

LITERATURE TURNED TO A PAINTING: DEAN RADER & COLE SWENSEN

I N C O N V E R S A T I O N

CS (Cole Swensen) – Hi Dean!

DR (Dean Rader) – Hi Cole! Lovely to see you here.

CS – Good seeing you too. So, we talked about starting with my reading a little bit from an essay, which I'll just preface by saying is an essay on Twombly's *Hero and Leandro*. But it's also a poem, so it kind of fuses the two forms.

DR – I love that piece.

CS – Thank you.

Cy Twombly's *Hero and Leandro*:

“What did you lose?

is the sound of the sea.

And why from a tower does

*an ocean seem to stumble, to fall on its knees and bleed a pure
thin salt that could have stained a cheek had she been inclined,
but not she, who decided, after all, to go with him. That's what
grief is, an accompaniment.*

*Death ends the story, as it always seems to. He died at sea, as
he often does, and the sea goes on. Life handed him a lemon
and the sea made sand. Hero and Leander were like every other
pair of lovers: one died.*

*‘Hero & Leandro’ is an inverse ekphrasis: literature turned to a
painting. Our basic story: a woman in a tower and her lover
swimming nightly across the Hellespont guided by her lantern
who drowns of it as soon as the weather turns.*

*And drowns of it: water is the perfect metaphor for love—
formless, it will be shaped by outside forces, and knowing this,
becomes a wanderer upon the earth, in search of embrace, as
was Leander, as is anyone in love.*

*It is also the perfect metaphor for painting. Of the four elements,
only land can be painted, while water, fire, and air are
among the hardest things to capture because paint is a solid object,*

albeit one always trying to refute that. And yet all paint is liquid when alive, and thus all painting is the property of water, with which it must make its peace before it can go on to anything else. Twombly addresses this by addressing the sea, over and over, because it is that which must be crossed. ‘Second Voyage to Italy,’ ‘Fifty Days at Ilium,’ ‘Téméraire,’ ‘Lepanto’; the sea is in itself a battle, and Leander fought it, ‘The Wilder Shores of Love’. And there it is again, in Twombly’s brush, in which a surrogate ocean of color is led shuddering across. [...]”

CS - And I'll stop there.

DR - That was amazing!

CS - Thank you.

DR - Can you tell me what you were thinking about as you were working on that piece?

CS - I was thinking a lot about just the motion, the way it starts and just rushes across these four canvases, and also about the lines; it's done in this really kind of, there are definitely splotches, but there are lots of lines. There's a real momentum of the line, and it ends, you know, with this handwritten name. And so I was thinking about the way that the paint turns into name, and the way of the painted line turns into a written one, which happens, of course, all throughout his work, we have this constant paint becoming language, language becoming paint.

DR - I love that line when you talk about an inverse ekphrasis. Instead of writing a poem about art, you wind up having this literature piece that becomes a great work of art. Can you say a little bit more about that? Why do you think Twombly was so drawn to literature and poetry, and why did it wind up in his art in such interesting ways?

CS - Yeah, I mean, obviously he was someone who was obsessed with poetry, and I think for him it was the evocation, particularly of the Greek and Roman world; a lot of that came through poetry and through legend. But I think it's one of the things that makes his work very unusual, its relationship to language. Particularly for that moment, though, thinking about how he's always compared to or talked about in the same breath with Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, who also really foregrounded language in their work—in very, very different ways.

DR - Different ways, right.

CS - Really important to them as well. What do you think?

DR - Similarly, I think he is very intrigued by the work that poetry does. It is in this in-between space, between connotation and denotation, between making things clear and making things obscure. And I feel like he wanted to do in paint and on canvas what a poem does on the page. To be in this place that is both accessible but also requires decoding and interpretation. I think generally we *see* differently than we *read*, and I think he was attracted to the process of reading. And, I think he wanted viewers to sort of grapple a little bit with the dual acts of reading and seeing, the way poetry activates the heart and the head.

CS - Yeah, yeah, I think that's a really good point. And I'm thinking about the idea that so much of his handwriting is difficult to decipher, and I think one of the results of that is that it remains ever emergent. It never gets read in a way that's

definitive. We're always in the process of continuing to read. It's always somehow changing, and there is also the pronounced awkwardness of it, and that I think also has the viewer constantly stumbling in a way that achieves its own kind of dynamic equilibrium.

DR – I think it might be in that same essay where you ask (and it's a line I steal for a poem in my book):

Why does Twombly always look like he's writing with the wrong hand?

CS – Yeah, yeah, and he does, so again what is the sort of grace in awkwardness? And I think a lot of his work achieves just that. I was also thinking, you know, so he quotes poets all the time, but he often changes things in the passages, and so I think what I feel about, you know, that seems to be an active engagement with the poet. I don't feel like it's a violation at all of the poet's work. Instead, it's a conversation. It's an activation of the work in a different way.

DR – Yeah, I think of it as an interaction, an engagement. I think he enters into conversation with the poem in a really interesting way, and he's willing to change it to kind of make it suit his needs.

CS – Yeah, and just underscoring that the poem is never done, even if it's been printed in a book, it's still a living thing. It can still morph and change, and I think the handwriting being slightly indecipherable really underscores that constant morphingness.

DR – Yeah, I agree. I think that's a really smart point. One of the questions I'm often asked when I give readings from the book or I'm talking about Twombly is: why do I think he "writes out" poems on the canvas. And I say it's a really interesting point because there would be a way using a stencil or using a very readable font, a la Ed Ruscha, if you just wanted to reproduce a poem and make it very legible. There are a lot of easy ways to do that. But I think he intentionally loves swimming in those waters of inscrutability that, again, force the reader to do a little bit of deciphering. I also have this theory that handwriting is more personal. It is in some ways more intimate. It goes back to journaling or a diary. And when you write out a line of poetry, you embody it in some way, and there's something about the hand and the trace where you're leaving your personal mark. All of that notion of physicality and mark-making is really wrapped up in there somehow.

CS – I was just thinking about again the awkwardness. There's something about it that is like learning to write.

DR – Yes, for sure.

CS – Well, really it has to do with that intimacy, the intimacy of infancy, learning how to make these marks that he kind of never loses that breaking into that creative act. He's always just right on the edge of it and going into it.

DR – Well, that's what is always really fascinating to me about the chalkboard paintings: they traffic in the accoutrement of instruction. It goes back to those early days of repetition and learning: the teacher, the students. All of that. It's all in it.

CS – I was reading something a while ago. It's just stuck in my head where because of course he was accused of being childlike and at one point he says "My work is childlike, but it's not childish." And I thought, you know, those words are so interchangeable, but we can grasp the distinction that he's making—to be childlike without being childish. So retaining the freshness and sort of spontaneity, but with a deep, deep intelligence and a deep, deep history and training behind it. Why don't you read a poem from your work?

DR – I can do it.

CS – I thought you could.

DR – I think I will read a poem that is somewhat similar to the prosy lyrical piece that you wrote that tries to get at some of

the things we're talking about. So, this is a poem from my book called *Meditation on Instruction*, and it is talking to one of the scrawly *Untitled* paintings. This is from 1970, but it's one of the only ones I've seen that instead of being a blackboard painting is executed in what looks like earth tones. And it's a really beautiful piece. The piece has 6 lines of scrawls going across, and this poem is in six pieces, six stanzas, and each one tries to do maybe a different mode of ekphrasis.

So, this is *Meditation on Instruction*:

I

In Twombly's 'Untitled' you don't know where to look, because you can't figure out which way the surface is moving. At first you believe it begins at the top of canvas, almost in mist, before spiraling down toward you. But then you see the direction is upward, a landscape in reverse, scaling a shifting mountain of stone and debris, until it disappears into the clouds. Vast swirl of stasis and motion, umber erasure of the heavens.

II

When I look at this painting, I see Oklahoma, I see autumn, I see wheatfields, I see the sun and a ray of rust and the wind bending the stalks but at the same time mending them into something akin to skin smoothing itself over a body that is not there, internal swirl of the not-yet-cut, glume and awn, spike and stem, glazed gold in the long rake of late light, all spiral, all coil, here tiller and rachis, here the ligule of last leaf.

III

How many fields go fallow inside me? Do you recognize me, wind, blind in the emptiness made by your moving?

IV

This is one of the few scribble paintings Twombly executed in earth tones. Color is its own language, its own metaphor. Imagine the same composition but in blue or green. Imagine this poem in stanzas. Imagine the dead deep below the surface of the field: the roots of the stalks stretching toward history as the little tips in the bright breeze make their own marks in infinite space.

V

In 1970, Twombly is 41 years old. He paints this in Rome where, 41 years later, he will die. This piece makes me think of death: the palette of harvest: the season receding into the long barrow of winter: the harrow hard into ground: the nights numberless, cold and countless: the orange and ash and flesh and flint and fall: the silent shift from stem to soil; that last release: the unlocking leaf: the slash of sickle and scythe: the brush lifting from the canvas: the pencil pausing:

VI

When I was a boy, my grandfather walked me around the rim of our family farm. Wheat and more wheat. Nothing but wheat. Barely soil, barely hill. It was Sunday. He was still wearing a tie. His shirt was the color of the wheat: his tie brown as the dirt the wheat bequeathed. If you stand here long enough, he said, you will learn everything you need to know. I, who always wanted to be taught, asked him if he thought God could learn anything new. He put his hand on my shoulder, and we walked into the stalks like two figures stepping into a story from an ancient book that is yet to be written, into the blank spaces where illustrations would go. The page, like the world, is always waiting to be known. When god looks at my life, the Lord learns nothing from me but infinite regret. But when the Lord looks at this painting, it is god who learns about light."

CS – Nice, truly! The sounds in there are lovely, and I love the play between the dense sound work, which makes me think of Twombly’s kind of confusion of colors and shapes, and then the clarity of a prose line that follows that just has this sort of brightness to it. But I was also really struck by the landscape and the, you know, bringing out the sort of how many of Twombly’s works are implicitly landscapes. I loved it was in the first section of the landscape in reverse, that the landscape is rising. I thought: *yeah*, that seems to be a landscape with Twombly or seascape that is somehow rising as well.

DR – Yes, people never really talk about his work as landscapes or seascapes or don’t think of him as a nature painter necessarily. But I think a lot of these pieces are again tilting their hat toward at least the space of landscape (and the work of landscape) and this larger notion of perspective that I think is maybe underappreciated in his work.

CS – One thing too, it was particularly section V that made me think of this was the evocation of landscape, but as a kind of a particular kind of paying attention, that is the landscape of attention and that a kind of attention to, for instance, in this case, Twombly’s work brings the landscape out in them. And so I’m interested—it ties into perspective. I think, too, that kind of attention is a kind of perspective that is proper to landscape.

DR – Yeah, I think every so often about that line by the poet Charles Wright, who says his three subjects are language, landscape and the idea of God. And I think about that with Twombly a lot too. I don’t know about the idea of God so much, but there is, I think, for poets and maybe also for Twombly (this is one reason we like him), this implicit relationship between language and landscape, maybe as something made, maybe as something that we inhabit, that we customize to the degree that we need it. But I love that trifecta, and I think that Twombly is certainly living in those spaces as well.

CS – Yeah, I think the landscape is always made, you know, that’s what we call it by using the word “landscape,” we’re saying “I or humans constructed this”—whether it’s through naming or again a kind of attention. But I was also thinking of that particular amazing green that he uses a lot. I was thinking of the big huge ones with the white—it’s called Hooker’s Green, I think, but it’s a particular green that is just to me the essence of living things. And it seems that that green alone establishes a landscape.

DR – Yeah, that’s really well put. I agree with that. Those greens are deep and full of life and maybe a little bit scary, like you might disappear into a lake or a mythical ocean.

CS – Yeah. Yeah, I was thinking too, we talked a lot about white, and so I was thinking maybe I’ll read this short poem from Goest that talks about his sculptures. This is from a 2001 sculpture show that was held at the National Gallery. And one thing that was striking about it was the use of white that wasn’t bright, it was a light that had all sorts of depths and things in it.

So, *The Future of Light*:

“give the box

*back to the pale (when the sun is drowned) to a line, which is thin, to a dim
slice on the edge. Give it back to him.*

*As the white brush brushes over you again you are counting time run
to its faithful ages (where the sun equals)*

Throw the sun into the box. The box is painted white. By your own hand

*the sun is hauled into view and proved to be
a pale thing off which the paint is flaking.*

‘In Time the Wind Will Come and Destroy my Lemons’

Rome 1987

*Everything white is turning
into a white wall*

*‘And we
who always thought of happiness climbing’ Rome, 1974.*

*Or ‘Madame d’O’, Jupiter Island
with the words inside it
and the little key unlocked
in place. States “the fragile arrangement of the world”
is a face
painted white
on a stage*

*soaring. We draped the stage in sheets and nailed it into place. And put a lightbulb beside it
and said that it bloomed.*

*Soon, one stem is smooth,
and the other, an oar. ‘The Future of Palm’*

And said it bore fruit.

Put it in the box.

on the beach when both are white.

Sand sways. And of the Etruscan,

it is said:

the Red Sea is white; the Dead Sea, dead. A thread

*seen end on, when kingdom, phylum, class, and duress
is of the vast.*

reduced (as one would a fraction)

to the face, when all its life was shape.

‘The Future Gate’

and a chariot runs through it: 'Car nymphaea caerulea'

and other toys of ancient children."

CS - It was just so much fun to try and write about that white.

DR - I love that poem. You've got another poem in that book toward the end. Is it *The Future of White*?

CS - I think it is.

DR - Yeah. I agree, the white that is not bright. Can you talk about why you are interested in that white?

CS - Yeah, one is just sheerly an aesthetic response. I find it really pleasurable, but I think also I feel it as this constant opening, that we have the sense that—and I remember standing in those galleries during that show—and just feeling like you could always see beyond. You could always see, and obviously you hit a wall sooner or later, but there was a sense nonetheless that the white was a constant opening. And it seemed to... I was thinking of your title, *Borderless*, and it seemed like that white was an enactment of a borderlessness.

DR - So in this poem you have some lines and italics and you seem to be going all Twombly by incorporating lines.

CS - Those are his titles.

DR - Yeah, exactly. So you're doing almost the reversal, right? You're taking lines of Trombly's titles and inserting them into your poems, kind of suturing projects together. It's really smart.

CS - Yeah. I hadn't thought of it that way, but yeah. And I was thinking about the fact that your book was based on going to an exhibition, that was the catalyst. So, what about the personal encounter? and I remember reading somewhere someone saying that you had to be in the presence of a Twombly to really, really get it. Did you feel that?

DR - You know, it's a great question. It's sort of interesting, at least to me. For me, I think it was all very contextual. My father died right around Christmas in 2017. I grew up in Oklahoma, and he was this very outward-facing figure, a public figure: a politician, the mayor of our hometown, and a really active guy. And not long after he died, my sister and I were going through his effects—boxes and boxes of plaques and photographs and newspaper clippings. There's a Gary Rader Mentor Award in Oklahoma. He was really an interesting guy and, as I was going through his things, I kept asking two questions. *What makes a life?* But also: *How does one contribute?* And almost directly after that, I flew to New York. I was doing a reading at NYU, and there happened to be this massive retrospective of Twombly's drawings at the Gagosian.

I went one afternoon, and I was just completely awestruck. It was this enormous exhibit down in Chelsea, and I found myself looking at these drawings through the lens of my father's effects and asking the same two questions. *What makes a life?* and *How does one contribute?* And I found myself realizing that I was tilting toward Twombly, not toward my father, toward this kind of quiet, inward-looking path. That was important for me because I realized I was choosing the path with Twombly, over the more selfless or more obviously giving, public route, for something way more private and interior. The route of Rilke. And they actually had to kick me out of the show. I closed it down. I was the last one out. So, they kind of scooted me along, and I walked home or walked back to my hotel on the High Line. And when I got back to my hotel room, I started writing this poem called something like "Overwhelmed by Oblivion and Infinity, I Exit the Twombly Retrospective at Dusk and Walk The High Line with the Ghost of my Father." And it became the first poem in the book. So, had I not been to that particular show at that particular moment, it's possible this book wouldn't have existed.

CS - Yeah, that the idea of the dovetailing, you know, the recent history, even the weather, those things that we can't ever

quite put our finger on that we know—or that we don’t know—are influencing us but they do, but the encounter, the idea that it began with encounter, I think is a really important thing.

DR – I agree. I saw a lot of other art on that trip and a lot of other art between when my father died and when I wrote the book, but there was something about Twombly, *something* about his groping for understanding, his attempts to articulate *something*. I find in him some sort of interest in the divine, and I don’t really know that everyone always sees that, but there’s something in there that is reaching backward toward history, looking toward the future, something kind of sacred and old in this notion of script and mark making that taps all these keys in the piano of my brain to make this chord that feels like something bigger than me.

CS – Oh, that’s really nicely put. And yeah, I just thinking about that these things going off, as you say, like different piano keys, creating this for us. I can’t help but notice the time, but it would be great to end with another poem.

DR – Oh yeah sure. Maybe I will end with the last poem in the book. So, one of the things that Twombly and I share is a real interest in Rilke, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. I think some of his most interesting artworks are that Orpheus series, that he did in the late 70s. There are some paintings where he writes out a quatrain of Rilke in German (making it doubly hard for English readers to decipher). But I love that he’s talking to Rilke, who’s maybe talking to Ovid in the Orpheus pieces. And I’m talking to Twombly, but also talking to Rilke. And I love that kind of aesthetic conversation between the present and the past that your work also engages in, that I really admire. So, this is a poem that is kind of a bookend to the first poem—where I was thinking about my own father—to this poem which is also thinking about fatherhood. This is called *Once Again in Thought about Rilke, Twombly’s Orpheus Paintings, and Fatherhood, I Consider the Inevitability of Creation and Loss*:

“Scarred sky,

the last beams bruised beneath the surface of stars.

The whole world a contusion

slowly transforming from one thing

to the next—

the one cell, the one life,

always becoming two:

What if it is the sun that follows the moon?

How do we know we’re not the bridle

hard against the teeth of this life?

Just because something has a saddle

doesn’t mean we should ride it.

What would it take to be inside the music

the cello does not know how to play?

What would it take to say to the strings

‘make me silent?’

What would it take for the skin to sing

its own song of blood and blooming?

To know one truth is to know nothing.

To wear your nothingness,

well, now we're getting somewhere.

I once believed I could be lifted by language out of language.

I once believed the horse hooves in the distance

were the ocean telling the rocks about water.

I once believed loss would thread my mind's needle like a blind seamstress.

But that was a long time ago.

Now,

I understand that time is nothing more than pure duration,

& that the mind is a field of herons

who have lost their way.

Even so,

I will let the entire lie down in my body's blue light

in hope that something will start

to heal."

CS - Wonderful, really, really wonderful! I was thinking, with bringing all the music in and, you know, what you were saying about the piano keys before—this triangulation of music, poetry and painting. It seems like as any triangulated thing, it creates a very stable base, and they allow a kind of circulation among them. I also love the “lifted by language”—“I thought I could be lifted by language out of language,” because that seems to head both in the direction of the music—you know I’m thinking of Zukofsky’s “lower limit”—“Upper limit music, lower limit speech, but also painting, you know, in a certain sense, Twombly is letting that language lift us out of language and, you know, into something else.

DR - Yeah, I agree. I think that Twombly could have uttered those lines. It’s always fascinating to me that I feel like for him, the visual field was never quite enough. Just having something to look at—just art—didn’t do it. He needed words in there, he needed the poetry in there to kind of round things out, make that triangulation, make that stable ground, because he keeps coming back to language. It’s like “if I just include more language, maybe it will lift this painting out of ... whatever.”

CS - Out of—lift the painting out of painting.

DR - Yes, exactly, which I find so fascinating and liberating.

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