

INTRODUCTION: TWOMBLY'S BOOKS

Bright books! the *perspectives* to our weak sights:
The clear *projections* of discerning lights,
Burning and shining *thoughts*; man's posthume *day*:
The *track* of dead souls, and their *Milky-Way*.

—HENRY VAUGHAN, "To His Books," ll. 1–4¹

Poetry is a centaur. The thinking word-arranging, clarifying faculty must move and leap with the energizing, sentient, musical faculties.

—EZRA POUND, "The Serious Artist" (1913)²

THE LIBRARY THAT Cy Twombly left after his death, in his house at Gaeta by the Tyrrhenian Sea on the coast between Rome and Naples, included many volumes of literature, travel-books and—as one might expect—books about art and artists. His collection of poets is central to the subject of this book: Twombly's use of poetic quotation and allusion as signature features of his visual practice.³ His collection of poetry included, among others, Sappho and the Greek Bronze Age poets; Theocritus and the Greek Bucolic poets; Ovid and Virgil; Horace and Catullus; Edmund Spenser and John Keats; Saint-John Perse and T. S. Eliot; Ezra Pound and Fernando Pessoa; C. P. Cavafy and George Seferis; Rainer Maria Rilke and Ingeborg Bachmann. Most if not all of these names will be familiar to viewers of Twombly's work and to readers of art criticism about it. Unusually among painters of his—or indeed any—period, Twombly's work includes not just names, titles, and phrases, but entire lines and passages of poetry, selected (and sometimes edited) as part of his distinctive aesthetic. Twombly's untidy and erratic scrawl

energizes his graphic practice. “The thinking word-arranging, clarifying faculty” (in Pound’s words) moves and leaps, centaur-like, across canvas or paper.

Henry Vaughan’s astral geometry—bright books like shining thoughts, tracing their transcendental geometry in the skies—coincides with Twombly’s interest in infinite space, weightlessness, and 1960s space-travel.⁴ Modern historians of the book are more likely to stress the book’s materiality, its relation to discursive networks, or the self-undoing of the literary work. A book may be thought of as an object or a gathering of pages; as underpinning larger systems of cultural and ideological authority; or as disseminated by the technologies of writing systems.⁵ But what constitutes the meaning of a book over time, if not its vivid or fading afterlife in the minds of its readers?—an afterlife that includes both the phenomenology and the unconscious of reading. We remember books much as we construct and undo memory itself; recollection includes selective revision and forgetting, along with its overlay of association and fantasy. A book is never static: it accretes and loses meaning; it exists in time as well as space; it means different things at different times to different readers, and even to the same reader. Its words can be quoted or misquoted, quarried, edited, or erased; they may be sources of inspiration, freighted with private significance, or part of a continuing dialogue with myth and history.⁶ Books shape the very subjectivity that preserves their traces—the imaginary constellations by which readers orient themselves in relation to a literary pantheon: “The *track* of dead souls, and their *Milky-Way*” (“To His Books,” l. 4).

Twombly’s books record his intellectual formation in mid-twentieth-century America, including studies that took him from New York to Black Mountain College, and travels that included a 1952–53 trip to Italy and North Africa before his semi-permanent move to Rome in the late 1950s. Although based in Italy, he continued to spend part of each year in America, as well as traveling extensively in the Mediterranean and Middle East. These biographical and geographical contingencies account for the confluence of poetic traditions, both ancient and modern, that comprise what I will call—on the analogy with Pound’s twentieth-century pedagogical project—the Twombly “anthology.”⁷ Like Pound’s never-to-be-realized anthology, Twombly’s collection of poetry is eclectic and unsystematic, linking past and present. Poets of the Greek and Roman past jostle with twentieth-century European literary Modernism, overarched by Twombly’s self-identification as a “Mediterranean” painter—a term that (unusually) extends to the Middle East and North Africa. His ownership of some books (Sappho, for instance—one of Pound’s poets) goes back over half a century, to the 1950s.⁸ Others were more recently acquired or given, and mined for specific works: inexpensive paperbacks, bilingual translations, or the fine editions that Twombly later started to collect.⁹ An enterprising and inquiring reader with a ruthless pen and an acute eye for redundancy, he turned to books as a resource that formed part of his studio environment, along with writing materials (wax sticks, crayons, graphite pencils, paper of all kinds). His books include handwritten mark-ups, rough notes, textual cuts, paint marks, and illustrative doodles.

Twombly said, “I like poets because I can find a condensed phrase. . . . I always look for the phrase.”¹⁰ But there is more to it than phrasemaking or phrase-memory. The Twombly “anthology” permits unique insight into an artist’s thought processes and working methods—the reading, brooding, and imagining that take place during the extended processes of pictorial composition. Twombly’s quotations reward closer scrutiny than has sometimes been the case in art-critical accounts, where they may be noted—even celebrated as a form of cultural *imprimatur*—but not necessarily examined in depth or in context.¹¹ His markings (both scribbled and precise), along with passages that he revised by hand or copied out on separate sheets of paper, show that he selected from and returned to his texts, and on occasion drastically pruned them. Although the scribbled quotations and allusions in his paintings and drawings give the impression of improvisation, these were not half-remembered phrases snatched from the air or random echoes retained by his inner ear. His quotations are almost always accurate, once the edition or translation has been identified, although sometimes altered to fit a particular work or space. He could and did write legibly when he prepared working transcriptions. In some cases, he reshaped his sources, line by line, to create the illusion of spontaneity. His marked-up texts and prepared transcriptions reveal that these quotations mattered to him—even if he made last-minute decisions about what to include or drop.¹² Paint-smears and eyewitnesses indicate that he sometimes had the book open in front of him as he worked.¹³ If he changed his mind, he painted it over: “I use paint as an eraser. If I don’t like something, I just paint it out.”¹⁴ Layers of paint suggest second thoughts—or (metaphorically) the obliterating effects of time and memory.

Deciphering Twombly’s scattered phrases and scribbled handwriting can feel like overhearing the artist talking to himself. Quotations and phrases appear as gestures, exclamations or sighs, expressions of pleasure or regret. This tendency to read Twombly’s graphic practice as primarily self-expressive coexists with a contradictory critical tendency—to read his work as the repository of a humanistic, holistic, and timeless form of engagement with cultural memory.¹⁵ Reinforced by appeals to classical myth, this tendency risks elevating Twombly’s cultural reach to near-Olympian heights. Both receptions have created correspondingly adverse reactions.¹⁶ As opposed to a high-humanizing reading of Twombly’s art, I want to sidestep the debate in order to recover the specifically twentieth-century avant-garde context for his practice of quotation and allusion—his anthology—by tracing its relation to American literary Modernism, and in particular, Ezra Pound.¹⁷ Pound’s *ABC of Reading* (1934) laid out a provocative program for the writer and student of poetry. The Pound “anthology” included Sappho and Catullus, Troubadour and Elizabethan poetry, James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, as well as Fenollosa and Burton’s *Anatomy* (“a sample of NON VERSE which has qualities of poetry”).¹⁸ Twombly inherited the iconoclasm of Pound’s canon, filtered through the dominant influence of Charles Olson at Black Mountain College, where he spent a brief but formative period in the early 1950s. Here he participated

in its distinctive intertwining of literary Modernism and contemporary avant-garde art practice.¹⁹ Olson famously adopted Pound's hyperbolic cathexis of the sign, substituting the Mayan glyph for Pound's Imagist (mis)understanding of the Chinese character as ideogram. Extending Pound's avant-garde pedagogy into the setting of an experimental practice-based college, Olson followed Pound in favoring archaic poets such as Sappho, the Greek Anthology, and Theocritus.²⁰

Translation (Chaucerian, Renaissance, Elizabethan, neoclassical) has a privileged place in the Pound "anthology," alongside Pound's own translations of Troubadour and Chinese poetry.²¹ But he believed that not every word had to be translated. Admitting that his *Cantos* contained "a couple of Greek quotes," he wrote breezily: "All tosh about *foreign languages* making it difficult. The quotes are all either explained at once by repeat or they are definitely *of* the things indicated. . . . I can't conceal the fact that the Greek language existed."²² Nor could Twombly, who uses archaic forms of Greek letters but few words of Greek apart from proper names. Like Pound, Twombly practices the poetics of incompleteness, drawing on the survivals and fragments of the past, and allowing the reader to project meaning onto textual *lacunae* and gaps. Translations of Greek Bronze Age poetry offered terse, elliptical phrases that combined the patina and poignancy of age with vernacular immediacy. The Twombly anthology is always mediated, whether by neoclassical translators (Pope and Dryden) or by twentieth-century poet-translators who belonged to much the same Anglophone culture as himself. Like Pound, he was especially drawn to Elizabethan poets who reinvented and repurposed the past—Spenser, Shakespeare, and Marlowe—as well as to Keats, a poet's poet who "very probably made the last profitable rehash of Elizabethanism" (Pound).²³ The Twombly anthology is not antiquarian; rather, it reflects an identifiable midcentury set of Modernist principles.

Writing, whether on canvas or paper, raises intriguing questions about the relation of the physical act of inscription or mark-making to the graphic gestures of drawing and painting, as well as to the material surface of the support.²⁴ Twombly's characteristic modes of mark-making include brush, crayon, pencil, and fingers—scratching, incising, smearing, and smudging. Pound's "Treatise on Metre" in *ABC of Reading* aphoristically defines rhythm as a form of temporal inscription: "Rhythm is a form cut into TIME, as a design is determined SPACE."²⁵ A design cut in time and space—on canvas, paper, or plinth—incises poetry in three dimensions. Twombly's practice of quotation has its roots in avant-garde experimentation, where the rhythms of lineation, layout, and spacing trump conventional verse form; as in Olson's "FIELD COMPOSITION," the eye and ear roam freely over episodes of text, rather than following a fixed itinerary.²⁶ Stéphane Mallarmé's Modernist typographical experiments had made his readers see words, phrases, sentences, and blanks—indeed, entire pages and books—as complex processes of meaning-making. Steeped in Dada and Surrealism, Robert Motherwell (Twombly's Black Mountain College mentor, and a likely source for his interest in Mallarmé) advocated automatic writing and drawing as a means

to forge artistic individuality.²⁷ Dadaist techniques of collage and juxtaposition elevate chance and opacity over control and transparency. They undermine ideas about intentionality and put reuse (or abuse) above reverence to iconic artworks.²⁸ Twombly defamiliarizes poetic quotation by splicing and remixing, adopting his own phrase-driven lineation—in short, treating poetry as a kind of “readymade.” His erratic handwriting proliferates with eclectic or borrowed forms of lettering, along with random capitals and accidentals (flourishes, dashes, spaces, shadow-writing). These features of Twombly’s orthography become an essential aspect of the reading and viewing experience.

Quotation signals Twombly’s one-time action in the “now” of writing, rather than his membership in the dead poets’ society. His fascination with writing as both *techné* and notation is always apparent, from his early experiments with shorthand during the 1950s, to the enlarged cursive of the “blackboard” paintings, or in late paintings where the act of writing exceeds the limits of the frame altogether. Like writing, quotation is also a mnemonic *techné*—a memory trace of the (unrepresentable) thought processes and physical movements that go into the actual making of each work: *poesis*.²⁹ Twombly famously wrote in his early manifesto of 1957 that every line had its own innate history (“it is the sensation of its own realization”).³⁰ He was impatient with interpretive questions that foregrounded meaning as opposed to making: “I spill my guts out on the paintings, and then they want me to say something about them.”³¹ What does Twombly’s poetry “say” about his work that the work doesn’t already say, at gut-level? Does it matter whether the reader recognizes a quotation, or takes the time to track down an allusion? Did Twombly intend his inscriptions to be deciphered in the moment of viewing, or rather to remain latent, half-seen and half-understood? Do Modernist practices of collage (both literary and pictorial) change the temporal dimensions of reading? Can the emotions, experiences, or symbolic significance vested in a quotation ever be fully recovered? Revealingly, Twombly admitted: “I never really separated painting and literature because I’ve always used reference”—a statement on a par with his admission about abstraction (“I’m not an abstractionist completely”).³² Poetry becomes more than just another attempt to outmaneuver Abstract Expressionism. It becomes one of the languages of Twombly’s incomplete abstractionism.

The title of my introduction, with its reference to Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, deliberately invokes the multiple sources of authority, power, and enchantment derived from books. Prospero abjures his rough magic once books have done their work. Twombly, by contrast, turned increasingly to books as he grew older, rediscovering and returning to poets he knew and loved, or finding inspiration in poetry brought to his notice by friends and collaborators. Conjunction? Or a rich and varied resource for pictorial solutions? Like many readers, Twombly evidently used poetry for self-inquiry or self-understanding, private expressions of love or loss. But the overriding question to be asked by critics—literary critics as well as art critics—concerns the relation of Twombly’s poetry to his aesthetic practice. How does his use of poetic quotation and allusion affect the viewer’s response to the

artwork? What does it mean to “read” a painting, collage, or drawing?—to “read” a Twombly? In paying close and sustained attention to literary reference, the chapters that follow may seem to run counter to Twombly’s view of the artwork’s self-sufficiency, its gut-spilling immediacy. Selectively and in detail, however, each chapter focuses on “reading” Twombly—and sometimes complicates the question of reading altogether. Vaughan’s books project eternal motion into the celestial sphere: Twombly’s paintings are anchored in space and time. Poetry offers a way to expand the limits of the two-dimensional artwork, even when it appears most resistant to meaning, or most hermetically sealed.

As a kind of pre- or overview, I want to introduce Twombly’s art of quotation with three short case studies. Significantly, all three involve translations. Each is drawn from books in Twombly’s library that show signs of repeated use. Each in its own way bears on what I take to be some of the overarching preoccupations in Twombly’s work: memory and memorialization; erotic vision and concealment; time and the materiality of the text. The first case study exemplifies a recurrent motif in Twombly’s later work: voyaging in time and space. The second uncovers a subversive erotic subtext within a classical myth. The third consists of a “found” poem, a fragment salvaged from the past. Each is cued to specific kinds of literary activity: poetry as a means to construct the subject in time; the encoding of sexuality via literary reference; the poetic “readymade” that draws attention to the precariousness of its survival. Pound’s *ABC of Reading* defines poetry as condensation (*Dichten = Condensare*). Pound illustrates this principle with a brief history of disordered texts and compendia (Homer, the Bible, Noh plays) that have been improved over time by their editors, by emperors—and by their translators.³³ The Twombly anthology privileges poetry’s diasporic movement. Poetic composition (*dichten*) equals displacement; art involves translation and travel, including time-travel.³⁴

I. “THERE ON THE OTHER SHORE”

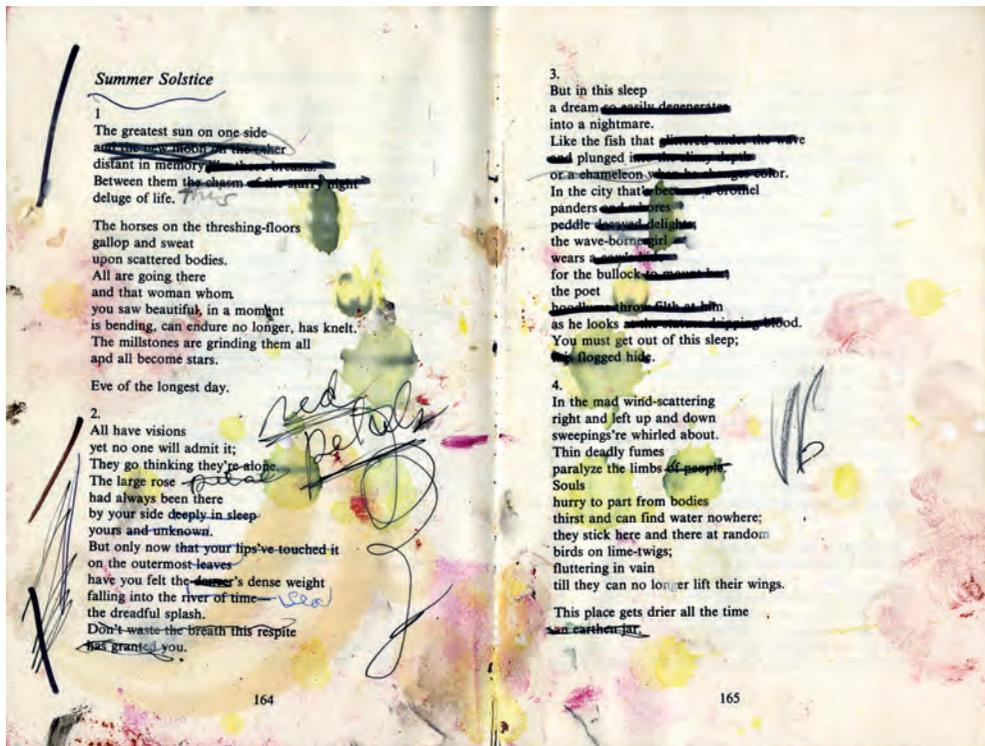
Twombly’s quotations seemingly convey half-formed recollections, snatches recovered from who-knows-what undisclosed source. This impression is deliberately created. Poetry “refers”—but to what? To itself? To the reticent subjectivity located in the painting? To the past? One function of Twombly’s use of quotation is to construct an imaginary subject, capable of looking back, or across, from one time and place to another. Poetry in his work speaks to the there-ness of “there.” It constitutes the visible trace of the artist’s having once been somewhere or experienced something, however incommunicable; it extends an invitation to enter the private spaces of memory. From another perspective, quotation draws attention to the physical space it occupies, structuring the two-dimensional canvas or page with the indexical traces of the artist’s hand. In this sense, it contributes to the indexical “once-ness” (both in the sense of historical past and one-time-only

occurrence) that belongs not only to memory but also to the physical acts of painting, drawing, and writing.

Quotation involves the repurposing of an existing text: translation requires a swerve from the source-text as it finds new directions and enters unknown terrain. Twombly made use of a number of passages from Seferis's allusive and highly personal *Three Secret Poems* (1966), drawing on the translation included in M. Byron Raizis's anthology, *Greek Poetry Translations* (1983).³⁵ Twombly's paint-stained paperback edition shows abundant signs of handling. His copy is heavily marked with line-by-line revisions, scribbles, and paint, as he quarried it for paintings that include the MoMA version of *Quattro Stagioni's Inverno* (1993–94), where he used an edited passage from Seferis's *Three Secret Poems*.³⁶ (See figure I.1.) When he came to complete the long-unfinished *Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor* during 1993–94, prior to its exhibition in New York and its installation in the Twombly pavilion at the Menil, he returned to a passage he had already used in his memorial painting for Lucio Amelio, *Untitled* (1993)—now almost as a form of self-quotation, or an allusion to the act of remembering.

Twombly was in the habit of marking passages that interested him, and it seems unlikely that he drew on Raizis's anthology without thinking about it as a translation. He circled the Greek-derived term *anaplasis* in Raizis's introduction

I.1. George Seferis, *Three Secret Poems*, in M. Byron Raizis, *Greek Poetry Translations: Views, Texts, Reviews* (Athens: Efstathiadis, 1983), 164–65; copy marked by Cy Twombly. Reproduced courtesy Alessandro Twombly. Photo British School at Rome.



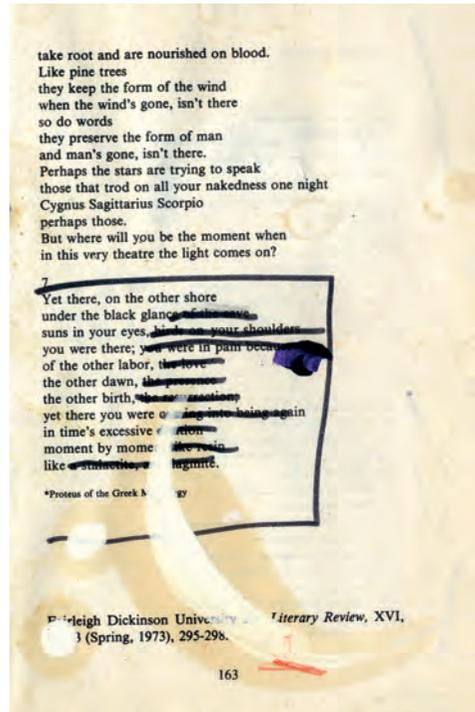
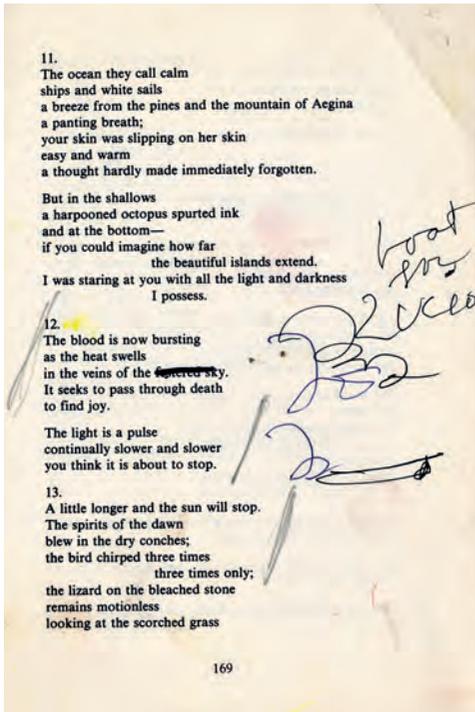
(“The Nature of Literary Translation”). One of many terms included in the translator’s technical repertory, this term is glossed as “a remoulding, a recasting of the words, expression, imagery, etc. of the original . . . when, *and only when*, the use of direct analogues does not yield poetic and idiomatic lines in the target language.”³⁷ Although Raizis emphasizes fidelity to the original, his term gestures toward the malleability (and in some cases, the untranslatability) of the source-text. Even without Raizis’s introductory discussion, Twombly must have been aware of the multiplicity of approaches—literal, free, paraphrase, imitation, adaptation, “versioning,” and so on—involved in Modernist translation-practice, as well as the tensions between accuracy, metrical form, and what Raizis calls “tone” (a shorthand for subtle combinations of linguistic register).³⁸ Given the contingencies of translation, Twombly presumably had few scruples about removing lines and words from a poem that he knew only in translation, and by a relatively unknown translator.³⁹ His quotations from *Three Secret Poems* are a case in point.

Twombly recalled apropos of the “gloomy text” he used for his memorial painting for Lucio Amelio that he “had no clue where it was from.”⁴⁰ This is misleading, since he emphatically marked the passages he used. In the margin of one page, Twombly has noted “boat for Lucio.”⁴¹ (See figure I.2.) Contradicting Twombly’s “no clue,” the printed text of his copy shows him outlining and editing the passages he used, paring Raizis’s translation to the bone. (See figure I.3.) His deletions systematically oust the metrically predictable midline caesura, using a method at once simple and drastic—removing the second half of each line and realigning the remaining half-lines like a Rubik’s cube:

Yet there, on the other shore
under the black glance ~~of the cave~~
suns in your eyes, ~~birds on your shoulders~~
you were there; ~~you were in pain because~~
of the other labor, ~~the love~~
the other dawn, ~~the presence,~~
the other birth, ~~the resurrection;~~
yet there you were ~~coming into being again~~
in time’s excessive ~~dilation,~~
moment by moment ~~like resin~~
like ~~a stalactite, a stalagmite.~~⁴²

The edited version leaves off with a dangling “like—.” Like what? An incomplete thought, or a deliberate breaking-off? Time’s “moment by moment” is held in suspense; the material stalactites and stalagmites of Seferis’s cave disappear, along with Seferis’s coded allusions to personal experience (pain, love, presence, resurrection, and so on).⁴³

Unowned and decontextualized, textual memory floats into an indeterminate region, along with the funeral boat bearing its crimson torches, beneath the solar



1.2.

1.3.

bark that signals the crossing into who-knows-what Mediterranean afterlife. (See figure 1.4.) The painting addresses a “you” who is already leaving, the eponymous Lucio—“like” (one might almost say) the passage itself, as it departs enigmatically with its mortal cargo: “years ago you said: / Fundamentally / I am a matter of light” (Twombly has marked the original passage with his insistent scribble). For the artist, light and life are synonymous, as the sun’s pulse slows toward death: “(The light is a pulse / continually slower and slower / you think it is about to stop).”⁴⁴ Twombly’s enlarged, parenthetical inscription at the lower edge of the canvas seems to shake with the effort of “stop,” in contrast to the more controlled orthography at the upper right. The quotations act as a form of self-commentary, resolving the painting’s empty spaces and ballasting the drips and scribbles of its rudimentary boats. *Untitled* is a funeral address to the departing dead. Still in dialogue with his dying friend (“you”), the elegist prolongs his passage, in time with the gradual slowing of the light’s pulse—synonymous with visibility, and hence with painting.⁴⁵

The following year, completing *Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor*, Twombly returned to the same passage, perhaps quoting from memory: “and yet there on / the other shore / under the dark gaze . . .”⁴⁶ Visually prominent in this new context are the enlarged words “Vast” and “Time,” dwarfing “drop

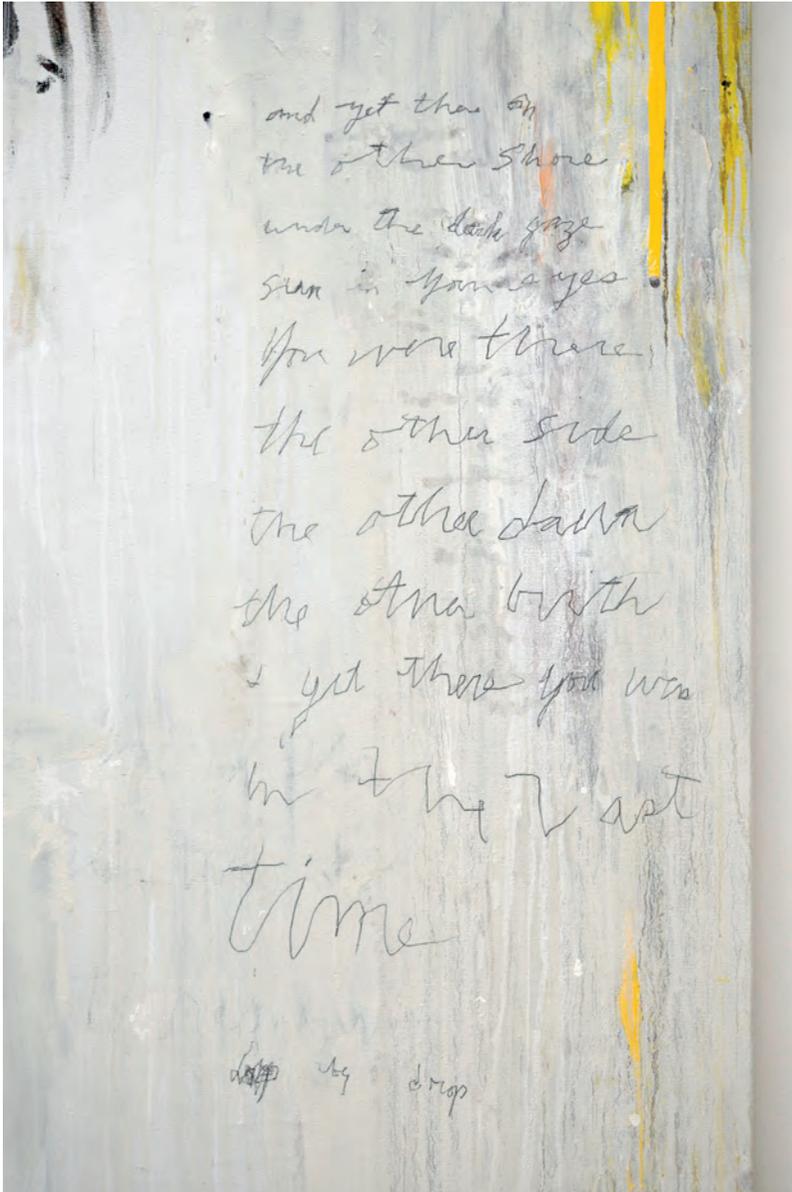
1.2. George Seferis, *Three Secret Poems*, in M. Byron Raizis, *Greek Poetry Translations: Views, Texts, Reviews* (Athens: Efstathiadis, 1983), 169; copy marked by Cy Twombly. Reproduced courtesy Alessandro Twombly. Photo British School at Rome.

1.3. George Seferis, *Three Secret Poems*, in M. Byron Raizis, *Greek Poetry Translations: Views, Texts, Reviews* (Athens: Efstathiadis, 1983), 163; copy marked by Cy Twombly. Reproduced courtesy Alessandro Twombly. Photo British School at Rome.

I.4. Cy Twombly,
Untitled, 1993.
Gaeta. Acrylic, lead
pencil on wooden
panel, 77 × 59½ in.
(195.5 × 152 cm).
Coleccion Udo and
Anette Brandhorst.
© Cy Twombly
Foundation. © BPK,
Berlin.



by drop,” as if time past had with hindsight become the overriding meaning of the passage for Twombly himself (unless it was harder for him to write small at the lower edge of the painting). (See figure I.5.) The *leitmotif* allows him to incorporate duration into the backward look with which he contemplates his long-uncompleted painting. Poetry signals a composite form of memory. As well as lines by Seferis, *Say Goodbye* includes quotations from Cavafy and Rilke, both poets who make claims for poetic language as the means to “say”—if not stay—the poet’s experience of the fleeting world. Functioning as memorial in *Untitled*, repurposed in *Say Goodbye*, Twombly’s quotations become a shorthand for time’s passage. Subjectivity is more than the sum of previous experience; it includes prior reading, moving from one state or place to another. Poetic quotation in Twombly’s



1.5. Cy Twombly, *Untitled Painting [Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor]*, detail, right panel, 1994. Rome/Lexington, VA. Oil, acrylic, oil stick, crayon, and graphite pencil on three canvases, 157½ × 117 in. (400.1 × 297 cm). Menil Collection, Houston. © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Menil Collection. Photo Adam Baker.

work “means” both the artist-subject and the act of looking back. His retrospect captures a life in translation—now “here,” now “there”—like trading ships crisscrossing the Tyrrhenian Sea, or funeral boats ferrying the souls of the dead across the Nile. Poetry signifies movement across space and temporality, both the canvas sea and the vastness of time.

II. EROTIC VISIONS

One of Twombly's four copies of Cavafy's poems, the 1980 paperback edition translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, contains many of his markings.⁴⁷ Cavafy's "Thermopylae"—the poem that inspired Twombly's memorial sculpture *Thermopylae* (1991)—has room on the same page for Twombly's ballpoint outline of his sculpture.⁴⁸ (See figure I.6.) The same edition contains another marked-up page, Cavafy's "When They Come Alive" (1916). Twombly has edited the Keeley and Sherrard translation, numbering its lines and cutting the third line altogether:

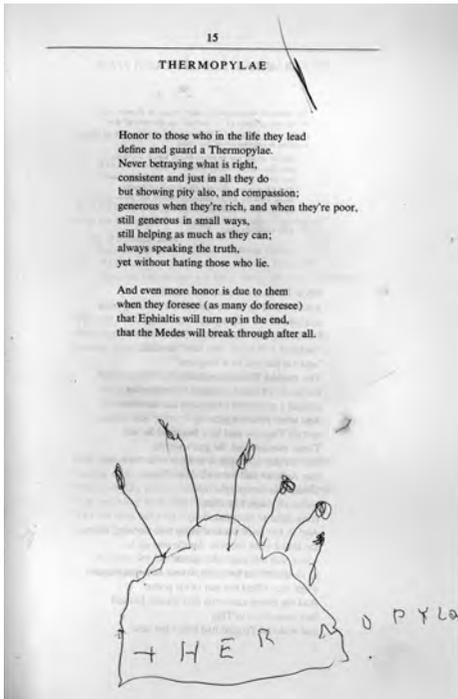
1 Try to keep them, poet,
2 those erotic visions of yours,
3 ~~however few of them there are that can be stilled.~~
4 Put them, half-hidden, in your lines.
5 Try to hold them, poet
6 when they come alive in your mind
7 at night or in the noonday brightness.⁴⁹

As if book-marking or memorizing them, Twombly wrote his own injunction in the space underneath: "TRY To KEEP them POET, Try to keep them." (See figure I.7.) Shorn of its awkward parenthesis ("however few of them there are that can be stilled"), Cavafy's six-line poem now has a stronger message:

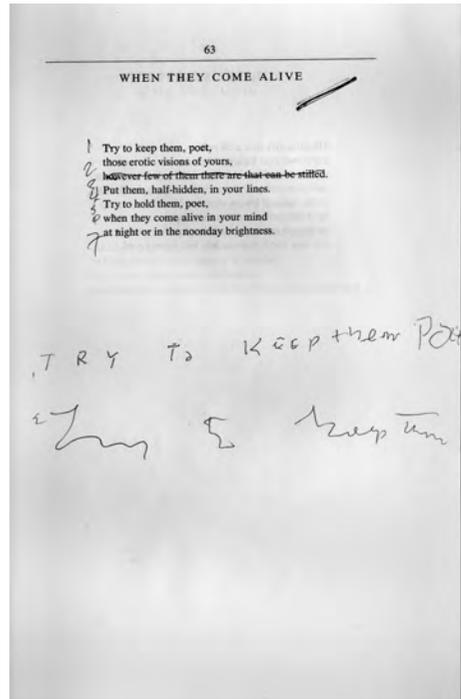
Try to keep them, poet,
those erotic visions of yours.
Put them, half-hidden, in your lines.
Try to hold them, poet . . .

Twombly holds onto Cavafy's injunction: keep and hold your erotic visions; make them permanent even if half-concealed.⁵⁰

Explicit eroticism in Twombly's art often takes the form of the unabashed scatological signs of genital sexuality (cock, tit, cunt, arse, semen) that punctuate his work like flying projectiles and excited exclamation marks. Cavafy's emphasis on the hidden life of erotic vision, however, bears specifically on Twombly's use of poetic allusion as a paradoxical form of concealment and self-outing. Two Elizabethan narrative poems that inspired paintings by Twombly—Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* (1593) and Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593)—contain powerful homoerotic subtexts; their baroque sexuality and lascivious scenarios (as well as their comic deflation of courtly love) belie their ostensibly heterosexual love-plots.⁵¹ The heart- and buttock-shaped signs that proliferate in Twombly's paintings also represent tooth-shapes (as he himself noted)—signs for the *anima* or soul.⁵² But sometimes they are less *anima*, and more animal. The creamy globes, blushing buttocks, and phallic graffiti of Twombly's peachy *Venus and Adonis*



I.6.



I.7.

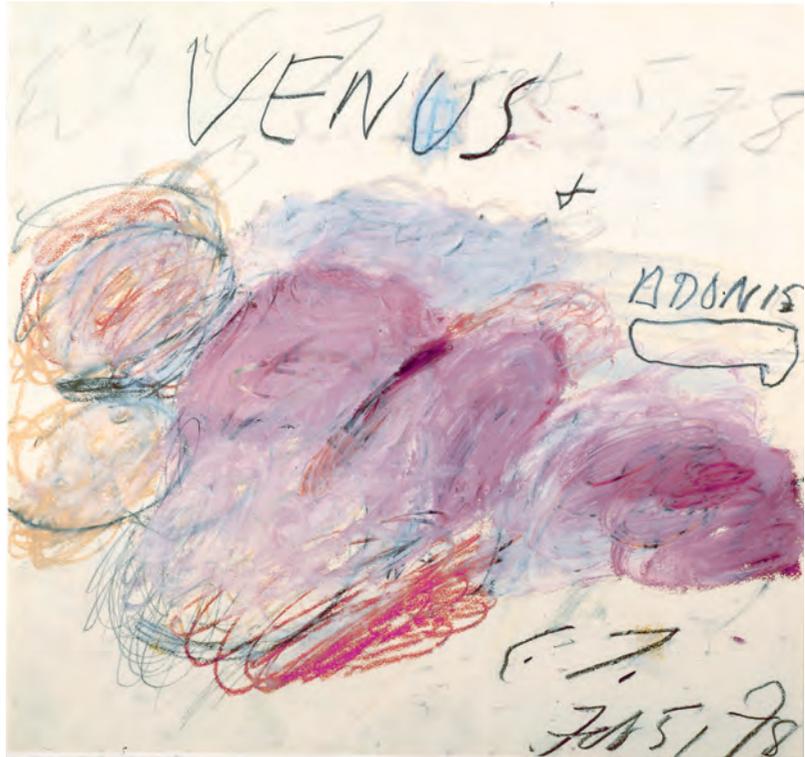
(1978) seemingly take up the Ovidian narrative that had inspired erotic paintings by Titian, Rubens, and Poussin, where Venus dallies with or seduces her youthful lover. By contrast, Twombly's *Venus and Adonis* emphasizes the polymorphous perversity of the encounter. Engorged sexual organs pile up next to one another like an accident (or a metamorphosis) waiting to happen.⁵³ (See figure I.8.)

In Book 10 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Venus's ardent and ill-fated wooing of the young huntsman, Adonis (product of Myrrha's incestuous love for her father), culminates in his death: gored by a boar, he is transformed into an anemone or purple wind-flower. The same book of *Metamorphoses* includes a number of stories about homosexual love, including the stories of Jove's and Apollo's respective boy lovers, Ganymede and Hyacinthus. But Twombly seems to owe his version less to Ovid than to Shakespeare's extravagantly sexual poem—pointedly dedicated (like *The Rape of Lucrece*, and in all likelihood, the *Sonnets*) to the Earl of Southampton.⁵⁴ This detour toward the louche subtext and sly phallicism of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* may be confirmed by the existence of three other works on paper of 1978, all titled *Venus and Adonis* and each containing the image of a book-like foldout decorated with scribbles.⁵⁵ In Shakespeare's poem, the delectable Adonis ("More white and red than doves or roses are," l. 10) becomes a pouting, disdainful boy—"unapt" and "frosty in desire"—fending off a lustful, frustrated sex-goddess:

I.6. "Thermopylae," in C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Phillip Sherrard, ed. George Savides (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 15; copy marked by Cy Twombly. Reproduced courtesy Alessandro Twombly. Photo British School at Rome.

I.7. "When they come alive," in C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Phillip Sherrard, ed. George Savides (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 63; copy marked by Cy Twombly. Reproduced courtesy Alessandro Twombly. Photo British School at Rome.

I.8. Cy Twombly, *Venus and Adonis*, 1978. Oil, crayon, pencil on paper, 17 $\frac{3}{16}$ × 18 in. (44.5 × 46.9 cm). Karsten Greve, St. Moritz. © Cy Twombly Foundation.



[He] blushed and pouted in a dull disdain,
With leaden appetite, unapt to toy;
She red and hot as coals of glowing fire,
He red for shame, but frosty in desire. (ll. 33–36)

Untutored by the example of his own impetuous courser, Shakespeare's grouchy adolescent thinks only of his horse and the chase: "I know not love," quoth he, 'nor will not know it, / Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it'" (ll. 409–10).⁵⁶

The love that Shakespeare's Adonis does not know (or else a love that dares not speak its name) manifests itself in the form of a wound. The lover's *coup de grâce*—desired, feared, and savagely inflicted—is delivered, not by a woman, but by a ferocious boar "Whose tushes never sheathed he whetteth still, / Like to a mortal butcher bent to kill" (ll. 617–18). After a sleepless night anticipating the worst, Venus's eyes light on Adonis in a pool of blood, his wound weeping purple tears:

... the wide wound that the boar had trenched
In his soft flank, whose wonted lily white
With purple tears, that his wound wept, was drenched ... (ll. 1052–54)⁵⁷

Venus fantasizes that the wound has been inflicted by an amorous boar who “by a kiss thought to persuade him there; / And nuzzling in his flank, the loving swine / Sheathed unaware the tusk in his soft groin” (ll. 1114–16). The displacement of desire from mouth to tusk to groin underlines Venus’s aggressive wooing: “‘Had I been toothed like him, I must confess, / With kissing him I should have killed him first’” (ll. 1117–18). There were three in this relationship—a woman, a boy, and a boar. Venus retires to her home on Cyprus to mourn her dead lover, leaving the outcome of love forever afterward unfortunate.

Twombly’s three other versions of *Venus and Adonis* (1978) include the words “Cypris,” “Venus,” and “Adonis,” along with Adonis’s bloody, flower-like shade, and a series of cleft buttock-shapes with a phallus poised in suggestive proximity. Each foldout book is decorated with representations of the “flowers” (figural pleasures?) of poetry, as well as a small five-lobed flower-shape (“Shade of A”).⁵⁸ (See figure I.9.) This is a combined spectacle of literary and erotic enjoyment—inseparably poetic, sexual, and violent. And painterly too. The flowers of poetry and homoeroticism coincide as Twombly keeps hold of Shakespeare’s half-hidden lines, where a nuzzling boar fatally injures a beloved boy with his rough trade (“Sheathed unaware the tusk in his soft groin”). Twombly’s *Venus and Adonis* drawings acknowledge the ambiguous attraction, provocation, and danger of the phallic object, relocating it in the visual sphere. As Pound wrote pithily in “The Serious Artist” (an essay Twombly surely knew), the work of poetry is “the thing that will out.”⁵⁹

I.9. Cy Twombly, *Venus and Adonis*, 1978. Oil, crayon, pencil on paper, 28 × 39½ in. (71 × 100.5 cm). Collection Stephen Mazoh, New York. © Cy Twombly Foundation.



III. “THIS SHRED OF ALEXANDRIAN PAPER”

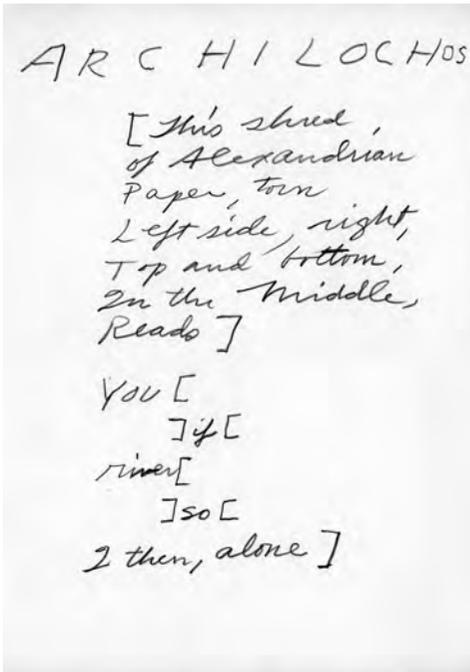
Twombly returned repeatedly to Guy Davenport’s translations of late Greek Bronze Age poets, *Archilochos*, *Sappho*, *Alkman* (1980). His much-marked copy reveals that the lyric and satiric poetry of the soldier-poet Archilochos was a favorite, while both Sappho (“Eros weaver of myths, / Eros bitter and sweet, / Eros bringer of pain”) and Alkman (“Leaving Kypros the Lovely / And Paphos ringed with waves”) reappear in Twombly’s late paintings of parting and departure.⁶⁰ Surviving transcripts show his response to the fragmentation and materiality of the poetic “readymade.” He copied out the same Archilochos fragment four times. What appears to be his first version is written on lined notebook paper; three other versions survive on plain paper. (See figure I.10.)

[This shred
of Alexandrian
Paper, torn
Left side, right,
Top and bottom,
In the middle,
Reads]

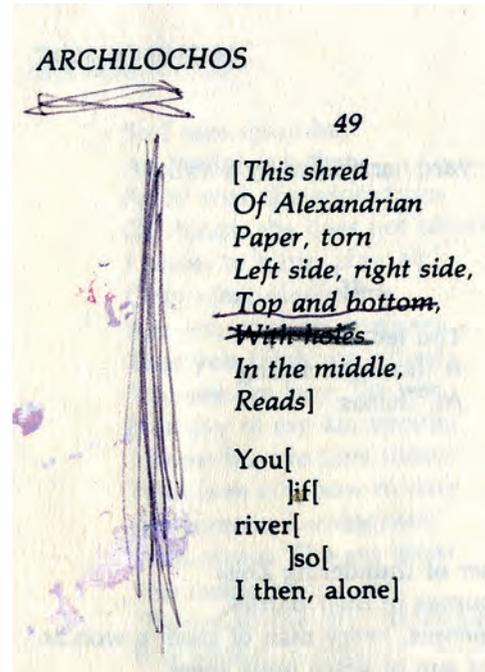
You [
] if [
river [
] so [
I then, alone]⁶¹

In Davenport’s translation, the torn shred of Alexandrian paper becomes part of the poem’s imaginary aura, along with its tattered dimensions. Davenport’s introduction refers to “papyrus fragments, scrap paper from the households of Alexandria, with which third-class mummies were wrapped and stuffed. All else is lost.”⁶² Salvaged from the dead, the fragments barely survive their Alexandrian repurposing.

Twombly’s fair copies follow Davenport’s lineation—except that in each case he leaves out one line. His deletion on the marked-up, paint-flecked printed page reveals that this was a deliberate omission: “Top and bottom/ ~~With holes~~ / In the middle.” (See figure I.11.) The eliding of what Davenport adds (prosaic holes) accentuates the erosion of an already lacunose text whose history is hauntingly evocative of poetry’s fate over time. Faint traces of travel and solitude linger in its gaps, like the longing that breathes in the ellipses of Pound’s paradigmatic precursor-poem, his four-word Sapphic translation “Papyrus” (1916): “Spring . . . / Too long . . . / Gongula . . .”⁶³ The hiatus is the poem; editorial ellipses (lost words, half-heard desires, distant worlds) encapsulate an untellable loneliness. Davenport



I.10.



I.11.

brings the material deprivations of time into his textual object. Shredded, torn, folded, used as wrapping for mummified bodies, Archilochos's poetic *corpus* survives only in this "tattered version" (Davenport's phrase).⁶⁴ The single incomplete, bracket-marked sentence consists of an unspecified "You," a lonely "I," and a conditional grammar of relation ("If" then "so"). No verb survives, other than the single, all-important verb supplied by the translator—the intransitive verb "Reads."

Like Fenollosa in his essay on "The Chinese Written Character as Medium for Poetry" (1903), Pound understood Chinese characters as pictorial ideograms.⁶⁵ His reception of Fenollosa underpins an entire aesthetic program for twentieth-century American poetics. Twombly might have found his way to Fenollosa's essay via Olson (who refers to the importance of "the VERB" in his 1950 essay "Projective Verse"), or via Pound himself, who alludes to Fenollosa in "How to Read" (1928).⁶⁶ But this is not the essay's only legacy. Fenollosa makes temporality the essential element in Chinese poetry, despite the ideogram's pictorial appeal to the eye; "poetry," he writes, "like music is a *time art*." He understands Chinese notation, linguistically, as "based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature"—that is, as a kind of moving picture (unlike a painting or a photograph, which "drops the element of natural succession"). The sequential nature of language allows time to enter, along with motion: "One superiority of verbal poetry as an art rests in its getting back to the fundamental reality of *time*." What the

I.10. Cy Twombly, "Archilochos" ("This shred of Alexandrian paper"). Autograph ms. Archives Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio. © Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio. Photo courtesy Archives Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio.

I.11. Archilochos, #49 ("This shred of Alexandrian paper"), in *Archilochus*. Sappho. Alkman, trans. Guy Davenport (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 32; copy marked by Cy Twombly. Reproduced courtesy Alessandro Twombly. Photo British School at Rome.

Chinese pictorial ideograph brings to poetry is “*a verbal idea of action*”—action-poetry, or poetry as at once performance and performative.⁶⁷

For Fenollosa, poetry consists of a single, continuous, ongoing action. Nothing is complete—not sentences, not action, and not thought either:

no full sentence really completes a thought. . . . The truth is that acts are successive, even continuous; one causes or passes into another. And though we may string never so many clauses into a single, compound sentence, motion leaks everywhere, like electricity from an exposed wire . . . there could be no complete sentence (according to this definition) save one which it would take all time to pronounce.⁶⁸

Motion leaks onto the page like electricity. Fenollosa understands metaphor as the primary circuit of meaning, following preordained communicative channels: “Thus a nerve, a wire, a roadway, and a clearing-house are only varying channels which communication forces for itself.” Simultaneously forcing and finding the channels through which it moves, metaphor (“the revealer of nature”) packs poetry with concrete, vivid, crowded relations between things. Among those things are “the single phrase,” or verbal thought: “The more concretely and vividly we express the interactions of things the better the poetry. We need in poetry thousands of active words. . . . Poetic thought works by suggestion, crowding maximum meaning into the single phrase pregnant, charged, and luminous from within.”⁶⁹ Twombly’s remark, “I always look for the phrase” has its prehistory in Fenollosa’s proto-Modernist poetics of the charged phrase.⁷⁰

“The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” culminates in a tellingly self-reflexive example of what Fenollosa calls (in Poundian mode) “terse fine style.” His specimen translation of the compressed sentence “Reading promotes writing” morphs into the loose verbal form (“If one reads it teaches him how to write” or “One who reads becomes one who writes”) before reaching its apogee in the terse pseudo-Chinese sentence: “Read promote write.”⁷¹ For Fenollosa, “There is no such thing as a naturally intransitive verb”; all verbs originate in the transitive, “worn away from it by alteration or modification”—a process, he claims, that can be observed in Chinese poetry (“wherein it is still possible to watch the transformation going on”).⁷² In light of Fenollosa’s emphasis on transitivity, Davenport’s single intransitive verb “Reads” can itself be read as a grammatical form of the erosion that wears away the substance of Archilochos’s fragment. The vulnerability of paper is matched by the fragility of language. Erosion begins with writing, scari-fying (scribbling, scratching, or cutting into) a permeable material: time attacks grammatical relations, including relations between things and actions.

Twombly’s 1956 application for travel funding had referred to “a deeply aesthetic sense of eroded or ancient surfaces of time.”⁷³ References to graffiti in his art, from Roland Barthes onward, customarily link the distressed surfaces of Roman walls to Twombly’s deliberate dirtying of canvas or paper.⁷⁴ In the annals of

twentieth-century drawing, even the act of erasure forms part of Modernist practice and its preoccupation with the material support; the iconic instance is Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953).⁷⁵ Shredded and abraded by the dual action of temporality and translation, the Twombly anthology repurposes pregnant phrases, aleatory histories, distressed materialities. The tattered remnants of the past generate further acts of writing: "Read promote write."

* * *

Overarching any account of the Twombly anthology is a larger question: the part played by reading, writing, and language in graphic art more generally, as it summons its viewers to particular kinds of attentiveness—or potentially excludes them by textual references that remain opaque within the work itself. What forms of cultural literacy are required in order to "read" a Twombly? This unresolved questions teases reader and viewer alike. As I hope to show, Twombly consistently experiments within an aesthetic that simultaneously links and disjoins mark-making and meaning-making, sign and reference. Books and poetry at times serve as bearers of figurative meaning; elsewhere, a name stands in for a poetic *corpus* ("Virgil"), or a quotation for a cultural tradition—ancient or modern, epic or pastoral, European or Mediterranean. A name, a phrase, or a word may cite, annotate, or serve as a pointer. Equally, the marks of writing may evacuate meaning altogether, instead alluding to formal writing systems in general.

I have been arguing implicitly that Modernist and even Postmodernist practices of juxtaposition, citation, and transliteration (destabilizing rather than consolidating the past even as they invoke it) all undermine the idea of a predominantly "humanist" practice in Twombly's work. To allude to poetic traditions (ancient and modern, European and non-European)—or, for that matter, to the classical past, its myths and icons—is not to privilege them as repositories of transcendent cultural value. Just as literal or symbolic acts of erasure challenge the authority of iconic images, Dadaist techniques of collage overturn received narratives and subvert aesthetic hierarchies. Twombly's lifelong habit of repurposing and erasure embrace elements of destruction and negativity that form crucial aspects of his visual aesthetic. Often his work seems designed to baffle, refusing to reveal what has been obliterated and setting limits on what can be known or retrieved.

How much do we actually need to know in order to "read" a Twombly? In the end, perhaps we only have to follow the movement of hand and arm, crayon, pencil, and brush with the same visual attention that we give to a poem; to respond to the work in all its immediacy, including scattered episodes of mark-making and cancellation, accidents and erasures.⁷⁶ But as one such episode among others, writing—especially poetry—is exceptionally loaded. Viewers are often tempted to find in Twombly's work a direct address to equivalent parts of their own subjectivities, much like Barthes when he aligns it seamlessly with his own postmodern practice, as "scriptible"—writerly, disseminatory, and dispersive—rather than as

“lisible”—or author-controlled. When Barthes “read” (aka “wrote”) Twombly’s art, it spoke directly to his sensibility, prompting the response that can be seen in the heightened eloquence of his writing, and in his impulsive forays into making art of his own.⁷⁷ Other viewers have felt themselves to be in receipt of an immediate and ravishing communication from the artist, understood as an equivalent subjectivity—a response also known as transference. And yet, who is to say that transference and counter-transference are not, in their own way, valid modes of response to an artwork?

An inquiry into Twombly’s art of quotation inevitably carries the risk of conducting psychobiography by other means. The aesthetic production of subjectivity necessarily involves gut-spillage on the part of the artist and passionate response on the part of the viewer. For Twombly’s generation, New Critical tenets informing the teaching of poetry in mid-twentieth-century America had tended to evacuate (auto)biography altogether, focusing instead on devices such as the construction of a *persona*, privileging formal complexity and paradox over expressive immediacy and self-revelation.⁷⁸ More viscerally, Pound wrote (apropos of Brancusi): “Every concept, every emotion presents itself to the vivid consciousness in some primary form. It belongs to the art of that form.”⁷⁹ Is all art about itself? Like sculpture, poetry is one of the “primary forms” in which concepts and emotions present themselves to consciousness. The Twombly anthology can best be understood in relation to the history of American avant-garde poetics and pedagogy, rather than being subsumed into the New Critical reading-protocols to which they gave rise. Nor does every line (*pace* Twombly himself) have to be read as a self-reflexive comment on its own production. Reference remains as an inescapable dimension of the literary. Twombly uses reference, some of it seeming to construct a skittish and elusive subjectivity.

Making the point that “[a] certain kind of American sensibility had to extricate itself from America in order to realize itself,” John Ashbery singled out Twombly as among the very few artists who had “managed to flourish on both sides of the Atlantic.”⁸⁰ This book avoids defining Twombly as an expatriate, preferring to see him as mobile and cosmopolitan, not just as a self-described “Mediterranean” artist. He regularly returned to work in New York each year (and later to Lexington, Virginia), retaining his links with New York avant-garde artists, including Rauschenberg, and through him, Jasper Johns and John Cage, as well as younger artists like Brice Marden and Richard Serra. Yet moving between one country and another brings inevitable shifts of cultural landscape and perspective, along with an influx of revitalizing influences, as well as more profound geographical and personal reorientations. Among the literary consequences of Twombly’s move to Italy was his discovery of twentieth-century European Modernist poetry, along with his rediscovery of the classical past—both largely (and crucially) in translation. The Twombly anthology draws on the work of distinguished American poet-translators such as Davenport and (for Rilke) Robert Bly.⁸¹ It eventually came to include no less than three Nobel prize-winning poets: George Seferis, Octavio

Paz (Twombly's collaborator on an artist's book), and Saint-John Perse.⁸² But this is not the only significance of translation in Twombly's work. His graphic practice has startling affinities with translational practices that go well beyond the Poundian legacies of Modernist translation in American poetry.⁸³

In his extended account of modern experimental literary translation, Clive Scott contrasts hermeneutic translation or "linear decoding" with "constructivist" translation—performative, intralingual, and intermedial practices that include handwriting, drawing, photography, and collage. As he puts it, "Constructivist texts are based on language, not as a vehicle for meaning, but as a material performing its own body and expressive resourcefulness."⁸⁴ Scott's salutary emphasis on the autobiographical and phenomenological dimensions of reading redefines reading itself as "reading-to-translate,"—a reminder of "the perceptually dynamic, multi-sensory experience we so easily forget that reading is."⁸⁵ If experimental translation provides an unexpected aid to "reading" Twombly, it is not simply because of their shared genealogy in Dada, the collage aesthetic of Kurt Schwitters, or the visual notation of John Cage's experimental scores.⁸⁶ The visual paralangues of Twombly's poetry (punctuation, spacing, orthography) along with non-print forms of graphism (doodling, sketching, erasure) represent a similar attempt to reclaim writing for drawing.⁸⁷ Eschewing fidelity to the original, Twombly's layered, pillaged, and edited texts enact Pound's brisk dismissal of "tosh about *foreign languages*." As Fenollosa might have written: "Read promote translate."

Scott argues that "both reading and translation bring the text into time, and not only into time, but into space"—that is, "the space of reading and translating."⁸⁸ Displaced by once-only inscription, print falls away (even the typographical experiments of Mallarmé's poetry), in order to highlight the time-bound vulnerability of the handwritten text in contrast to print. It follows that a potential for unreadability and erasure shadows and obscures (often literally) the multiple ways in which writing appears and disappears in Twombly's work—legible, scribbled, or illegible; painted, overpainted, or painted out. The Twombly anthology implies that poetry (like painting) may in the last resort be both unreadable and untranslatable; it too suffers from the accidents of time and displacement, leaving gaps or traces that survive only in distressed materialities or fragmentary scraps. The subject of this book—the relation between painting and poetry—includes not only the question of "reading" but also the arts of illegibility.

Each chapter in this book hazards speculative readings of individual works or series of works, taking Twombly's quotations and allusions as a point of departure for his relation to particular poets, poems, or genres—and to painting. Research has often yielded information about the editions and texts on which Twombly drew, and the significance of particular poems or poets. Given my literary perspective, I inevitably prioritize the words in Twombly's work, as well as the words written about it by critics and by Twombly himself. But like anyone confronted by details of line and color, surface and texture, materials and technique, I have experienced the perennial challenge of a literary critic who

ventures into art-writing—the inadequacies of language when it comes to describing the artwork, let alone conveying aesthetic and emotional response. Words strain to encompass visual effects that exceed the linguistic register. Yet language remains an indispensable tool for art criticism; in the end, it is the primary analytic, descriptive, and affective resource, even when describing the art object's materiality. Literary criticism, after all, has been formative in taking as its starting-point the Baudelairean idea of modernity that underlies both modern art and art criticism.

* * *

Chapter 1, “Mediterranean Passages: Retrospect,” looks both back and forward: back to Twombly’s formative trip to Italy and North Africa with Rauschenberg during 1952–53; forward to the MoMA retrospective of 1994 that brought to completion his monumental *Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor*. Chapter 2, “Psychogram and Parnassus: How (Not) to Read a Twombly,” views successive “readings” of Twombly’s transformation of Rome’s iconic Renaissance art as a challenge to the modern artist; art itself becomes a form of knowledge. Chapter 3, “Twombly’s Vagueness: The Poetics of Abstraction,” considers two sequences on paper—the Mallarméan *Poems to the Sea* (1959) and the stormy *Letter of Resignation* (1967)—as wordless and encoded communications that allude to specific genres of writing (poem and letter). Chapter 4, “Achilles’ Horses, Twombly’s War,” unsettles the idea of Twombly as an ahistorical artist isolated from America’s defining wars, reading *Fifty Days at Iliam* (1978) in the context of Vietnam; Twombly’s turn to memorialization recognizes war as an inescapable feature of modernity.

Chapter 5, “Romantic Twombly,” redefines Twombly’s identification as “Romantic” through his preoccupation with sea and lake as imagined by artists, writers, and poets for whom (as for Twombly) Italy was an imaginative destination as well as a repository of classical culture. Chapter 6, “The Pastoral Stain,” views Twombly’s engagement with pastoral poetry (Theocritus, Virgil, Spenser) in terms of the artist’s alienation from society, uncovering its sexual politics as well as its preoccupation with time, history, and mutability. Chapter 7, “Psyche: The Double Door,” traces the links between poetry and “psyche” in Twombly’s work via allusions to Keats (Psyche), Ovid (Narcissus), and Rilke (Orpheus), in order to understand different meanings of the look (eyes wide shut, narcissistically self-absorbed, or backward-looking). Chapter 8, “Twombly’s Lapse,” considers Twombly’s late-blooming flower paintings—his haiku-accompanied peonies and Rilke-inscribed roses—as a continuation of the dialogue between poetry, books, and decorative art that engages both Matisse and the “magian” book of Rilke’s rose poems.

“Postscript: Writing in Light,” prompted by the collaboration between Twombly and the poet Octavio Paz, returns to the Baudelairean figure of the artist as translator (“poet in paint”) while underlining the paradoxical nonequivalence

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of poetry and painting. “Translation” emerges as a metaphor for the problematic of meaning in modern painting and art criticism within which this book aims to reinscribe Twombly’s work—not as “poetic,” but rather as a form of painting in which poetry prompts renewed acts of reading and writing, viewing and interpretation. Hence my title: *Reading Cy Twombly: Poetry in Paint*.