

**Say Goodbye, Cy, to the Shores of Representation:  
Towards an Abstract Romanticism**

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*This essay is concerned with the ways in which the works of Cy Twombly, especially those paintings that refer to and draw their impetus from the poetry of Shelley and Keats, elaborate an impulse towards abstraction already latent in Romanticism itself.*

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The title I have fashioned for this essay incorporates the title of Cy Twombly's magnificent painting, "Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor." By appropriating it in this manner, I am afraid I have done violence to the elegiac tone and classical elegance of Twombly's title and risked making it an annoyingly precious riff on epistemic shifts in art and literary history. I don't know whether or not Twombly has passed to what Percy Shelley in his magnificent late elegy *Adonais* called "the abode where the Eternal are," but the painter's death in 2012 has made critical goodbyes and reckonings inevitable. I am certainly not in a competent position disciplinarily to offer any such critical reckoning; but I am much moved by many of Twombly's pictures. And, as a Romanticist, I find Twombly's painterly engagement with Romanticism to be as critically compelling as it is aesthetically illuminating. In this essay I hope to show how Twombly's pictures, especially those prompted by or engaged with Romantic poets, point us towards what I am calling an abstract Romanticism. My intention here is not merely to revisit the marks or traces of Romanticism in Twombly's painting but rather to show how those Romantic remnants might reveal a movement towards

abstraction already at work in Romanticism itself, one that often is marked by “outsoarings,” vanishings, fadings.

According to our prevailing available modes of literary history, few if any adjectives would seem more inappropriate modifiers of the British version of Romanticism than “abstract”: expressive or imaginative, to be sure, pantheistic, transcendental, empirical, ecological, revolutionary or reactionary, but never “abstract.” This explains why it is not a coincidence that the historical period we conventionally associate with British Romanticism coincides with a fundamental shift in the meaning and value of the word “abstract” and its derivations—“derived” being one of the earliest uses of abstract. For much of the early history of this word, “abstract” is neutrally understood as something withdrawn or removed, in this context most notably as something withdrawn or separated from matter and material embodiment. Throughout its history – in its form as a verb, at least – to “abstract” means to “distill” or to “purify,” as in late 18<sup>th</sup>-century chemistry. In this same long history in juridical discourse, to “abstract” also means to verify or to epitomize. But by the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – by the time of Romanticism, in other words – “abstract” becomes a highly contentious and increasingly pejorative term, especially in its adjectival form, as something which is not only withdrawn from reality but which *threatens* it. It is at this moment that “abstract” becomes synonymous with “abstruse”; and while no writer of the period is more likely than Coleridge to be regarded as abstruse, his poetry and criticism are both derived from a theory of the imagination as the organic medium that connects the worldly with the divine and thus resists the mechanisms of abstraction. But on the perceived threat of abstraction in the British tradition, all roads lead to Edmund Burke, for whom “abstract liberty,” such as that which was understood to motivate the revolutionary events in France, “like other mere abstractions, is not to be found. Liberty inheres in some sensible object.” For these British Romantic writers, abstraction not only distracts us from divine guidance or the sensible word, it “seduces” or “hurries” us into a dangerous and even seditious realm. For this strain of Romanticism, abstraction is the virus that causes the contagion of French revolutionary terror.

The Romantic aversion to abstraction is not merely a symptom of political reaction. William Blake, by any measure one of the most politically radical artists of this or any period, wrote a pivotal poem about “abstraction” for his *Songs of Experience* called “The Human Abstract,” which makes it clear that Blake believes “abstraction” to be “the dismal shade/ Of Mystery,” another of those “mind-forg’d manacles” which poetry and painting must shatter so that we may behold the liberating contrary form, “the divine image.” However much Byron and Wordsworth might be opposed on most every poetic or political matter, both resist in theory and in practice the impulse toward abstraction. In the case of Wordsworth, however much imagination might “augment” or even overwhelm perception, his poems insist upon a relationship or, better yet, a tether to material detail and empirical particularity that resists the impulse to abstraction. Byron’s ferocious and relentlessly satirical impulse coupled with his neo-classical poetics make him doubly ill-disposed to any sense of abstraction as we understand it. The oscillations in this one complex word serve as an index of the political, philosophical, and aesthetic currents of the period. In fact, I would argue that Romanticism – and indeed much of the history of scholarship it has elicited – can be distilled or *abstracted* as a debate over the meaning and value of the word “abstract.” To the extent that the methodological disputes within Romantic studies over the past quarter of a century were framed as an opposition between the abstractions of theories such as deconstruction and the materiality of empirical history, they were reiterating a debate that originated in Romanticism.

But for this to be a genuine debate *within* Romanticism, of course, one must be able to identify Romantic writers sympathetic to what we understand as abstraction; and I believe an impulse toward abstraction is discernible and its manifestations legible in the poetry and poetics of Shelley and Keats. There we begin to encounter a new version of abstraction as, in the words of another *OED* entry, “something which exists only in idea, something visionary.” Hypotyposis, the rhetorical term for the capacity of language to make abstractions *seem* to be available to the senses, is arguably the master-trope of Shelley’s most adventurous poetry. This characterization of Keats and particularly of Shelley as

poets of the ethereal is as old as the hills; but I am interested in demonstrating how it is something more than a visionary temperament or a disposition towards poetic abstractions. I hope to show how certain moments in certain poems by Shelley and Keats constitute a genuine engagement with the processes of abstraction as we *now* recognize and understand them. For this argument to work as something more than influences and allusions, for it to hold at the formal and rhetorical level, one must be willing to accept that there may be equivalents in the material workings of poetry for the formal processes of abstraction in painting, that certain experiences of reading have their perceptual analogues. I want to argue, in other words, that the modes of abstraction at work in some important poems by Keats and Shelley are those that Clement Greenberg or Frank O'Hara would recognize, abstraction as a withdrawal and a distillation, a distancing and even exile from what we might call the mimetic project in art and literature. The rhetorical status of O'Hara's delirious (mock?) manifesto on "Personism" makes it difficult to know if we are expected to *trust* any of its observations about poetry or painting. But, trustworthy or not, there is much to be learned from O'Hara's brief but detailed distinction between a painterly and poetic abstraction that finds its origins in the "negative capability" of Keats's Romanticism. "Abstraction (in poetry)," says O'Hara, "involves personal removal by the poet. For instance, the decision involved in the choice between 'the nostalgia *of* the infinite and nostalgia *for* the infinite.' The nostalgia *of* the infinite representing the greater degree of abstraction, removal, and negative capability (as in Keats and Mallarmé)." <sup>1</sup> I want to consider how an abstract Romanticism might not only be visible in the poetry of Keats and Shelley but legible in the pictures of Cy Twombly, an abstract Romanticism that may also hinge on the turn of a preposition.

A good historicist might approach this project by acknowledging, distilling, and analyzing the remnants of British Romanticism in Twombly's pictures. But, since I don't claim to be a good historicist, I propose a different route, one that takes its direction from Walter Benjamin for whom the sovereignty of history – what in *Adonais* Shelley calls the "weight of the superincumbent hour" – is not

progressive but catastrophic. *Kairological* rather than chronological, Benjamin's understanding of history is one in which "the past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption."<sup>2</sup> According to Benjamin, the value of a work of art is not its manifestation of artistic genius, its monetary worth, or its "cultural capital"; rather, like any "document of culture," a work of art is "redeemed" in the constellations that crystallize between past and present and take shape in an image, such as those images that populate poems and paintings. These are the images that, in Benjamin's formulation, "flash up at the moment of their recognizability," or to put it in the synaesthetic idiom of Shelley's *Adonais*, as "incarnations of the stars, when splendour/ Is changed to a fragrance" that dwells on earth (ll. 174-75).<sup>3</sup> If it seems far-fetched to invoke Benjamin's poetics of history as the model for this braiding of Shelley and Keats, one might recall that Benjamin's concept of history is derived or abstracted from the image of an angel in a painting by Klee, another descendent of Shelley's "lost angel of a ruined paradise" (l. 88). It is through this mode of constellation that Twombly's paintings show us how to behold two of the poets who had, as Benjamin would put it, "singled out" or solicited the artist, insisting upon their inscription in his work. I begin with Twombly's leavetaking.

Most every version of literary or art history I know of lives by way of its negations, its goodbyes. So if each new phase of art or literary history is made possible by an act of negation of its predecessor, leaving "the shores of representation" is the good-bye on which modern art is constituted. But the decisive and agonistic forms of that negation rarely acknowledge the wistful nostalgia that can accompany the loss, the sense of being an exile from one's literary tradition or artistic origins. "Abstract Romanticism" is one way to indicate how Twombly simultaneously acknowledges and says goodbye *not* to figuration, which is never entirely banished from his work, but to "Abstract Expressionism." And, ironically, it means saying goodbye to "organic form"—one of the most overused misinterpretations of Romanticism – which Clement Greenberg and others insisted on seeing in Jackson Pollock's pictures. In the words of one reviewer, "Pollock's agonies produced a kind of sublimated organic form, while

Twombly's are released to produce an utter nihilism." The comment is symptomatic of Modernism's persistent and almost sacred regard for the receding measure of such ostensible Romantic concepts of "organic form"; but it is also a common early critical response to the sense of negation and experience of violence registered in Twombly's canvases. It is by way of this violence that we encounter the materiality of Twombly's abstraction: scratching, etching, cutting, pricking, smearing. For Rosalind Krauss, the various instruments Twombly employs and the damage he inflicts on his pictures constitute his departure from Abstract Expressionism and stand as a rebuke to the hegemony of visuality she locates in those painters and in the art criticism of Greenberg and Michael Fried. "By 1955," says Krauss, "Twombly had stopped making paintings with the expressionist's loaded brush and had started using the sharp points of pencils to scar and maul and ravage the creamy stuccoed surfaces of his canvases."<sup>4</sup> I have always felt that I *should* be on Krauss's side in her disputes with Fried and Greenberg; but her characterizations of Twombly's aggression – "scar and maul and ravage" – have never really matched my experience of the pictures, which have always struck me as more delicate and tenuous than aggressive or confrontational.

O'Hara's description of Twombly's early paintings offer a much more compelling description of the effects they generate and especially of the way in which the agency recorded in the pictures is rendered oblique, closer to Shelley's vanishing Sky-Lark than to Krauss's characterization of a determined aggression. Twombly's "paintings are drawn, scratched and crayoned over and under with as much attention to aesthetic tremors as to artistic excitement," writes O'Hara in his brief but stunning review of Twombly's first solo exhibition in New York. By this distinction between "artistic excitement" and "aesthetic tremors," I understand O'Hara to be making the case, at least implicitly, for a mode of painting which is more interested in recording and inscribing transient and provisional aesthetic *effects* than it is in the frontal arrest of novel artistic provocation. "A bird seems to have passed through the impasto with cream-colored screams and bitter clawmarks ..., every wash or line struggling for survival." If we take O'Hara as

our point of departure, the “aesthetic tremors” and “clawmarks” of Twombly’s pictures are the effects of an agency that comes from elsewhere – maybe a bird did it! – and that seeks the canvas for what Benjamin would call its “redemption.”

Leaving aside Twombly’s work in sculpture, there are some recognizable phases and projects in the artist’s career: the massive totemic pictures, the geometric paintings often depicting numbers or numerical motifs, the series of lush green oil paintings on wood, the collages and word pictures, the grey “chalkboard” pictures covered with white loops that recall the Palmer handwriting method. But there is also a style of painting that Twombly began in the early 1960s and continued throughout his career. It is as distinctive as his signature; and it perhaps best conveys the “Twombly-effect.” One of the first of these paintings, finished in 1962, is called *Hyperion (To Keats)*, addressed to the poet’s great fragmented Hyperion epics.



Figure 1. Cy Twombly, *Hyperion (To Keats)*, 1962, Oil, wax crayon and graphite pencil on canvas, 260 x 300 cm, Menil Collection, Houston.

The picture is approximately 8 1/2 by 10 feet, white painted canvas – what Krauss calls “creamy stucco” – with what often appear to be random markings, often concentrated in sections of the canvas, markings made in oil, acrylic, pencil, or crayon (here oil, pencil, and crayon) which convey in the abstract, since nothing is really depicted as doing anything, the effect of falling, rising, or suspension. I call paintings such as this one Twombly’s “floaters.”

Severe myopes often suffer from the harmless but annoying malady of the eye that ophthalmology calls “posterior vitreous detachment,” a condition of sight which manifests itself as unpatterned squiggles and coagulates that follow the movement of the eye horizontally or vertically like a tether in a slow drifting motion. These optical filaments become much more prominent when looking at a creamy white background or the back of the eyelids in bright summer sunlight. Otherwise, they tend to dissolve or blend into the perceptual field. The condition is most commonly known by the much lovelier and more lyrical name “floaters.” I have always regarded paintings such as *Hyperion (To Keats)* as floaters not only for the scattered suspension of the constellations of graphic markings and swatches or coagulates of color, but also for the way the term “floater” links painting to a *problem* of perception and makes the abstractions of the canvas a special material condition of sight.

Certainly one way to construe materiality is “embodiedness”; and Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* is to my knowledge the most sustained reflection on the ways in which the images of the world’s appearances are inextricable from the percipient’s view of them, from his or her embodied consciousness. When, following Herder, Merleau-Ponty says that “man is a *sensorium commune*,” he is describing a kind of “thick” perception in which “we do not think the object and we do not think the thinking” but are instead “directed toward the object and merge with this body that knows more than we do about the world, about motives, and about the means for accomplishing this synthesis.”<sup>5</sup> When Merleau-Ponty examines the particular forms this perception takes in the *sensorium* of art, he turns famously to Cezanne, in the magnificent

“Cezanne’s Doubt,” of course, but also throughout the *Phenomenology* itself as exemplary of the attempt in art to connect “sense and existence” as they are already connected in “the miracle of the natural world” (*Phenomenology*, 338). The lesser “miracle” of Cezanne’s remarkable achievement, as Merleau-Ponty understands it, is to show how “the system of appearances and pre-spatial fields become anchored and ultimately become a space” through which “the very sense of the thing is constructed before our eyes” (*Phenomenology*, 337).

If the composition of Cezanne’s paintings offers Merleau-Ponty a means of explaining the construction of genuine embodied perception, this explanation is not applicable to Twombly’s “floaters” which seem more suited to Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the *failures* or *breakdowns* of perception, like the “floating appearance” of the “hallucination that does not take place in the stable and intersubjective world” (*Phenomenology*, 351, 355). For Merleau-Ponty, the “hallucinatory thing is not, like the real thing, a deep being that contracts a thickness of duration in itself.... Rather, the hallucination slides across time just as it slides across the world” (*Phenomenology*, 355). When perception functions in its authentic mode, “perception and the perceived have the same existential modality”; but Twombly’s pictures seem to undo this shared modality and to belong to what Merleau-Ponty describes as “the simple presumption of seeing”: “the contemplation of a drifting and anchorless *quale*,” something much reduced from the embodied act of perception (*Phenomenology*, 393). A *quale*, of course, is an abstraction; and from Merleau-Ponty’s perspective, it is even further removed than a hallucination from genuine perception. But radically revalued or, to use Benjamin’s idiom, “redeemed,” I cannot imagine a better way to describe the experience of beholding Twombly’s abstract floaters than “the contemplation of a drifting and anchorless *quale*.”

And often enough amidst the vast expanses of untethered and floating abstractions are scraps of script and material inscriptions. One can often discern words and names scrawled in pencil, sometimes boldly, often faintly and almost unintelligibly on these massive canvases, emerging from, buried in, or etched across the tangles of lines or scratches. Sometimes, the words and names are

the only marks in picture. And some of these – *Adonais*, for example – take the form of collages on paper that are much smaller in scope and size. To Krauss these pictures confirm in a positive light another older characterization of Twombly as the insurgent graffitist: Twombly, she writes, “takes the attack route of the graffitist, the marauder, the maimer of the blank wall” (*Optical Unconscious*, 259).

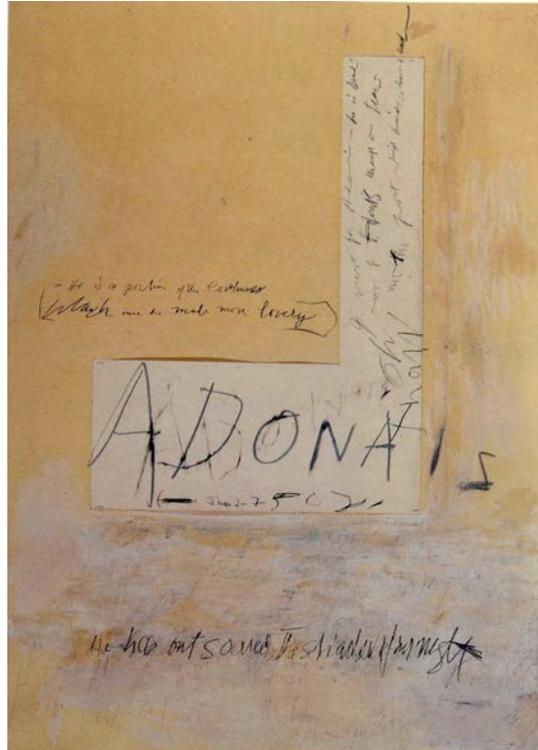


Figure 2. Cy Twombly, *Adonais*, 1975, Oil, wax crayon, graphite pencil, collage on paper, 166 x 119 cm, Collection of the artist.

If this is what critics have said about Twombly’s art since the 1960s in order to discredit or dismiss it, Krauss writes in the early 1990s, at the end of a decade in which the subversive aesthetic power of New York City’s graffiti artists had been recognized and even canonized by some of the city’s most distinguished critics and, ultimately, transferred to detachable surfaces – windows, doors, plates and finally canvases – that were exhibited and sold in the city’s most prestigious galleries. And it is true that the most exciting and lionized of these “graffitists,” Jean-Michel Basquiat, was deeply indebted to Twombly’s work. “The graffitist makes a mark,” says Krauss, and like all marks it indicates a public act has been performed:

“Kilroy was here.” This is Krauss’s understanding of the clandestine temporal mode of the graffitist’s insurgent mark: “even at the time the marker strikes,” says Krauss, “he strikes in a tense that the mark he makes can only take the form of a clue” (*Optical Unconscious*, 260).

Richard Leeman assigns these nominal markings and textual references a vastly different valence and interpretation. Rather than the anonymous act of the subversive graffitist, Leeman understands these inscriptions as the imagistic reinvestment of the Western cultural tradition, “the allusive signs of a vast, branching culture suddenly condensed on the surface of a canvas in a heap of broken images.”<sup>6</sup> From Leeman’s perspective, Twombly’s art belongs to the Modernism of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*: the allusive “fragments” the magisterial artist has “shored” “against” the “ruins” of culture or perhaps even the ruins of the Western European mimetic project in art and literature.

But I regard the images Twombly leaves on canvas or paper neither as the marks of the insurgent graffitist nor as the magisterial gestures of an Eliotian artist gathering a “heap of broken images.” Rather, I have always felt the names that appear in Twombly’s paintings and drawings to be amorous declarations, like the name of a lover crudely and quickly scrawled on the sly during, say, handwriting exercises. In the case of Twombly, the names are often those of poets and, on some important occasions, the names of Shelley and Keats. The pairing of these poets is, of course, not an unusual one; indeed, it was not unusual during the brief period they were writing poetry. In June of 1821, upon hearing the news of Keats’s death in Rome, Shelley was moved to write *Adonais*, the magnificent elegy in “Spenser stanzas” that not only mourned the untimely passing of his fellow poet but that erected a shrine to his poems. Oscar Wilde regarded Shelley and Keats – and not Coleridge and Wordsworth – to be the true originators of what he called “our Romantic movement,” one in which he felt himself enlisted. And in 1881, prompted by his visit to the Roman grave of Keats, Wilde wrote a lovely sonnet that mourns with memorial tears the poet as “the youngest of the martyrs,” “fair as Sebastian,” and, most pertinently, as “poet-painter of our English land.”

Wilde's sonnet summons an "elective affinity" between painters and poets – sites of an affective transfer – that is present in a substantial strain of Twombly's paintings. And it is this affective transfer which gives rise to what O'Hara characterizes as the "aesthetic tremors" that play across the surfaces of those paintings. If Shelley and Keats are the most significant ekphrastic poets of the Romantic tradition, with Twombly we encounter the painterly reversal of ekphrasis – *ut poesis pictura*. Twombly is an artist so moved by poets and poems that he feels compelled to commit to his canvas or paper the poet's name or the lines of the poem that so moved him. In Twombly's *Adonais* and other works in this vein, the artist's calling is to transfer to canvas or paper what Shelley in his *Adonais* called "a portion of the loveliness" he encountered in those lines and which Twombly's picture might in turn "make more lovely."<sup>7</sup>

Though Krauss and others have wanted to interpret these marks as the work of an insurgent graffitist, there is nothing about Twombly's names that feels like the generic tag – "Kilroy was here" – or even those famous tags of the 1980s in the streets of New York: "Sammo" or "I am the best artist." If they incorporate the name of the beloved poet in a very personal and distinctive "hand," the gesture feels as if it is destined for its source: thus, not even so much "I love Keats" as the impersonal amatory declaration, "*Adonais forever!*" And when these are names that belong to British Romanticism, the poets who bore those names felt a deep identification and ultimately a destination with the Mediterranean, where in turn do most of the poets Twombly cares enough to name in his pictures. As did Twombly himself, whose project becomes identifiable when he says goodbye to the shores of the Hudson and sets sail for the Mediterranean. In two exquisite essays, Roland Barthes produced his own lover's discourse on Twombly's work and for Barthes "the key to Twombly's 'effect,' constant in all Twombly's canvases ... is the very general one released in all its possible dimensions by the word *Mediterranean*. The Mediterranean is an enormous complex of memories and sensations: two languages, Greek and Latin, to be found in Twombly's titles, a mythological, historical, poetic culture, a whole life of forms, colors, and light."<sup>8</sup> This is not, of course, the "real"

Mediterranean in its historical and material detail, but rather a Mediterranean distilled from poets, classical to contemporary, and ultimately purified into “forms, colors, and light.” It is, in other words, an abstract Mediterranean, a Mediterranean that is named and declared but never represented at least not mimetically. It is “The Italians,” as one famous early “floater” is called, with no Italians in it. And thus it is with “Bay of Naples” or “Voyage to Italy” or his favorite motifs and figures from Greco-Roman mythology, Narcissus, Venus, Apollo, Leda, Orpheus, Bacchus, Hyperion.

The last name in this series of titles and inscriptions should serve to remind us that this abstract Romanticism is also a Romantic Mediterranean, specifically the Mediterranean Romanticism of Shelley and Keats; and it is this dimension of their work that circulates through the pictures from the 1960s onwards in the form of titles, proper names, and even – as in *Adonais* – lines of poetry. “I am a Romantic Symbolist,” Twombly once declared, though the “symbolism” to which he alludes seems more like fragments of Romantic Hellenism and figures of Romantic devotion, the relics and scraps of the Keats-Shelley shrine to love, “portions of its loveliness” set against a white background which Twombly described as “the neo-Romantic area of remembrance,” the site or field, in other words, of aesthetic memorials.

I have in mind and at hand three examples from Twombly’s extensive Romantic catalogue: the early floater “Hyperion (to Keats),” “Adonais,” a collage work done in 1975, and the picture to which my title refers, “Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor,” a massive tryptich – 13 feet high and 53 feet long – that hangs in the de Menil museum in Houston.



Figure 3. Cy Twombly, "Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor," 1994, Oil, acrylic, oil stick, wax crayon, and graphite pencil on canvas, 400 x 297 cm, Menil Collection, Houston.

Begun in 1972 and finished in 1994, "that big painting" as Twombly was fond of calling it, is made with almost all the materials in his toolkit: oil, acrylic, crayon, oil stick, pencil, and colored pencil. The right panel features dense and dripping bursts of bright oil and acrylic, reds, yellows, blacks, and purples with some wispy lines scrawled in colored pencil. In the central and largest of the three panels, the dense painted bursts become less concentrated, more tufts than bursts, dissipating as the penciled semi-cone like figure and blue smear gives way to the broad expanses of white canvas in which appears a white floating cottonball and some barely discernible ascending penciled script. Beyond that, nothing but some boats, crudely or abstractly rendered boats, drifting into the third panel increasingly cancelled or penciled over as they disappear into the vast

expanse of canvas. I have reproduced one final image, from Twombly's *Lepanto* series, which allows one to see more clearly what the boats look like.



Figure 4. Cy Twombly, *Lepanto*, 2001, Acrylic, wax crayon and graphite on canvas, 215.9 x 334 cm (Exhibited at Gagosian Gallery, Winter 2002).

These boats also belong to what Barthes calls Twombly's Mediterranean; and they remind us how the artist's delicate indolence carries with it a strain of historical melancholy for the ghostly memories inscribed in these paintings. For Benjamin the act of historical redemption derives its "method" from "indolence of the heart, that *acedia* which despairs of appropriating the genuine historical image as it briefly flashes up" (*Concept*, 391). Flaubert, says Benjamin, was "familiar" with this *acedia*, this torpor. And what Flaubert wrote of Carthage would well apply to Twombly's invocations of Lepanto: "few will suspect how sad one had to be to undertake the resuscitation of Carthage" (*Concept*, 391).

In Twombly, boats – those named for the catastrophe at Lepanto and those not – are always empty and melancholy; this other species of floater begins appearing in his paintings and drawings in the early 1990s, and it is the introduction of these effaced boats that, according to Twombly, brought the picture to completion. "Catullus went to Asia Minor to see his brother," says Twombly on the topic of the title, "and while he was there his brother died, and he came in this little boat. I found the idea of Asia Minor extremely beautiful. Saying goodbye to something and coming back on a boat. I found it very beautiful, the

line in the painting from the Keats poem.” That line, which served as the picture’s working title for its twenty unfinished years, is an enigmatic phrase lifted from Keats’s poem “The Human Seasons”: the line in the painting is “On mists of idleness” and it is retained just above erasure on the left third panel of the triptych, as if to remind us or the painter that these abstracted boats leaving Asia Minor, saying goodbye, might remain suspended in the abstraction called “On mists of idleness.” It is as if the painter is acknowledging that the poet “whose name was writ in water” and whose poems prompt his own efforts also provides the painter with this image of abstraction or at least the kind of abstraction that is always marking its own goodbyes.

But Twombly got it wrong, that one phrase in the picture he takes from Keats. In the actual poem, Keats describes how the autumnal soul is “contented so to look/ On mists *in* idleness – to let fair things/ Pass by unheeded” (ll.10-12): he is, in other words, by the time of autumn, sufficiently contented in his idleness that he would look at mists and allow “fair things” to pass by “unheeded.” By cutting out these lines to paste them in his picture, Twombly has removed the “contented” relationship between beholder and beheld and, by the substitution of the pronoun transformed this act of looking on or at something into a *feature* of idleness. Twombly has, in other words, *abstracted* Keats, distilled a permanent condition of being from what is in Keats’s poem a mimetic if transitional act. This is how O’Hara would have understood the substitution of prepositions, “on mists *of* idleness” “representing the greater degree of abstraction, removal, and negative capability.” And it is by this very abstraction that Twombly’s “misreading” of the line in this one poem by Keats crystallize the impulse to abstraction at work throughout Keats’s poetry.

For as unlikely as it may seem, I believe that Twombly is also right to identify “idleness” or “indolence” as the vehicle of Keatsian abstraction. Nothing could be more removed from the modernist ideologies of the heroic artist physically wrestling with the all the materials and conventions of painting to distill or purify its nature. But one of the most challenging, paradoxical and neglected dimensions of Keats’s poetry is his openness to weakness, his submissions to

“mists of idleness” and indolence. Readers sympathetic to Keats’s poetry are not inclined to understand “negative capability” in this form. With good reason, they are far more likely to regard “negative capability” as the *rigorous* capacity for self-negation; but Twombly helps us understand how “negative *capability*” might be understood more literally as *weakness*. That is how as sympathetic a reader as Shelley understood and enshrined it in his elegy: Adonais is that “defenceless” “gentle child” who “with weak hands though mighty heart” did “dare the unpastured dragon in his den” (ll. 239, 235, 237-38). One explicit version of this weakness is the aesthetic experience of being undone by art, as when Keats’s speakers are confronted by such “mighty things” as the “wonders” from the Parthenon that Lord Elgin plundered from Greece. Keats’s sonnet “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” opens with a declaration of absolute weakness: “My spirit is too weak.” “Too weak” for what? Asks the sonnet. It is certainly the case that Keats’s speaker is wrestling with the experience of confronting the materiality as well as the wonders of the “Elgin Marbles.”<sup>9</sup>

Keats wrote an ode on the very experience of indolence. And though it is often regarded as the weakest of Keats’s “great odes,” “Ode on Indolence” is the place in his “late” poetry where weakness is made the medium of dematerialization. It is a poem devoted to dissipation and disappearance, an ode that celebrating “the blissful cloud of summer-indolence” (l. 16) luxuriates in the processes of “melting” and “fading.” It is a poem in which the allegorical figures of Love, Ambition, and Poesy – arguably the three principal themes of Keats’s poetry – appear at the ode’s opening “like figures on a marble urn” (l. 5) only to be evacuated of their materiality in the mists of indolence until they “fade softly” from the speaker’s “benumbed eyes” “into the clouds and never more return” (ll. 53, 17, 60). Indeed, the urn on which these masque-like figures are projected is drained of its own materiality by the end of the ode: the “marble urn” in the first stanza becomes the “dreamy urn” of the final lines, on its way from allegory to abstraction.

The “indolence” and “idleness” Twombly discerns in Keats’s poems become, at least as Barthes understands them, the “constitutive” features of

Twombly's art, what Barthes calls "*La paresse*." Twombly's script, with which he invokes and inscribes lines of poems from Keats and Shelley, are "the scraps of an indolence" (*les bribes d'une paresse*):

What *seems* to intervene in TW's line and to conduct it to the verge of that very mysterious *dysgraphia* which constitutes his entire art is a certain indolence. TW's art – this is its morality, and also its greatest historical singularity – *does not want to take anything*; it hangs together, it floats, it drifts ... (*Responsibility*, 173, 175).

This relationship between Keats and Twombly and Barthes belongs to the Benjaminian model of the constellation to which I alluded above, a "secret index of redemption" through which the poet, the painter, and the critic are "constellated" and the distilled abstraction of indolence is illuminated at each point of contact. This "constellation" is in every sense an accidental one: Barthes is not a reader of Keats's poetry – there are but two or three scattered references to the poet in his entire body of criticism – but what he sees and indeed *reads* in Twombly's paintings and in the "negligent and elegant" form of their lines and figures is the same "indolence" Twombly *reads* in Keats and then *writes* on his own pictures.

Keats's weakness was such that he died a little for a long time, and upon hearing that the young poet's existence had indeed become "posthumous," Percy Shelley wrote the elegy that forever constellates them not only in the canon of British literary history but in such shrines to their relationship as Twombly's collage. If Keats wrote his own epitaph as "here lies one whose name was writ in water," it was Shelley who with his copy of Keats's *Hyperion* in his pocket would drown in the Bay of Lerici when his little boat called the Don Juan – much like the ones he liked to scribble into the texts of his poems – turned funereal. I want to conclude this essay on Twombly's Romanticism by looking at some lines from *Adonais* that the painter scribbled for us to see and read. In the course of Shelley's long good-bye to Adonais, the topics or tropes of many of Keats's poems are reconstellated in a procession of distilled images or poised

abstractions that cherish as much as they mourn the weakness for which they are responsible. Twombly's scraps of Shelley's poetic text reiterate this same act of constellation. In *Adonais*, Twombly has written in pencil not only the title of the poem but three brief passages: the opening three lines, two lines from stanza 43, and a single line from stanza 40. The title and first passage of the poem are written on a separate piece of paper that has been cut and attached like a backward L to the center of the picture. Under the scrawled name ADONAIIS, which is completed on the main surface, one can still make out the traces of a smaller partially erased *Adonais*. The opening lines of the poem – "I weep for Adonais – he is dead!/ O, weep for Adonais! Though our tears/ thaw not the frost which binds so dear a head!" – are just barely legible in Twombly's picture: they are scratched out in the ascending panel. This panel is affixed to the paper just above a horizon line, below which Twombly has filled in with oil and pastel. On this painted surface appears the line from stanza 40: "He has out soared the shadow of our night," the boldest and most legible of the lines taken from the poem. Twombly has ignored the narrative trajectory of the poem and removed the impulse toward the reconciliation under painful duress that most critics find there. The opening lines that record the event of Adonais's death and the exhortation to grieve feel as if they have been written hastily, as if the painter had been singled out for them and urgently recorded them before they disappeared. The remaining lines that appear on the main body of the picture are taken from the poem's closing stanzas. In the upper left-hand quadrant are the lines that might well serve as a version of Benjamin's "secret index of its redemption": "He is a portion of the loveliness/ Which once he made more lovely." It is, of course, only a partial redemption, for if Adonais once made the "loveliness more lovely," he is now but a *portion* of it, an aestheticization that exists forever fragmented. That final line, committed to the paint and pastel at the bottom of the picture – "He has out soared the shadow of our night" – is a line that seems in the poem to be a part of the speaker's reconciliation with the death of a poet, the repudiation of mourning. But singled out in this way – *abstracted* – it functions to underscore the catastrophe of this loss, the very subversion of the order of the cosmos

without which there could be no constellations. This is not what Wordsworth dismissed as mere “disaster peddling,” but what O’Hara called a genuine “meditation in an emergency,” one confirmed by the poem’s final stanza. It is there that we find the poetry of poetry’s own departure. For it is only with the awareness that the spirit of Adonais has joined the company of the “Eternal” that the poem makes its radical reversal of the ideal and the actual, the abstract and the material and announces the project of its own embarkation: to call upon the breath of poetry thus invoked and set sail in his “spirit’s bark,” driven “far from the shore” of material, worldly actuality towards that ideal, *abstract* “star” that beckons from nowhere.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Knopf, 1971), 498.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 4: 1938-1940. Ed. Michael Jennings, trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 390.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations of Shelley’s poetry are from *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1993), 256, 259.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 248.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Leeman, *Cy Twombly*, trans. Mary Whittall (London: Thames & Hudson), 97.

<sup>7</sup> *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 423.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 186.

<sup>9</sup> I have developed this thesis of Keats’s weakness in my chapter on his poetry in *Art’s Undoing: In the Wake of a Radical Aestheticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 67-102.