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## Between Past and Present: Twombly at Boston's MFA

BRANDON JONES

ROUGHLY TWENTY YEARS ago during my time as a high school teacher in Boston's southern suburbs, I spent many summer days wandering around the Museum of Fine Arts—to different galleries, but never without a visit to those showcasing masterpieces of classical antiquity. I always commenced the procession through a dark, narrow hallway, detouring on a rightward loop through the Egyptian funerary collection, and then rejoining the narrow passage to another dark room with Greek vases, where I would check on red-figured Aktaion and on bilingual Achilles and Ajax playing board games before I angled into an almost hidden corner room with an Etruscan couple in tufa calmly laying at rest in a cool, quiet setting. I still recall vividly the change in temperature, humidity, even the scent of the air as I opened each door to each successive gallery.

Some years later, the company for which my father worked was commissioned by the MFA to install new doors within most of its galleries. With some acknowledged irony, my brother and I have since made holiday visits to the MFA during which we admire the glass doors, especially those that open smoothly almost as if a motor were propelling us into a world of ancient art; we also playfully grimace at those that slow our passage with a squeak or hinder our view with a fingerprinted film. Of course, my father's art was different from that of the sculptors, painters, weavers, and many others who are responsible for so much of what gives the MFA its true *raison d'être*. Yet, this unusual connection to the museum helps me appreciate the many ways that modern hands bear on our way of experiencing ancient art. They construct the doors which help preserve and provide access to the ancient past. Sometimes the passage or view through those doors is clear; sometimes it takes an extra umph or squint.

While most of the doors my father built remain throughout the MFA, my previous route through the Behrakis Wing yields a very different display of the museum's antiquities collections after renovations completed in 2009 and 2021, both of which brought an emphasis on explicit connections between the present and the ancient past. Themed galleries from the 2009 renovation included didactics on such timeless topics as daily life, drama, and drinking parties. The most recent renovation expanded the didactic mission, especially in the new Early Greek Art Gallery which includes themed sections on the body, burial, local identities, storytelling, and trade. In the same gallery, video of the seaside cliffs at modern-day Behramkale, Turkey projects against a wall, opposite reliefs of Herakles chasing centaurs and sphinxes facing one another from the architrave of the ancient Temple of Athena at Assos, or modern Behramkale. Throughout the Behrakis Wing, interactive video monitors focusing on pigment in sculpture and vase painting techniques, along with a looping video of student testimonials on antiquity's allure, aim to connect present and future visitors to the ancient past.

Just beyond the Early Greek Art Gallery's architrave from Behramkale, the Lubin Family Gallery now serves as a space for a rotating display of modern artistic interactions with the ancient world—the boldest instantiation of the MFA's mission to show past and pres-



Fig. 1a – *Untitled (Odalisca)*,  
August 1988 (1 of 6)

Collection Cy Twombly Foundation. ©  
Cy Twombly Foundation. Photograph  
by Mimmo Capone. Courtesy, Museum  
of Fine Arts, Boston.



Fig. 1b – *Untitled (Toilet of Venera)*,  
August 1988 (3 of 6)

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Fine Arts, Boston.

ent together. The gallery currently features three sculptures by Cy Twombly surrounded by Sally Mann's photographs of Twombly's studio in Lexington, Virginia. It serves as a teaser to the massive, temporary exhibition, *Making Past Present: Cy Twombly*, which has crossed the country from the J. Paul Getty Museum and will reside in the Linde Family Wing galleries at the MFA through May 7, 2023.

Visitors to the exhibition will immediately find a photograph of Twombly measuring up Constantine's colossal hand in the courtyard of the Capitoline Museum in Rome—just the beginning of Twombly's engagement with ancient inspiration, an important and unavoidable motif in his art and in the MFA's exhibition. Much like Twombly's work, the exhibition swings between antiquity and modernity, as select items from the MFA's antiquities collections are set amidst Twombly's art as a constant reminder of his ancient inspiration. One gallery, in particular, featuring *Venus and Leda and the Swan*, encapsulates the combination of ancient and modern, artistic disruption and fluidity. On one side of the gallery, the torso of a Capitoline Venus from the second century CE stands at center in front of four collages dedicated to the goddess, the central two from the series *Untitled (Toilet of Venere)* and the outer two from *Untitled (Odalisca)* (Fig. 1). Here, cohesion ultimately comes of the obstruction and separation, of the old and the new. On the other side of the gallery,



Fig. 1c – Torso of Aphrodite (Capitoline Type)

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Henry Lillie Pierce Fund.



Fig. 1d – *Untitled (Toilet of Venere)*, August 1988 (5 of 6)

Collection Cy Twombly Foundation. © Cy Twombly Foundation. Photograph by Mimmo Capone. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

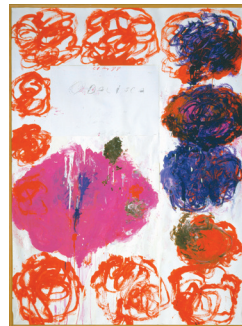


Fig. 1e – *Untitled (Odalisca)*, August 1988 (4 of 6)

Collection Cy Twombly Foundation. © Cy Twombly Foundation. Photograph by Mimmo Capone. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

the sexual theme continues, though the violence is ratcheted up, as the marble torsos of Leda and the Swan from the fifth century BCE stand before the aggressive graphite strokes of Twombly's *Leda and the Swan* (Rome, 1962) on one wall and his six-image series *Leda and the Swan* (Bassano in Teverina, 1980), trailing down another wall into the next gallery, as if words on Twombly's canvasses (Fig. 2). Such is the thoughtful curation and design of the exhibition. Educative placards further help guide the visitor, but those hungry for more food for thought will benefit from an engaging museum publication as well. The final pages of Mary Jacobus' chapter of the publication, for ex-



Fig. 2a (above) – *Leda and the Swan*, Rome, 1962

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest and the Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection (both by exchange), 1994. © Cy Twombly Foundation. Digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Fig. 2b (left) – *Leda and the Swan*

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Henry Lillie Pierce Fund.

Fig. 2c (right) – *Leda and the Swan*, Bassano in Teverina, 1980 (1 of 6)



Collection Cy Twombly Foundation. © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

ample, provide engaging analyses of these Leda paintings also with an eye to potential literary inspirations behind them, not least the poetry of W. B. Yeats and Rainer Maria Rilke.<sup>1</sup>

It was also with Rilke that Anne Carson opened and closed her January 29, 2023 Estelle Shohet Brettman Memorial Lecture at the MFA, “A Rustle of Catullus,” which brought the Latin poet together with Twombly by way of eight “paragraphs,” one for each letter in the Veronese poet’s name.<sup>2</sup> Carson teased that she didn’t know whence came a Rilkean earworm—“What birds plunge through is not the intimate space”—or why she decided to mention Rilke at all. I might hazard that the rest of Rilke’s poem applies well to Twombly’s practice, which seeks some essence by reshaping and retranslating things in space:

Durch den sich Vögel werfen, ist nicht der  
vertraute Raum, der die Gestalt dir steigert.  
(Im Freien, dorten, bist du dir verweigert  
und schwindest weiter ohne Wiederkehr.)

Raum greift aus uns und übersetzt die Dinge:  
daß dir das Dasein eines Baums gelinge,  
wirf Innenraum um ihn, aus jenem Raum,  
der in dir west. Umgib ihn mit Verhaltung.  
Er grenzt sich nicht. Erst in der Eingestaltung  
in dein Verzichten wird er wirklich Baum.)

What birds plunge through is not the intimate  
space, where forms intensify before you.  
(There in the open, you would be denied your  
self, and would fade away without a trace.)

Space reaches out from us and translates things:  
for a tree’s essence to matter to you,  
cast the inside around it, from that space  
in you. Surround it with a boundary.  
It won’t limit itself. Then, shaped by your  
denial it will really become a tree.<sup>3</sup>

Rilke's presence in Jacobus's chapter and Carson's lecture is a striking reminder of the importance of intermediaries. Reflecting on inspiration, Twombly once said that "ancient things are new things. Everything lives in the moment; that's the only time it can live, but its influence can go on forever."<sup>4</sup> While this quote and the very title of the exhibition emphasize the ancient past and the present, crucial is the survival through influence that takes place in the space between the two, through those who once but no longer in the present become part of a not-yet-ancient past, and whose influence goes on—the doors which preserve and through which we visit and see an ancient past; the Rilkes; and since his death in 2011, Twombly himself.

Visitors to the Twombly exhibit are likely to observe and experience some of what the MFA's publication describes as "visual conundrums," "creative tension," work that is "never transparent in meaning," and more than once by way of Barthes, a "bait of signification [after which] we are forced to retrace our steps and start out in another direction."<sup>5</sup> In her Brettman Memorial Lecture, Anne Car-



Fig. 3 – *Il Parnasso*

Promised gift of Ann and Graham Gund in honor of the 150th anniversary of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. © Cy Twombly Foundation. Image courtesy of the Gunds. Photograph by Greg Heins. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



son touched on the theme of “uncertainty” in Twombly’s work, returning to it in a later discussion of what it means to be “untitled.”<sup>6</sup> In the first of the exhibition’s galleries, one may encounter a bit of a log-jam where a video plays near sculptures from Twombly’s personal collection set before



Fig. 4 – Parnassus. Raffaello Sanzio. Vatican Museums.

a large photograph of those busts in his studio—the crowd of people amidst a crowd of objects and images will perhaps give the visitor the feeling Twombly may have had in his own studios, in which, as Jennifer Gross relays in her chapter for the museum publication, the clutter sometimes prevented the artist himself from seeing his works individually.<sup>7</sup> In short, Twombly’s art does not always make for easy viewing, even for its own creator. Yet, while one won’t find any glass doors between the several large galleries hosting Twombly’s work at the MFA, metaphorical doorways mediating between past and present abound in an understated, but most valuable contribution from the exhibition’s organizers. Here, I’d like to look at some of that intermediate space that “reaches out from us and translates things.”

A central piece of the exhibition is a promised gift from Ann and Graham Gund, *Il Parnasso* (Fig. 3).<sup>8</sup> In this painting, Twombly puts his hand to the mount which rises over sacred Delphi. The inspiration is ancient; in fact, Parnassus, the home of the Muses, is the epitome of ancient inspiration. The painting’s most obvious element is Twombly’s modern, abstract hand with its scribbles and splashes. But in between the ancient and the modern is Twombly’s model, Raphael’s *Parnassus* (Fig. 4)—seen particularly in the dark clusters of “trees,” the framing around a lower “window,” and a mostly vague arrangement of “poets, muses, and gods.” While Apollo remains at the center, the god appears in Twombly’s characteristic scrawl, circled and crossed out. Homer, one of Twombly’s favorite poets, appears again on the left in a striking deep blue amidst graphite swirls that might draw one’s mind to later various works from *Fifty Days at Iliam*.<sup>9</sup> Also on the left, below Homer, Sappho’s name, as in Raphael’s

painting, is maintained legibly—at least by Twombly standards—but the poet has given up her white and blue garments for a light pink and bright flesh-colored blotch evoking genitalia. Her color's effluence is the only one to drip downward—one of Twombly's ways of illustrating that ancient things' or, in this case, the poet from Lesbos' "influence can go on forever"—just as it had in Twombly's *Catullus* a couple years prior. But try to understand the painting without passing through Raphael and it is a great challenge to see how that ancient influence goes on.

*Il Parnasso* is the most obvious of Twombly's canvasses to call for viewing the ancient past via a Renaissance intermediary, but it is not the only one of that kind. In the top left corner of the final canvas of the MFA's exhibition, Twombly's scrawled "Issus" betrays his ancient inspiration for *Synopsis of a Battle* (Fig. 5), that is, the battle between Alexander III of Macedon and King Darius III of Persia in 333 BCE. The canvas's creation between 1968–1970, its title, and its appearance as a diagram of sorts will evoke for many the contemporaneous Viet-



Fig. 5 – *Synopsis of a Battle (ISSUS)*, New York City, 1968

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Gift of Sydney and Frances Lewis. 85.451. © Cy Twombly Foundation. Photograph: Katherine Wetzel. © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

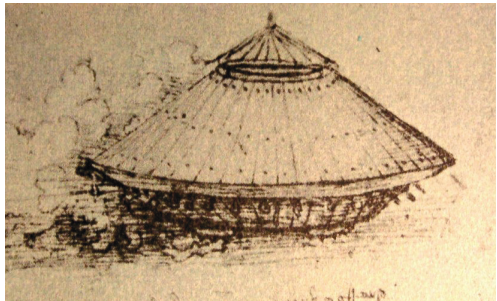


nam War. But the richness of the canvas grows in part thanks to new information which Christine Kondoleon shares in one of her chapters for the museum publication: Twombly's son, Alessandro, recalls Cy's model for the work being Albrecht Altdorfer's 1529 painting, *The Battle of Issus* (Fig. 6).<sup>10</sup> Many have already noted the likely influence of Leonardo da Vinci's *Design for a Fighting Vehicle* (Fig. 7) on the form and spatial distribution of Twombly's *Synopsis*. But one relevant feature of Altdorfer's painting, not found in da Vinci's diagram, is the anachronism of sixteenth-century steel armor that places the contemporaneous European-Ottoman conflict in an ancient background. Now, one will be hard-pressed to find such a clearly rendered anachronism on Twombly's battlefield. As Kate Nesin puts it in her excellent chapter for



Fig. 6 – The Battle of Alexander at Issus  
Albrecht Altdorfer. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

Fig. 7 – Design for a Fighting Vehicle  
Leonardo da Vinci



the MFA volume, Twombly's paintings "tend to court and evade legibility, whether of image or of text, by crucial, tantalizing degrees."<sup>11</sup> Attempts at reading the numbers and equations at a micro level in *Synopsis of a Battle* are doomed to leave the onlooker feeling like Tantalus. But at a macro level, meaningless numbers replace sixteenth-century CE soldiers who once replaced fourth-century BCE soldiers in a manner that is so powerful because of its evocation of continuous, anonymous death in battle throughout intermediate space and time.

Another ancient battle space occupied Twombly on several occasions: Thermopylae. If the coastal cliffs, or "Hot Gates" in northern Greece were a constant source of inspiration for Twombly, he found more than one passage to them, not unlike the Persians with Ephialtes' help. Three of the artist's approaches to Thermopylae are exhibited at different stages of the MFA's galleries (Fig. 8–10), each version maintaining motifs dear to Twombly: puns on his own name and thus a burial mound that one often associates with Greek t[w]ombs; (un)intentional conundrums and thus a burial mound associated with Thermopylae rather than the more obvious Marathon; and condensed phrases from poetry in which Twombly sought "the essence of something" and thus the marked coexistence of word and image.<sup>12</sup> But even amidst such motifs and the consistent image of the mound with its flowers sprung from death, Twombly finds that "essence of

something" in different intermediaries. At some unknown date, he scribbled a mound in pen below C. P. Cavafy's poem "Thermopylae" in a copy of his *Collected Poems* (Fig. 8). On August 16, 1990 he jotted down a line from Wallace Stevens's "The Poems of Our Climate" in graphite above a mound of wax crayon and acrylic and oil paint: "delight lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds" (Fig. 9). In 1992, he returned to his mound, this time in wicker and plaster later cast in bronze with patina, on which the very careful viewer will find Cavafy's poetry again: "Honour to those who in the life / they lead define and guard / a Thermopylae" (Fig. 10). The full final stanza of

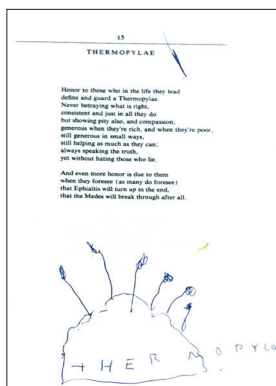


Fig. 8 – Page with markings by Cy Twombly from C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*

Collection Cy Twombly Foundation. © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Fig. 9 (above) – *Untitled*, Bassano in Teverina, August 16, 1990

Collection Cy Twombly Foundation. © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Fig. 10 (left) – *Thermopylae*, Meudon, 1992 (Edition 3 of 3)

The Menil Collection, Houston. Gift of the artist. Photograph: Hickey-Robertson, Houston. © Menil Foundation, Inc. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

the Stevens poem from which Twombly drew might help us understand Twombly's various returns to "Thermopylae":

There would still remain the never-resting mind,  
So that one would want to escape, come back  
To what had been so long composed.  
The imperfect is our paradise.  
Note that, in this bitterness, delight,  
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,  
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

We don't know when Twombly first marked up his copy of Cavafy's poems, but I cannot help imagining that it was before he turned to Stevens and, furthermore, that Stevens's poem subsequently called Twombly's "never-resting mind" to "come back to what had been so long composed"—Thermopylae's ancient past and Cavafy's rendering of it. The MFA exhibit smartly places these mounds at varying intervals, leaving us to approach Thermopylae, like Twombly, at different moments, from different directions, with different vatic guides.

If spatial arrangement—Raphael's, Leonardo's, and others'—served as an open doorway between Twombly's antiquity and modernity, then poetry—Stevens's, Cavafy's, and many others'—requires some pushing and pulling. We see this play out in another fine painting featured in the MFA exhibition, *Untitled* (Rome, 1989) (Fig. 11). Here, hanging literally and figuratively are some of Archilochus's lines, as they appear in Guy Davenport's translation:<sup>13</sup>

Hang iambs.  
This is no time  
For poetry.

Twombly inscribes them atop the canvas as if in a white sky. Beneath the fragment and its author's name is a complex marriage of light and dark blue, green, red, white, brown, and black acrylic paint, combined in a swell that leaves its central area appearing cavernous. It is not surprising that viewers have seen something of the wine dark sea in this painting. Some read more deeply and instruct us to place ourselves, next, in a Dionysiac frenzy, and then, in a state of *ennui* at alcohol-fueled social gatherings in Rome in the 1980s. I wonder if it is



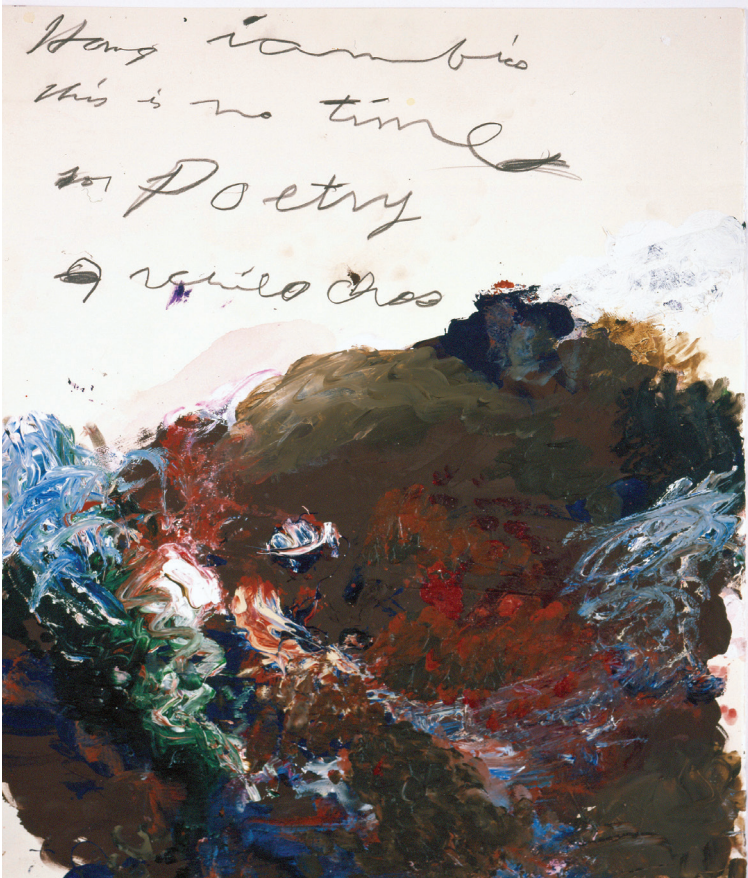


Fig. 11 – *Untitled*, Rome, 1989

Collection Cy Twombly Foundation. © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

possible that Twombly's intermediary was not, or not only, some Dionysian soirees, but Guy Davenport, or rather a drawing that Davenport paired with the fragment in his 1964 publication of Archilochian translations (Fig. 12). Notice the relative arrangement of the word and image in Twombly's and Davenport's pictures, and the celestial and marine contrasts: bird and fish, sky and sea. Twombly arranged his *Il Parnasso* and *Synopsis of a Battle* in the image of Renaissance intermediaries to the ancient world. Is it possible that Davenport sim-



ilarly served Twombly as more than just a translator of words here? Twombly and the MFA leave such doors open, encouraging us to let space reach out from us and translate things.

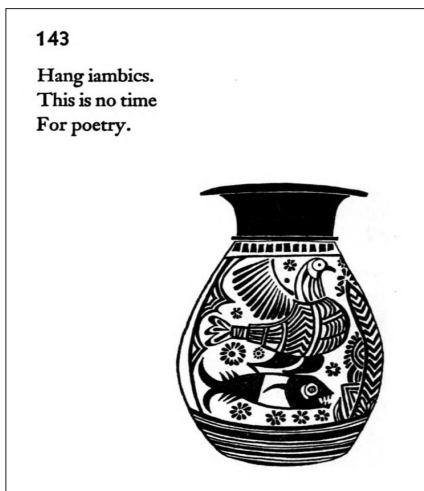


Fig. 12 – From *Carmina Archilochi*

Guy Davenport. University of California Press, 1964.

NOTES

1. Mary Jacobus, "Akephalos / The Headless One," in Christine Kondoleon with Kate Nesin, eds. *Cy Twombly: Making Past Present*. (Boston: MFA Publications, 2020), 97–117.
2. A transcript of Carson's lecture is printed at the beginning of this issue, but it does not include her informal intro and conclusion with Rilke from January 29, 2023. Part of Carson's lecture echoes some ideas from her chapter in the museum publication, also titled, "A Rustle of Catullus," in Kondoleon and Nesin, *Cy Twombly*, 227–32. I cannot resist pointing out that Carson, a visual artist herself, stood next to Twombly, so to speak, at least once before the recent MFA work when her essay on Homer, Moravia, Godard, and Bardot appeared in *Arion* 16.3, which featured Twombly's *Shield of Achilles* on its cover.
3. Rainer Maria Rilke, my translation.
4. Quoted in *Cy Twombly: Making Past Present* exhibition, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
5. Kondoleon and Nesin, *Cy Twombly*, 12, 33, 37, 138.
6. See pp. 4–6 of this issue.
7. Jennifer R. Gross, "A Return to Sculpture," in Kondoleon and Nesin, *Cy Twombly*, 189.
8. Surprisingly, the painting is discussed just twice and briefly (though insightfully) in the MFA publication accompanying the Twombly special exhibition.
9. On this series and other Homeric and Achillean themes in Twombly's art, see Brooke Holmes, "The Time of Achilles," in Kondoleon and Nesin, *Cy Twombly*, 205–25.
10. Christine Kondoleon, "Color and Line, Gods and Poetry," in Kondoleon and Nesin, *Cy Twombly*, 53. Such personal information gathered by Kondoleon from interviews with Alessandro is a particular strength of her chapter and the museum publication.
11. Kate Nesin, "Mountains Transfixed, Memory Unfixed," in Kondoleon and Nesin, *Cy Twombly*, 135.
12. Twombly, quoted in Nicholas Serota, "History behind the Thought" in *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*, ed. Nicholas Serota (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 50. Cited in Kondoleon, "Color and Line," 47.
13. It is likely that Twombly knew them from the 1964 University of California edition in which they run as Fragment 143, though they previously appeared in *Arion* 2.2 (first series), Summer 1963, as Fragment 5.