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# Thinking the Line: A Collection of Books on Poetry and Visual Art

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Carter Smith

THINKING THE LINE: A COLLECTION OF BOOKS ON POETRY AND VISUAL ART

What I remember about the painting--if the memory isn't significantly altered by the thinking that came after--are the wide-spaced letters of the name. Not the painter's signature, but one of the pictorial elements on a canvas too large to take up anything less than one wall of the gallery, a canvas that required its viewer to feel the time it took to take in each part of it, to move from the multicolored, painted forms to the drawn-out script that read *O R P H E U S*.

The painting was Cy Twombly's *Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor*, and though I knew that an image of it wouldn't replicate the feeling of standing in front of it, I scanned the pages of the books in the Menil Collection's bookstore, looking specifically for a reproduction of the painting that held me there before it, beholding. While none of the books contained the particular image I was after, I found several slim volumes, all beautifully produced, dedicated to Twombly's work. The book that I bought that day, published by the Menil Collection, still shows me Twombly's lines, again and again, but the physical fact of the book also returns me to the day on which I first saw the painting (and bought the book), the trip to the museum that houses it, who I was then, and what I was thinking about.

At the time, I was a student in a Master of Fine Arts program in Creative Writing. Remembering that time, I can see now why Twombly's work--with its allusions to classical literature, with its writing that often refuses to be read--would be important to me, for I was beginning to think about the poetic line and how it materializes thought in the

form of a visible effort. What I did not know then, when I saw Twombly's paintings for the first time, and when I bought the book with images of his work, was that this way of thinking would put visual art and literature into a dialogue carried out in what I read, what I thought, and what I saw.

After days of looking at that first book, simply titled *Cy Twombly*, I found that I couldn't stop thinking about the books I hadn't bought, that I couldn't remember clearly enough the images that *they* contained. So I started looking for them. And, in the process of looking for them, I found books by other artists. As I discovered other artists, I traveled to see their work. Wherever I traveled, I looked for books in museum and gallery shops. Books led to places, and places led to more books. Thus, my Lucian Freud exhibition catalogue is a day of riding buses in Los Angeles; Richard Serra's *Drawings and Etchings from Iceland* is the day after a trip to Dia:Beacon to see his torqued ellipses; Twombly's *Letter of Resignation*--published by Heiner Bastian and long out of print when I found it--is a return trip to the Menil, the last one I made before moving to St. Louis.

There is a page in the catalog for Cy Twombly's *Lepanto* that reminds me of my first encounter with his work, a page that offers an extreme close-up of the lines the artist made by allowing paint to run down his canvas. What's lost in the image--as I was lost, in front of *Say Goodbye, Catullus*, in the intricacies of the word *Orpheus*--is all sense of what the picture depicts. Zooming in past the ostensible subject of the painting (*Lepanto* refers to the naval battle of Lepanto, and the suite of paintings is filled with images of ships), the image shows its reader the way paint runs down a surface. For the materiality of artistic means is also one of Twombly's subjects, and the Gagosian

Gallery's decision to foreground that materiality made it visible to me as I sat at my dining room table several hundred miles from where I had seen the paintings, aware that, after several hours of looking at the book, I was no longer using it to remember the works I had traveled to see.

I was reading there--my catalogs taught me that *looking at* is indeed a type of reading--something analogous to the poems I studied and admired. That is to say, it seemed to me that there was a sense of bravery and invention in Twombly's surrender to *the way in which* a line makes something known, in Serra's valuation of the weight of the steel he used, in Rauschenberg's willingness to use anything: a bravery and invention much like William Carlos Williams's use of the variable foot, A. R. Ammons's movement between long and short lines, John Berryman's reworking of the sonnet in his *Dream Songs*, and Paul Celan's fractured music, which there is nothing like.

Each book had a way of making visible the hand that made the mark, even those books that contained printed lines of poetry. The design for Jean Valentine's *Ordinary Things*, for example, matches the heavy silence of her lines with a book that *looks* quiet. The cover, composed of repeating lines (it could be an Agnes Martin composition, or a Frank Stella), is another close-up. Is it a rubbing of a tree's rings, or a fingerprint? When I met Jean Valentine in 2002 and asked her to sign *Ordinary Things* (her 2005 collected volume, *Door in the Mountain*, was in production but not yet in print), she was pleased to see the dust jacket in such good shape. I like to think that the cover image--with its implied intersection between natural world and social world, with the gentle insistence that one must *look hard* to tell the difference--showed her how much the book designer was also her reader.

This is what my collection of books on art and poetry shows me: that making is always a response, always intertwined with some kind of reading. Agnes Martin makes this point in "We are in the Midst of Reality Responding with Joy," the talk included in *Paintings and Drawings 1957-1975*. The title is slightly misleading; though the book contains a checklist of the works included in the exhibition, it only reproduces a few of them. The majority of the volume is dedicated, instead, to a facsimile of the written pages of Martin's speech. Her talk, which she addressed to college-age art students, is chiefly on the necessity of making art a daily practice. We can see, because the Arts Council of Great Britain made the decision to show us, that Martin hand-wrote her speech with what appears to be a drawing implement, on sheets of paper torn from a sketch pad.

I read the books. I studied the images. The gestures that my books disclosed were the gestures of minds in motion. That motion mirrored the motion of the world in which in which I bought the books and looked at them. The line became a way of thinking that the two combined.

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