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Twombly's Anatomy of Melancholy

After a while you wouldn't even be able to tell what it was I had painted exactly; it had rearranged itself very far from the familiar home truths. I didn't want it to seem melancholy – I can't stand pathos – but there it was, hopeless and crazily metaphorical, nevertheless still a leaf, abstract as it was. Rothko wouldn't have done it that way. Franz Kline wouldn't have done it that way. No one else would have.

Charles Baxter (2000, 87)

A spectre haunts the American psyche in this psychodramatic political season: the spectre of melancholy. Its face can be glimpsed in what Senator Obama has called the bitterness of citizens rebuffed by the harsh winds of economic modernity. But this was not politically correct, as his adversaries were quick to remind us. Bitterness is un-American in this best of all possible worlds, and Senator Obama's reference to the visceral anger of the US electorate is a sign of his incorrect condition. He is incorrect in presuming to characterize the way folks go about their lives out here. He is an elitist snob for naming their blunderbusses and that old time religion as their resorts from despair. Nobody gets away with implying there's something wrong with these decent people, much less calling them bitter. The happy face is the American way. And it's our way or the highway, as they say in the precincts of power.

Melancholy is not always already political, yet the proliferation of the word in literature both academic and popular must be considered a sign of the times. Except in maudlin oldies like *My Melancholy Baby* the word does not trip lightly off the local tongue. The conception of a collective condition exceeding merely personal distress rubs against the native grain, though pharmacology and marketing have made resistance to the organic issues involved seem pointless. The medicalization of depressive illness is established clinical practice, whatever its critics may say. For Horwitz and Wakefield, academic skeptics writing against the psychiatric institution, dysfunctional society is the real issue; individual reactions to it are local symptoms of general malaise. Such an objection can sound like a re-run of R. D. Laing's challenge to the ethical status of psychiatric intervention, a sort of *Politics of Experience* for professional social constructionists. Recent commentary suggests that the conversation has moved on, beyond any social theory that would insist on the primacy of the broken organic whole, into the plight of the individual subject living out the consequences of the crisis of modernity. »We are right at this moment annihilating melancholia,« observes a critic of the happiness industry, ruefully (Wilson 4). There is something millennial in the war on affective disorders long recognized under the name of melancholia. These have always been the province of the arts, and they are linked in the popular imagination to the modern artist's vocation. The suffering artist is the acceptable face of »this dreadful malady,« as the 1804 translation of Johann Georg Zimmermann's medico-moral treatment, *Über die Einsamkeit*, characterized the ailment we dare not recognize as such. The popular caricature of artistic abjection keeps the thing at a decent distance from our normal, happy faces.

The artistic temperament meets the scowl of history in Orhan Pamuk's recent reflection on Turkish *Hüzün*, derived from an Arabic root that appears in the *Koran*. Pamuk is involved in autoethnography in his memoir, in bringing the Turkish national experience into line with western ideas. *Istanbul: Memories and the City* represents an opportunity to consider our way of thinking about melancholia from a quite different angle of incidence. If such affective

conditions, indeed art itself, amount to a confession of the inner anguish of the rational subject, *Hüzün* brings us face to face with his childish distraction. »I amused myself with mental games in which I changed the focus, deceived myself, forgot what had been troubling me altogether, or wrapped myself in a mysterious haze« as a way of escaping his anxious family life. He goes on to »call this confused, hazy state melancholy, or perhaps we should call it by its Turkish name, *hüzün*, which denotes a melancholy that is communal rather than private. Offering no clarity, veiling reality instead, *hüzün* brings us comfort, softening the view like the condensation on a window when a teakettle has been spouting steam on a winter's day. Steamed-up windows make me feel *hüzün*, and I still love getting up and walking over to those windows to trace words on them with my finger. As I shape words and figures on the steamy window, the *hüzün* inside me dissipates and I can relax; after I have done all my writing and drawing, I can erase it all with the of my hand and look outside« (2006, 89). In this state of temperamental wandering the author is unplugged. His graffiti release him from anxiety, if not from the ordeal of bickering parents and broken empires.

As a cognomen of melancholy, Pamuk's conception of *hüzün* is profoundly redemptive. Inscription is the agency of the affected subject; he inscribes, therefore he is. Here is the modern artist at his work of self-expression. His cyphers on a windowpane are messages in a bottle put out to sea. They are not meant for reading, yet they signify through the steam of his distraction, in words and figures. Erasing the trace is a moment in his activity of signification, as it is in the monumental canvas of Cy Twombly to which I shall be returning. Such erasure is essential to making signs of disaffection, as it would signify the contingency of self-expression, of inscription, of the signifying monkey itself. What »can be inscribed can be erased, and through the window's pane a whole world of *hüzün* comes into view,« for »the view itself can bring its own *hüzün*.« The disaffection of the artist is the inside story of a world consumed with disaffection. His claim on our attention lies not in his singularity, as of a voice crying in the wilderness, but in his prescience. His interiority is what we are being driven to.

Melancholy is not a solitary phenomenon, an individual behind a window, even if is a solitary experience. »The Prophet Muhammad referred to the year in which he lost both his wife Hatice and his uncle, Ebu Talip, as *Senettul huzn*, the year of melancholy; this confirms that the word is meant to convey a feeling of deep spiritual loss. But if *hüzün* begins its life as a word for loss and the spiritual agony and grief attending it« (Pamuk 2004, 90), it would become a sign of transgression among his inheritors. One party considered it into a punishment for undue attachment to the world. Another, inspired by Sufi mysticism, involved a kind of inversion of this: being in the world at a distance from Allah kept *hüzün* at bay, and it is from alienation that we suffer in its absence: »If *hüzün* has been central to Islamic culture, poetry, and everyday life over the past two centuries, if it dominates our music, it must be at least partly because we see it as an honor« (Pamuk 2004, 91). The one attitude seems quite like the early Christian vilification of *acedia*, taking the afflicted subject as the culpable source of his own negligence, indifference, and chagrin (Prigent 2005, 23). *Ennui* aptly translates such a characterization of melancholy as moral affliction – even, according to Origen, as demonic. The second attitude corresponds to the romantic glorification of melancholy as a gift of spirit. Pamuk associates it with the gifted artist, in the modern Western way.

Against this background, he concludes that »the *hüzün* of Istanbul is not just the mood evoked by its music and its poetry, it is a way of looking at life that implicates us all, not only a spiritual state but a state of mind that is ultimately as life-affirming as it is negating« (Pamuk 2004, 91). Such a construction would help us understand Walter Benjamin's animus at the conventional, left-wing melancholy extolled by Erich Kästner. Yet his class analysis of the

petit bourgeois writer is impoverished by a lack of conceptual depth. For even in Baudelaire, Benjamin's secret sharer in the Paris of his mind, ennui is something more than the boredom of private life. The condition is morally ulcerous but also an incentive to inscription.

Something of the kind appears to be at work in Benjamin's figure of the labyrinth, associated in his *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* with the restless, constitutional *ennui* of the child that he was. This child would grow to become the writer who did for Berlin what Baudelaire did for the Paris of the Second Empire, and what Pamuk does for modern Istanbul. He put a rictus on its desolation.

What distinguishes the *hüzün* of Istanbul, as Pamuk construes it, is its collective habit. This is not a resort of solitaires, like the Oxford of Robert Burton, author of the protean *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). »The holy city of Byzantium,« as Yeats called it in his celebrated lyric, figures as an icon of the still »artifice of eternity.« Its stasis remains its salient feature in Pamuk's telling; here, »history becomes a word with no meaning« (Pamuk 2004, 103) as its old stone goes to bits, unremarked and uncelebrated. This is not a city of museums. Its inhabitants are consumed with »the *hüzün* of the ruins,« feeling keenly their loss of empire, embracing and even cultivating a local sort of desolation. Nerval described it once upon a time, full of noise and color and life. But the great poet of melancholia missed the real story here. In fact the grand tradition of French literary melancholy stretching from Montaigne to Lévi-Strauss is out of sorts with this empty, colorless desolation. For the modern natives of Istanbul, living in the weeds is a choice, and a social imperative – »*hüzün* rises out of the pain they feel for everything that has been lost, but it is also what compels them to invent new defeats and new ways to express their impoverishment.« Their community is a sort of death-in-life, to recur to another phrase of Yeats, channeling Coleridge, characterizing the gilded stasis of his poetic Byzantium as a Xanadu lost in time.

Suspended animation captures in a phrase the ghastly afterglow of empire lost. It haunts the writing of his modern Turkish forerunners, as Pamuk recounts their lives in art. All felt the burden of the French example, and of western cultural hegemony after the loss of their own, Ottoman civilization: »If they gave themselves to melancholic poems about loss and destruction, they would, they discovered, find a voice all their own« (Pamuk 2004, 113). But unlike Kästner and the other writers whose complacent melancholy Benjamin derides, the Turkish writers whom Pamuk describes did not resort to ironic tricks, distancing themselves from despair. Their melancholy of the ruins is a form of mourning for a lost homeland on the Bosphorus – »caught as the city is between traditional and western culture, inhabited as it is by an ultra-rich minority and an impoverished majority, overrun as it is by wave after wave of immigrants, divided as it has always been along the lines of its many ethnic groups, Istanbul is a place where, for the past 150 years, no one has been able to feel completely at home« (Pamuk 2004, 115). Their *hüzün* joins the poetic desolation of Poe to the collective experience of a lost golden age. Such writers thus became the voices of a haunted half-way house of national feeling. Pamuk's memoir assumes this burden in the postcolonial moment of a new century.

Melancholy is in the American grain; it is not a French import, some Derridean contraption front-loaded for deconstruction. The newer biographies of William James, founder of the US school of empirical psychology, make clear how deeply rooted in the experience of chronic melancholia his wide-ranging researches were. Henry James, the younger brother who observed his habit from childhood, produced compelling narratives of the afflicted personality. It is in the deeper context of well-worn cultural history that the spectral return of melancholy to the front of the American mind should be considered. For melancholia never went away; its domestic rediscovery is more recollection than epiphany. Popular

retrospectives of Edward Hopper, whose canvases dwell on the odd stasis, the death-in-life emptiness of American life, represent a recurrence to something strangely familiar. Melancholy is the right word for his way of seeing storefront displays, an old house along railroad sidings, a couple drinking coffee in the dull glare of nocturnal mean streets. The appeal of such canvases made them iconic, definitive of an undertow in what we recognize as American experience. The expressionist turn reached its apogee in the abstract art of the New York school, from late Arshile Gorky to Jackson Pollak. In their wake, Robert Rauschenberg, recently deceased, and his old studio-mate Cy Twombly took the expressionist idiom in quite different directions. Rauschenberg was the noisy innovator. Twombly kept his own counsel, took off for Rome in 1957, and earned wide recognition from cultural critics like Roland Barthes as a master of *diseño*, the virtuoso line.

A wall-sized canvas by Twombly hanging in a purpose-built pavilion by Renzo Piano, commissioned by the Menil Collection in Houston, bears the scrawled inscription »Anatomy of Melancholy.« *Untitled (Say Goodbye Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)* is the culminating statement of the artist's maturity: begun in 1972, it was first exhibited in 1994. In this monumental cenotaph, Twombly's painting displays phrases from Archilochos, Catullus, Keats and Rilke, as well as the title of Burton's famous tome, worked into the fabric of the composition, integral to the iconic content. It is the aching heart of the select permanent exhibition of his oeuvre at the pavilion, known as the Twombly Gallery (www.menil.org/twombly.html). The austerity of Piano's architectural setting, as well as the cunningly filtered Texas sunlight, makes this a site of cult, like the chapel containing the dark, final canvases of Mark Rothko, situated around the corner in the same urban grove of old oak. The setting is a modern Dodona, remote seat of the oaken oracle of Zeus, and it makes an evocative home for Twombly's enigmatic constructions. These disarm conventional vocabularies of aesthetic response, drawing attention to words and snatches of verse as points of association and recognition. Looking at them involves siting a phrase such as »Anatomy of Melancholy« in other dimensions – in lines, patches, figures, colors.

Verbal iconicity is not original to Twombly. The surrealists made the most of it, something visitors to the Menil Collection will be mindful of after viewing artifacts from that cohort on permanent display in Piano's elegant, hangar-like museum structure across the street. Anselm Kiefer is perhaps the best known contemporary working iconically with words, as in his magisterial canvas *Die Milchstrasse* (1984-87), hanging in the Albright-Knox Gallery. The inscribed reference to the Milky Way, extruded from a gaping wound in a sullen, wintry field, is jarring, hard to process. Neither ironic nor witty in the surrealist way, it would situate the bleak horizon in a universal sphere of light. Are we to consider this wintry desolation as a moment in a seasonal cycle? Is there nowhere to hide from such barrenness? The word emerges as an irruption in the closure of this empty field, rotting in place. The word enjoys a miraculous vitality in such a setting. Its association with the universal amounts to an escape hatch from enclosure in the overcast world of decay. Nothing overtly allegorical intrudes on the composition. The wires and fibers emanating from it call us back to our elemental confinement. Canvas is only fiber, after all.

Other Kiefer canvases and works on paper seem less successful in making words signify in this way. *Böhmen liegt am Meer*, one version of which hangs in New York at the Metropolitan Museum, dates to 1995-96. We are still in that rough field, our earthly home, though a path has been worked through it toward a low horizon; perspective is in play. At the top of the canvas are inscribed the words that name the painting: Bohemia by the sea, a geographical chimera. They appear outside its iconic structure, a visitation from on high, not an irruption from within. Verbal associations take us out of this wasteland, into Mitteleuropa

and off to the coast. Magritte's word games appear to be the real horizon here. Such an inscription can only be an intrusion into this *angewinteretes Windfeld*, in the phrase of Paul Celan, apparently unrelated: *hier mußt du leben, körnig, granatapfelgleich, aufgeharscht von zu verschweigendem Vorfrost* (2005, 260) – this wintered-down wind-field where one dwells like a pomegranate seed, harried by hoarfrost, coerced into silence. The lines are late Celan (30.5.1967), from the period of his confinement. Is Kiefer's verbal escapade meant to evoke something like a way out of such barrenness at the end of that footpath, where the words are? Melancholy acquires Heideggerean resonance in such sparse figurations of the something without and within. What is this elemental *something* here? Is it nothing much? What lies over the horizon, beyond perspective's convergence – somewhere over the rainbow?

Kiefer's desolate canvases of this period would help situate Twombly's nearly contemporary figurations of melancholy in a larger expressionist line, continental in origin, generational in its preoccupations. Like W. G. Sebald, the melancholy traveler who mixes his narratives with snapshots, these artists grew up in the shadow of the war that finished off Europe. The possibility of hope is at issue: how to give form to a longing for something outside the endless present tense? In its distracted strokes and scribbling, its erasures and replications, Twombly's *Untitled (Say Goodbye Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)* seems absorbed in the complexity of temporal duration. »Each line is now the actual experience with its own innate history. It does not illustrate – it is the sensation of its own realization,« as the artist described his constructive process in an interview of 2000 (Daigle 2008, 4). It could not look more different from Kiefer's bleak canvases, suffused as it is with modulated light rather than consuming darkness. There is something baroque in Twombly's handling of this cloudy element exploding into meaning. Its anatomy of melancholy has expectation written all over it, and not only in its child-like scrawl. This is melancholia as *otium*, as distraction and artless inscription in the manner of Pamuk's exemplum of *hüzin*.

Twombly's collaboration with Octavio Paz on a volume of poems is indicative of the literary turn of his later work. Paz would make this distinctive – »Some painters use words without meaning and only for plastic purposes: ironic, sardonic comments. In Cy's case, however, he uses words with meaning, as well as fragments of poems. A collaboration of image and words, not just form but also their meaning. It is rather new in modern painting, and I like it. It is a courageous way of facing the problem of painting. You cannot represent allegories anymore, you cannot paint meanings of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, or even the nineteenth century, but you can do what he's doing: an attempt to interrelate the words, the poetic word and the visual image« (Paz 1995, 261). That *problem* for modern painting is how the artist can make his iconic statement matter to viewers. Paz puts the problem in terms of abstraction in painting, considering Twombly's recurrence to words as a reaction against the inward austerity of abstract expressionism. Because the sense of relation to his viewer matters to him, he could not, finally, take refuge in such private icons. Collaborating with the poet meant exploring the possibility of shared meaning, on his own terms.

Writing of *Untitled Painting* 1994, Kirk Varnedoe, who curated a Twombly show at the Museum of Modern Art in this period, dwells on an analogy to Chinese scrolls: »Somehow the writing in that piece informs what is going on in the painting in a more resolved way than what had been happening up to that point. . . When I saw it, the first thing I thought was, ›Well, it's like a Chinese painting except it's backward. It's moving in the wrong direction.‹ But then going back, you know, you can read it in both directions: like the ships sailing up the Yangtze, facing the red cliffs, or the Egyptian barges moving across the Nile. Obviously Cy is pushing this thing much harder than practically anybody else in terms of having the writing inform the piece. . . I find that reading it really informs the rest of the image, to the point

where the way he works it, it becomes so much a part of the image; it isn't a distinct separate thing» (Varndoe 1994, 243). Reading is what such inscription invites; it points the reader in the direction of understanding, a matter of conventional meaning in language. Yet taking such a construction as a text misapprehends its essentially iconic nature, as Varndoe would imply. The dimensions of the piece, some sixteen metres long by four high, defy anything like so regimented an interpretive activity. It is a spectacular canvas, full of occasional detail, inscription and erasure: a palimpsest staged out in the open like a parade. Its protracted presence, too full for the gallery vision of the conventional museum, presumes a spectator, not a reader. We are invited to watch the show while working out the point of it.

Claire Daigle, writing in advance of the Tate Modern's momentous Twombly retrospective, echoes Varndoe's first impression of *Untitled (Say Goodbye Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor)* where she asserts that »the painting is to be read from right to left, like a Chinese scroll, marking the direction of Twombly's return over the Atlantic as it does the movement of soul boats crossing the Nile, the primary pictorial theme. The varied marks also weave as complex web of connections to myth, poetry, history, memory, conventions of painting and earlier moments in Twombly's career« (Daigle 2008, 8-9). This is fair summary of the iconography of a canvas that is too large to take in at a glance, or even a scanning, if we think of it as a scroll. Yet it misses the polymorphous animation of the display. The pictographic vessels are archaic, a matter of a couple of crossing strokes, drifting in the current of the painter's protracted present tense. My young daughter, with a fresher eye than my own, identified them instantly as boats – plainly enough, so it seemed, though soul boats like the meandering shallop of Shelley's *Alastor* are another matter. Daigle's commentary, informed by Twombly's personal investment in this supremely self-expressive work, expands on his elegiac title. This is a leave-taking, a transition westward, in the direction of mortality.

Spectacles are made for spectators, and the frantic figuration of baroque frescos in Roman *palazzi* provides a point of reference for painting on this epic scale. Such colorful displays typically refer to large mythological or historical subjects, crawling with pictorial details of a kind the ordinarily social visitor mostly passes by. In these ornate precincts, private *séances* will be conducted, business transacted, entertainments staged. Nothing much more than the allegorical referent will be taken away by such spectators, for whom the distraction of something to look at counts as, at most, subliminal pleasure. The austere chambers of the Twombly Gallery are a little like that, and not only because few visitors take the time before abstraction of this kind. We are just passing through; the air of hushed expectation encourages awe, not close reading. If the baroque riot of clashing reds, yellows, deep blues has given way to more subdued hues, it is because this is a Triumph of Melancholy, in the Petrarchan tradition of the lyric *trionfo* celebrating some ideal virtue in its triumph over its antithetical enemies.

What sort of virtue is melancholy? Albrecht Dürer's classic engraving of the brooding, female *Melencolia* (1514) has usually been considered in counterpoint to his figure of *Der heilige Hieronymus im Gehäus* (1514). The allegory is dialectical; Jerome is the pious scholar ensconced in his *studiolio* while Melancholy sits out in the open air, disconsolate, alone with her thoughts (Friedländer 1921, 144). The light surrounding Jerome is filtered through arching windows, while Melencolia broods in a sunset world over what appears to be a port city. Twombly's cloudy light belongs to this out-in-the-open expanse – *das Offene* as Hölderlin would call something of the kind, open to poetic imagination as melancholy is supposed to be. Twombly's *vademecum* to the shores of Asia Minor in the persona of Catullus finds a modern element for Dürer's city by the sea, an antique motif. Yet there is no real iconographic consistency here, no recurrence to standard forms because these have been lost, along with the

dialectical contrast between two figures of contemplation. If melancholy would be virtuous it will have to transcend its iconographic past to become something almost familiar.

Twombly's anatomy of melancholy might be characterized in terms of the *dying fall*, in the musical sense deployed by Shakespeare's love-sick Orsino at the outset of *Twelfth Night* (ca. 1601):

If Music be the food of love, play on!
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.
That strain again! it had a dying fall:
O, it came o'er my ear, like the sweet sound
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing, and giving, Odour!—Enough; no more!
'Tis not so sweet now, as it was before.
O spirit of Love, how quick and fresh art thou,
That, notwithstanding thy capacity
Receiveth as the Sea, nought enters there,
Of what validity, and pitch so ere,
But falls into abatement, and low price,
Even in a minute!

That dying fall is the melancholy note, a musical descent into pathos. Orsino's voice joins mortality to passion in a way that Shakespeare's melancholy Dane acts out in his fatal relations with his mother, and with unfortunate Ophelia. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* is essential accompaniment to this line of Shakespeare's work; its Third Partition, devoting some three hundred pages to Love-Melancholy, documents Orsino's morbid passion through the career of literary antiquity. Writing in Shakespeare's lifetime, within the orbit of antique textual traditions, Burton committed to public understanding the awful anatomy that is Twombly's announced subject.

Such an orientation, literary more than pictorial in inspiration, appears true to the painter's intention in his masterpiece. Elegiac but restrained in pathos, it recalls Keats's journey from the iconographic treatment of his ode *To Melancholy* to the more original affirmation of the natural process of ripening in *To Autumn*. A sea change envelops Twombly's figuration of the little boats sailing off into uncertain waters. Where they are headed matters less than that they are under way; their journey is westerly, but not into darkness. Beauty that falls (*Bellezza che cade*), as Giorgio Agamben has named the subject of a Twombly sculpture of 1984, responds to a formal problem: »How can we give form to broken and falling beauty? There comes a point on the creative journey of every great artist, every poet, when the image of beauty that he appeared to pursue until then as a continual ascent suddenly inverts and starts falling directly downwards, so to speak. It is this topical moment that finds expression in Twombly's untitled piece, in the cracking of the wood that, reversing its upward movement, falls back to earth right at the point where the scroll inscribes its Rilkean motto« (Agamben 2006, 14). The literary inspiration of the piece and its figuration of the fate of natural beauty look forward to several large canvases in the Twombly Gallery, and most of all to *Untitled* 1994, with its significant allusion to Burton's *Anatomy*. This would invite us to recognize melancholy as the affective equivalent of falling beauty, in the spirit of Keats's great odes. All that grows, ripens; full is an overture to fall. Aesthetic dominion involves the artist in an acceptance of the consequences of his maturing into the perfect stasis of art. Byzantium is not far off.

Agamben's exploration of Twombly's figural response to Rilke's tenth Duino elegy represents a claim for the integrity of the artist's imagination: »Such is Twombly's gesture in these extreme sculptures, in which every ascent is reversed and suspended, almost a threshold or caesura between an action and a non-action: Falling beauty. It is the point of de-creation, when the artist in his supreme way no longer creates, but de-creates, the messianic moment which has no possible title and in which art miraculously stands still, almost thunderstruck, fallen and risen at every moment« (Agamben 2006, 15). Seen in this way, Twombly is involved in finding figural equivalents for the lapse into melancholy entailed by the aspiration to art. The biographical sources of melancholy usually enlisted by his commentators revert to the Burton stage of explanatory adequacy, as if life were just like that. Agamben's way of situating Twombly dialogically, in a conversation about the deeper sources of aesthetic expression, conducted with the illustrious dead through their own enduring monuments, would insist on the triumph of art over the transitory experience of natural embodiment. That is to say, of the triumph of melancholy in a virtuous cycle of creation and de-creation, in the company of Keats and Rilke.

Twombly becomes something more than an arid abstractionist through such a conception. His devotion to painterly tradition is extolled by Reinhold Baumstark in his Preface to an exhibition catalogue from the Alte Pinokathek (2006) in terms that would make sense of the artist's inclusion in this Temple of Fame. What can account for pre-posthumous sanctification of the kind? »Although they were created only recently, his sculptures partake of that age-old quest to express absolute beauty,« effuses Baumstark. »The force of his symbols, the sensuousness brought to life by his shaping hand, and the weightlessness of the color white sheltering the banal objets trouvés and ennobling them with an aura of timelessness: All this serves to place his sculptures on an equal plane with the achievements of the Old Masters« (Baumstark 2006, 7). Fulsome exaltation of the eternal verities of aesthetic idealism sounds overwrought in the presence of the commonplace wooden boxes and spindles concerned. What's painting got to do with it? Twombly is no Rubens despite the baroque temper of his masterpiece. He is no Altdorfer framing history in the novelty of perspective. Beauty is so contested a concept that predinating the artist's mastery on a modern rendition of it is bound to ring hollow. Which beauty did he mean? For these are no water-lilies, and their occasional epigraphy joins their white shrouds to make a cemetery of beauty, if the term fits at all. The extension of standard concepts of the kind to aesthetic production in an utterly different register must be considered mystification. Twombly's devotion to the great art of the past is significant, but it hardly makes his constructions count in such company. The life-line provided by inscriptions in his later work leads back to the baroque preoccupation with moments of revelation, and the iconic structures within which they are embedded provide dramatic settings in a modern idiom. His art of mourning and melancholia stands as a monument to aging intellect.

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