that it does not feel contrived. One can almost imagine the narrative to be still unsettled and in the process of being written.

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The Art of Being Sparse, Porous, Scattered

Roland Barthes on Cy Twombly

Neither an art historian nor an art critic, Roland Barthes writes so rarely on painting that when he does, we anticipate his commitment to something else. We see this commitment when we discover that Barthes wrote on the art of Cy Twombly not once, but twice. The question immediately presents itself: What urgency or scintillation does this art possess for him, a *littérateur* of cultural scope? Answers may strike us with peculiarly vivid force if we regard Barthes's literary interpretation of Twombly from the perspective of art history, because from the vantage of art history, the semiology that Barthes pursues is literary both in its peculiar emphasis on literariness as well as in its assumptions of the verbal grounding of visual things. From the perspective of art history – art history, moreover, occasioned by the constraints of the catalogue essay – the norms lie elsewhere.

Whereas the catalogue essay is typically bound to honor its function of describing art rather than criticizing it, the catalogue essay specifically occasioned by a retrospective is further bound to administer the entire career of works on display. With time here an epistemological factor, if not also a factor of style, sense must be made of the art through a compelling temporal order that demonstrates and proves the content that the art historian believes significantly integral to the work. The art essay of some intellectual heft, meanwhile, treats the artist's stylistic history as it also engages cultural history in significantly conjunctive or disjunctive ways. In other words, whatever else it is, the catalogue essay is a species of dependent beauty. Its constraints are demonstrably those of occasion, function, and social purpose, the last being tied to educating a public.

Any audience already familiar with the mentality of Barthes has already guessed that he would have exploited the occasion otherwise. Commissioned by the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York to write a catalogue essay, one that would accompany a mid-career retrospective of Cy Twombly's art (spanning 1954–77), Barthes wrote "The Wisdom of Art."¹ Cheerfully frustrating the

curatorial and educational staff in the process, he would pretend to acquit himself with this essay of extravagantly “free” beauty. We shall examine this essay.

Barthes’s literary representation of visuality flaunts poetic over historical narrative. He delights in the perversity of doing antinarrative antihistory when professional decorum would suggest doing otherwise. Barthes indeed exercises the option to be literary that is accorded *hommes de lettres* when commissioned to write catalogue essays. Topics freely adapted from Aristotelian poetics, announced at the outset, will become the mobilized nodal points under phenomenological consideration. A fact, a coincidence, an outcome, a surprise, an action – these are the terms of interest.

Material facts are noted. Elements prior to art – pencil scratches, brown smudges – are seen “as stubborn substances whose obstinacy in ‘being there’ nothing (no subsequent meaning) can destroy.” The pencil line has come to usurp the place of the brushstroke, but it is not noted as such.² Rather, in Barthes’s schema, pencil is less an instrument and more a residue comparable to *materia prima*.³ Barthes has found a visual analogue to the prelinguistic verbal utterances remarked by Julia Kristeva (see Figure 5).

Graphic elements receive a provisional taxonomy: scratching, smudging, staining, and smearing. Then the written elements are mentioned, and the names Virgil, Orpheus, the Italians (all used in the paintings by Twombly) lose their “nominalist glory” as a result of having been written clumsily. Even so, this clumsiness of application “confers on all these names the lack of skill of someone who is trying to write; and from this, once again, the truth of the Name appears all the better.”⁴

Barthes next entertains chance under the aspect of inspiration. The material smudges and stains seemingly thrown across the canvas, separated in space, produce in Barthes “what the philosopher Bachelard called an ‘ascensional’ imagination: I float in the sky, I breathe in the air. Those stains: it is as though Japanese aesthetics inform them.”

Up to this point Barthes has cited works from the early 1960s. *Mars and the Artist* (1961), a work on paper from 1975, now prompts a passage contemplating symbolic composition featuring furious lines at the top and a contour forming a flower below, a flower accompanied by the artist’s name. Figurative and graphic elements combine to raise the issue again of representation. “It is never naïve . . . to ask oneself before a painting *what it represents*,”



Figure 5. Cy Twombly, *The Italians*. 1961. Oil, pencil, and crayon on canvas, 6' 6 $\frac{3}{8}$ " \times 8' 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (199.5 \times 259.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Blanchette Rockefeller Fund. Photograph \copyright 1998 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

he says. People “want meaning” from a painting and are frustrated if the painting, this painting or another (here, Barthes returns to *The Italians* [1961]), does not give them the understanding they seek. This is especially so since viewers seek meaning by way of analogy from the title they read to the image they see. Looking at *The Italians*, people are bound to ask, “Where are the Italians? Where is the Sahara?” Even so, Barthes maintains, the viewer intimates a proper solution or outcome consonant with the painting at hand and perceives “what Twombly’s paintings produce . . . : an effect.” Explaining his choice of the word “effect” – that is, he associates it with the French literary tradition (from the *Parnasse* to *Symbolisme*, it “suggest[s] an impression, sensuous usually visual”) – he said that it is the very word that for him captures the airy qualities in such early paintings as *The Italians* or *The Bay of Naples* (1961), qualities suggestive to Barthes of an effect of the Mediterranean.⁵ It is a

Mediterranean effect “into which [Twombly] introduces the surprise of incongruity, derision, deflation, as if the humanist turgescence was suddenly pricked” – or else through such deflationary pricks and clumsiness, there arises the experience of *satori*.

Finally, the drama of it all registers. A designation integral to “a kind of representation of culture,” one achieved not through “depiction” but through “the power of the Name,” animates these paintings. The name that stands in for the subject in classical painting presents the topic in these paintings as well: that question of rhetoric reflecting what is being talked about. What is being talked about in the painting as subject falls back on the subject who painted it: Twombly himself.⁶

If an historical narrative may be defined as a temporal ordering of events happening under the aegis of an intellectually predetermined scheme, then a poetic nonnarrative may be said to propose a contingently arrived-at simultaneity, one where events that might have happened breathe with life.⁷ History whose causal or logical temporality has relaxed serves the ascendancy of the lyrical narrative; at least since Wittgenstein, theories of interpretation have displaced explanation, and they have built upon the longstanding contention between the human sciences’ reliance on meaning and intention and the analytical sciences’ reliance on logic and necessity for what constitutes explanation in history.

Barthes’s interpretative performance puts such history on notice, particularly that sort of docile unfolding of fact and biography associated with the norm of historical narrative that is appropriate for the museological occasion. A declared Symbolist bias aids and abets Barthes’s phenomenological reading of Twombly. Sensation as such is all-important. That Barthes searches out the tangible effect of emotion shows a predisposition to view Twombly as Baudelaire viewed Delacroix.⁸ But Barthes’s assumption that poetic effect and sensation are synonymous (revealing a bias the Surrealist poet Paul Eluard would come to reinforce) leads Barthes to overestimate this content: He will neglect or otherwise discount the cognitive component in Twombly’s visual discourse. Even though in another, subsequent piece on Twombly he notes that gesture conveys intellection, that comment is mere mention, and it contrasts with the weight given to intuited sensation with resultant *satori*, putting analytic intention at a clear disadvantage.⁹ A manifested spirit-within-matter is Barthes’s interpretive choice.

In Barthes’s scheme of things, values-centering on epitome gives

privilege to paintings and essentializes sense and significance. Selective attention paid to early work establishes a core stylistic identity for Twombly – a core stylistic identity, furthermore, that accords with Barthes's own. When Barthes wrote this first essay for Cy Twombly's retrospective in 1979, he chose to concentrate on the paintings created in 1960 or thereabouts, those done relatively early in the artist's career. Here is an occasion to examine the significance of Barthes's selective attention as an historical representation of the artist and as a stylistic representation of himself.

Discarded by Barthes are various alternative themes of an artist's retrospective career. Among the art-historical discourses not assumed by him is, least interestingly, the chronological account typical of catalogue essays, at least in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s (although still often obligatory). As the discursive yet redundant form of the listed biography otherwise placed in the back pages, this chronicle of a life also unfairly stigmatizes all art history – as though chronology and history were synonymous, both despite the fact that "history" is a universal term covering any number of particular temporal employments; and despite the fact that in the allowable decorum governing catalogue practice, most approaches, ranging from formalist to cultural, are practiced simultaneously.

Attention paid to chronology in the Twombly catalogue is abbreviated indeed:

Cy Twombly was born April 25, 1928, in Lexington, Virginia, studied at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Boston Museum School in Boston, Massachusetts, and [the] Art Students League in New York. In 1951 he studied at Black Mountain College, North Carolina. Between 1951 and 1953 he traveled and lived in North Africa, Spain and Italy. In 1957 he moved to Rome where he still lives.

This is the entire biographical text, printed in the back of the catalogue alongside a chronology of exhibitions that follows reproductions of Twombly's work. Ever since *Sade/Fourier/Loyola* (1971), we have come to expect this inverted priority of fact and interpretation from Barthes, and here it is again. But independent of this, many artists of Twombly's generation – especially those raised on avant-garde formalism as well as those in color-field painting who belatedly joined in the formalist rhetoric – disallow anecdote, incident, and other signs of the personal biography which are doted on by editors of glossy art magazines. Twombly has long distanced himself from public appetite. In this sense the intentionalist fallacy will be

defended wherever catalogues devoted to him appear, and as with the catalogue copy for this retrospective, biography is similarly perfunctory elsewhere.

Chronology, by no means only a normative historical approach for catalogue writing, may occasionally prove even strategic.¹⁰ Yet social history may be the preferred mode when treating entire art movements or when plotting artistic interventions such as those by Andrea Palladio or Vladimir Tatlin or Man Ray, whose functionally dependent art or career is inextricable from milieu and cultural context. In fact, a culturally contextual approach to art writing is more commonly employed than is readily acknowledged by those who want to stereotype the historical enterprise by limiting the scope and resourcefulness of its instrumentality.

Although intellectual antagonists, formalism and social history coexist in educating the public. One need only remember the debate in the 1930s between formalist Alfred Barr (first director of the Museum of Modern Art, who in 1929 coined the term "Abstract Expressionism" to refer to Kandinsky) and social art historian Meyer Schapiro over the meaning of abstract art. The subsequent emergence of the New York School provoked rival histories and commentary by the art historians Meyer Schapiro and Robert Goldwater, by the formalist Clement Greenberg and the humanist Harold Rosenberg – both cultural critics – and by the formalist chronicler Irving Sandler and the cultural critic Dore Ashton.

Essays by critical historians or semioticians are prevalent in certain museological enclaves: Much depends on the intellectual and administrative freedom given museum staffs by their board. By the 1970s and sporadically thereafter, when Barthes was approached by the Whitney Museum, the critical paradigms applied to catalogue essays were quite variously creative. Recall, for instance, Lawrence Alloway's applied communication theory and semiotic overlay on American Pop Art for the Whitney Museum after decades of writing about the subject which he had initially defined and traced in Britain and the United States.

These days, however, the thematic approach favored more and more in an era of nonspecialist audiences is also ironically most amenable to the *littérateur*, because, of all the typologies, this one requires the least scholarly specialization or comprehension. The thematic approach lends itself to lay percipience, which is expressed in the *aperçu* and in the impressionistic criticism that poets write when writing on art. Together with Meyer Schapiro and Rudolf

Arnheim, poets – and artists – were conscripted by *Art News* editor Thomas Hess to review and cover Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, when such painting was shunned almost everywhere else. That's how the poet and lawyer Harold Rosenberg, who had published Vorticist poems in *Poetry* magazine in the early 1940s, found a forum for his metaphoric art criticism, which mobilized enthusiasm for "action" painting. In contrast to the sociolinguistic practice of our times, when an avid appetite for simplistic popularization in the press assumes a reception made queasy if confronted with art history, intellectual history, or criticism, Barthes's playful interpretation of Twombly supplies what the public wants; yet his interpretation does so elusively. As sensuous impression, Barthes's art writing is meanwhile consistent with a tradition of the belletrist liberal construal of his object.

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Since, after all, a retrospective raises the question of style across time, let us review Cy Twombly's career by decade to ascertain the interpretive spin Barthes puts on the matter at hand. Although ignored by Barthes, the decade of the 1950s was indeed represented in the retrospective exhibition and catalogue. A formalist would have taken note that, in Twombly's work, *matière* and tactility, both registering the artist's allegiance to *art brut* (and Jean Dubuffet in particular), give way to attenuated expression. Reliance on line is conspicuous. If style is "patterned selection of possibility afforded by forms,"¹¹ these early works reveal Twombly's interest in exploiting reduction for expressive possibility; yet given the variety of expressionist tendencies that kept pace with the stylistic milieu of the period, Twombly's personal style, it may be guessed, will continue to form in response to the period style.

Given the emphasis that Abstract Expressionism placed on Nietzsche – that anti-aesthetic archaism the anteriority of which was already a commonplace by the time the craze for Nietzsche reached the United States – we might assume Barthes would have laid even more emphasis on expressions of Dionysiac archaism made lean.¹² Neither children's art nor the art of the insane – whose grammatical and lexical forms are writ large in Twombly's work (as they are in European and Europeanized art of the 1950s) – figure in Barthes's discussion, except through the attribute of clumsiness. Were he to have mentioned the aesthetics of children's art, as he did in his second article, "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper," then his interpre-

tation of Twombly at this stage would have had to reformulate itself. It would be obliged to consider the sensorimotor handicap Twombly deliberately undertook when drawing with his left hand to place himself at a disadvantage to acculturation.

Drawing the graphic equivalent of the prelinguistic utterance and so sacrificing linguistic competence by reducing one's means – such was decidedly part of the ethos of authenticity inscribed in Twombly's aesthetic. Because of this, it is tempting to wonder why Barthes laid so much emphasis on *satori* if the Greek concept of vulnerability, “which is essential to the manner in which the excellent man conducts himself,” was culturally closer at hand.¹³ The answer might be that, with Twombly classified as a Symbolist, surprise – and ironic surprise especially – lent the notion he needed to fill out his scheme. To return to the phenomenological without delineating the historical era associated with it may be Barthes's implicit purpose.

Although literary critics and art historians alike do tend to disregard the stray, idiosyncratic, or occasional manner as intellectual noise irrelevant to the style of art unfolding before them, art historians more readily accept the deviation because their commitment is to an unruly universe of experiential findings even at the expense of the rational principles they hold to be true. Barthes's adherence to an original grammar of style located in those values deemed representative of the artist's work centers on works from the early 1960s, the years when the artist came into his own. Given this selective attention to the early 1960s, the grammar of dispersal, disposing of lexical smudge and smear, is adequate to interpreting Twombly at this moment. It accounts for the highly articulated range of material properties a painterly mark can manifest; not merely various, Twombly's mark-making unsystematically encapsulates a set of intensely sensuous and expressive reductions¹⁴ – and Barthes gets a good grip on this heterogeneous material anatomy even if, semantically, he could have noted that a fully formed lexicon is implicit at this early, so-called primitive, stage.

The consensual cultural reading reinforces Barthes's interpretation. The milieu at Black Mountain College – where John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Robert Rauschenberg brought fruitful anarchy to the disciplined yet pragmatically oriented *technē* that had been brought there by Joseph Albers, Anni Albers, and other exiles from the Bauhaus – fostered radical experiments with materials and craft. It also gave rise to radical renovations of definition. For instance, music now construed to be anything derived from the prin-

cept of sound is answered by the notion that dance incorporates all kinesis. (Anecdotally, this assumption of art as materially and formally comprehensive extends to Twombly, who, only a few years ago, wondered aloud if he would ever hear again "a certain Futurist music entitled *Veil of Orpheus*," which he had heard long before. Fortunately, I, too, had heard Pierre Henry's *Veil of Orpheus* and could supply Twombly with a cassette of this *musique concrète* of 1953, which is largely percussive thanks to its object-generated sounds and so provides an aurally dispersed lexicon of timbre and rhythm – and which, by the way, still sounds new, unlike so many experiments that have attained a quaint status as period pieces. Twombly's effort to realize the phenomenal visual analogue to aura sound structures remains underappreciated because naïve viewers (including the more discerning Barthes) perceive, at best, a rarefied sensibility.

Further issues of signification arise even where Barthes is strongest. *The Italians* seizes his attention as a painting whose title finds no objective or subjective representation on canvas; the relation of signifying title to signified subject remains tantalizingly abstract "Where are the Italians? Where is the Sahara?" he asks in vain.¹⁵ Yet even as the nonreferential title underscores the abstract nature of painting itself, Symbolist traces abound, if only to manifest the content of this style, which animates nothing providently. Given the chromaticism and wet-in-wet pigment decidedly present in *The Bay of Naples* and *The Empire of Flora* (1961), for instance, more needs to be done to elucidate content than Barthes's hedonist impulse will allow. Barthes may have even suppressed the latent historical content suggested by his questions that only a few years ago he might well have allowed himself to recall.¹⁶ Another mention of *The Italians* confidently asserts its allusion to the classical spirit, but, in anything, Twombly's calligraphic mark serves the Nietzschean barbaric revitalization of that classical spirit.

Perhaps because pursuing the Mediterranean effect under the aegis of French grace, Barthes ignored the consensual interpretation that could reinforce his own sensualist bias. As though unfamiliar with André Breton's writings on Arshile Gorky – not to mention the painterly antecedent to Twombly in Gorky – Barthes disregards both the Surrealist gynecological vernacular and the scatological corollary to *matière* deposited on canvas. Nor in his mention of the Mediterranean effect does Barthes take into account that this very Surrealist content prevented Twombly from being accepted as an Abstrac

Expressionist when the lines of aesthetic and ideological battle were being drawn up – and that Twombly's move to Italy in 1957 was due in large measure to the pressures to become a purist when the impure state of throwing figural and abstract gestures and signs together in a condition of contested agony was his abiding interest. These very vestiges of Surrealism, not to mention figuration as such, were prejudicially received by the formalist critic Clement Greenberg. The artistic climate in the 1950s and 1960s, which was decidedly formalist and materialist, promoted color-field painting, at the time Minimalist objects. Europe, not America, remained more hospitable to art nurtured in the legacy of Symbolism. Barthes does not rehearse this critical face-off, so he does not exploit the situation debated within painting – Twombly's painting – itself.

Even early on, Twombly's paintings take up the issue of radical aesthetic purity. In the 1961 painting *School of Athens* and with determined frequency thereafter, Twombly engages in a structuralist discourse conflating expressively and rationally coded painterliness that dramatizes the possibility of synthesis. Today, I show no slides of this painting, with its schematic stairs that serve as a rectilinear dais engaging vehement gesture as *The School of Athens* (1961 and the New York School play out their destinies jointly.¹⁷ Nor is there a slide of *Leda and the Swan* (1962), the necessary antagonism of whose theme throws together a formalized expressionism. Yet both works were on view in the retrospective. Deservedly well known are the paintings by Twombly that treat mathematical and rational discourse as felt ideas. In a deceptively simple formal conversion, what was white is black and what was black, white; and the field of sensation has become a didactic field of operational thought.

On Twombly's "blackboards," the semantic range of the mark has been reduced to almost sheer uniformity: Some feature a single line read as measurement – the notion of measurement – by virtue of a number placed above, where convention would mandate. Syntax as operational thought being more elaborate elsewhere, campaigns or topology become the elusive subject of a serial accumulation of line, one heavily qualified by trial and error – or at least the apparition of trial and error inscribed, erased, and reinscribed. In consequence, the quarantining of poetic from scientific discourse advocated by the New Critics is, in Twombly's calligraphic compositions from this phase, synthesized. The field of thought seems as

creative as critical, as expressively self-forgetful as empirically inquiring. But whereas the dialectical process seems to have intervened at the point of origin in some canvases, in others, isolating poetic from scientific vocabulary seems more clear-cut. In any event Twombly's analytical intention is in the foreground.

Jasper Johns owns a painting by Twombly in which the calligraphy has achieved the perfect neutrality and uniformity that earlier paintings had barred from their surfaces. This, of course, is not a consequence of development, insofar as Twombly's skill – indeed his virtuoso *technē* – was evident all along in the pictorial intelligence, as Barthes noted, wherever one looked. Here, rather, is captured the antithesis of the prelinguistic sign which is seen in abundance earlier on developmentally; this evidence of motor control revealed through the Palmer method of calligraphic training for children proves the code of acculturation and mastery. It is, furthermore, the symbolic code for prose. Barthes ignores this phase of Twombly's art almost entirely, perhaps since its style might seem to refute that which he had identified as recently his own. In evoking the authority of the poetic mark, then, Barthes may be reluctant to acknowledge the full spectrum of Twombly's discursive intentionality.

Barthes's selective attention to the original phase in Twombly's art treats the oeuvre as an enactment of Barthes's own late poetics. Aphoristic impressions, willfully literary but not historical, stand for Barthes's declared representation of Twombly's history on the occasion of the retrospective. What Barthes leaves out is cultural context in the panorama of the stylistic milieu in which Twombly moved – and to which his embedded rhetoric gave witness. The mid-1970s saw a relatively conservative historicism in art. Neo-Expressionism purported to recuperate meaning, yet with few exceptions, artists revised only illustrative and familiar ambivalences to nationalistic themes. Against this postmodernist reaction, Twombly's reinvestment in figural imagery seems to be more continuous with his own poetics than appropriated from without.

The retrospective featured a few of these efforts and included canvases and drawings penciled with single mythic names – or rather, a penciled name together with a reductive graphic symbol serving as attribute. Thus, "Virgil" was erased by applying paint that smeared the graphite; "Dionysus" rides a phallus; "Orpheus" is set above a launched strong diagonal in awkward cursive script. In

light of work soon to follow, propulsive gestures organizing themselves into a nearly pacific image in *Mars and the Artist* may dramatize the motivated sign as well.

Twombly's so-called return to figuration, then, is symbolic – a virtue or quality enacting a name. With a modernist's clarity and using the universality of poetic sign to treat topics, Twombly himself seems to be insisting on the Structuralist phase of Barthes's early rhetoric. Free variants on a thematic constant abound. Here, then, are early modernist ideograms whose formalist reductions function equally as sign-system and as reference. Although beyond the scope of the retrospective, the epic *Fifty Days at Iliam* (1978) was available for viewing courtesy of the Dia Foundation at the same time, and it might well have existed in transparencies for Barthes to see. A single painting comprising ten canvases now on permanent view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Twombly's *Fifty Days at Iliam* is truly a major work from his career (see Figure 4 on p. 42).

Poetry ignores writing as a figure of history in styles, according to Annette Lavers.¹⁸ But Twombly's thematic inscription of epic into a lyrical mode compels attention to this implication of history, if only to lend myth the experiential feeling of history. Meanwhile, taking a linguistic approach to structure, Twombly seems to "omit what is accidental or contingent . . . and gives imaginative expression to the essential type,"¹⁹ because he utilizes style and schema alike to encapsulate the drama of Apollonian and Dionysian crisis. Note, then, the evolving or devolving image-concept.²⁰ Whether single or manifold, each image is precisely that, Aloïs Reigl would argue, because it is condensed by virtue of enfolding motivic transformations:

Shield of Achilles
 Heroes of the Achaeans
 The Vengeance of Achilles
 Achaeans in Battle
 The Fire That Consumes All Before It
 Shades of Achilles, Patroclus, and Hector
 House of Priam
 Ilians in Battle
 Shades of Eternal Night
 Heroes of the Ilians

Action painting, having accrued libido and animus, subsides into gesture; gesture subsides into contour. Remember the myth of Flora

memorializing the destiny of warriors who, when they die, undergo a transformation and metamorphose into flowers. Having painted this symbol early on (in vivid chroma), Twombly in mid-life will have continued to grant the motif of the heart (or flowering heart or passionate flower) in the schema of the rosette so that it may be interpreted as a funerary remembrance.

Now note a conversion from the diachronic story into a structure featuring transposition and reflection. Where in Homer's myth the empowering shield had been placed centrally in the narrative, Twombly's retelling has the shield initiate the action. Occupying the center of Twombly's narrative is the scheme of rosettes symbolizing the shades of Achilles, Patroclus, and Hector – and, in reflection on either side, images of victory and defeat, passion and reason, which represent, left and right respectively, the houses of the Achaeans and the Ilians. Painting and drawing administer the contesting forces of passion and reason in the synchronic epic Twombly has constructed for his *Fifty Days at Iliam*. The question remains: Why did this not appeal to Barthes, the once master Structuralist? I believe it might, had not Barthes, years before, disavowed this Structuralist possibility for himself. If the catalogue essay on Twombly demonstrates anything, it is a stylistic representation of Barthes himself in a post-Structuralist phase, someone acknowledging that the validity of the artist might be enacted in a form and manner compatible with his (the artist's) own beliefs.²¹

The ahistorical aspect of Structuralism could be said to be expressed by those who treat a retrospective study of art thematically on a sample of work meant to suffice for the entirety. In this sense, the Aristotelian categories Barthes imputes to Twombly's work emerge not only through the suggestive link with actual text on canvas but also through the adoptive myth located in mythic time which Twombly desires for his archaic modernity, a mythic time to which Barthes willingly subscribes. At least for the duration of the catalogue essay, Barthes treats those Aristotelian terms as though they were *churinga* of European vintage – verbal objects of symbolic representation removed from the depths of a cave to be verbally caressed and prayed over, and then returned to their proper archival setting once the connection between the present and mythic past has been made. (Refelt and thus remade, as George Poulet might advise, the terms may now be said to embody the essences to which they refer.) Let's say this ahistorical metaphor for history is not incompatible with Barthes's synchronic approach to Twombly's style but

represents a thematic appreciation of symbolic events, acts, and effects more connected to a mythic saturation than to its modern and contemporary histories that contextualize conditions and intentions. But it is the post-Structuralist scatter and dissemination to which Barthes returns at the end of his essay that gives emphasis to his own intentions. Having inverted the intellectual hierarchy by which the structure of history culminates as a sequence of contextual approaches to an event – in this case, the event of Twombly's particular paintings – Barthes distributes free variants of key terms throughout the essay, and the sensuous effects of these terms scattered throughout the essay constitute a field of *écriture* closer to art appreciation than to art criticism.

The significance of Barthes's impressionistic and selective attention, then, is meant to reinforce Barthes's own late style of transfigured dissolution. The columns he wrote for *Le Nouvel Observateur* from December 1978 to April 1979 reveal, as much as do his late books, this post-Structural rationale for style in which the particular – the occasional – moment at hand is historically embedded in life, and this is as much of a claim to structuring history as he wishes to make. This is why, toward the close of his catalogue essay on Twombly, he writes,

Thus this morning of 31 December 1978, it is still dark, it is raining, all is silent when I sit down again at my worktable. I look at (*Herodiade* [1960]) and have really nothing to say about it except the same platitude: that I like it. But suddenly there arises something new, a desire: that of *doing the same thing*; of going to another worktable (no longer that for writing), to choose colors, to paint and draw. In fact, the question of painting is: "Do you feel like imitating Twombly?"²²

And so Barthes, himself a transient figure inscribed as Proust inscribes himself within a text, closes his essay by considering the topic of production and the drama of doing that initiates Twombly's art and essentially permeates it.

