

Cy-zing Up Homer: Twombly, Translation, and the Trojan War

A dark crimson stain vomited across the canvas, thick clods of paint, a black bruise beginning to spread – along the bottom are scratched the words ‘The Fire that Consumes All Before It’. This signature scrawl could only be that of Cy Twombly, the American painter who divided audiences and critics alike. A victim of the age-old smear of “my kid could do that”, Twombly trod the fine line between modernism and a deep classicism, often turning to the themes of Greece and Rome for inspiration. His 1978 series ‘Fifty Days at Iliam’ was completed in a flurry of frenzied energy, brought on by Alexander Pope’s translation of the *Iliad*, and attempts to “translate” the passion of Homer’s epic into paint. I am loth to use the infuriatingly vague term ‘passion’ in relation to Twombly’s work – but this is, I feel, the best way to describe the series. The overwhelming impression it leaves on a viewer is that of unrestrained and painful vitality, as if one can see his process, imagine a depraved Twombly in the midst of a poetry-induced delirium. *Menin*, or rage, is the first word of the *Iliad*, and this is the force which pulses over the canvases of ‘Fifty Days at Iliam’.



Cy Twombly, *The Fire that Consumes All Before It*, 1978
Oil paint, oil crayon, and graphite on canvas
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

Critics like to call Twombly a “poetic” painter. He not only alludes to myth and classical literature in his titles, but often quotes whole lines or passages from Virgil, Ovid, Cavafy or Keats. Scribbled fragments of Sappho or Theocritus weave their way into the paintings, like relics washed ashore. But Cy Twombly’s quotations or allusions are much more than just an aesthetic affinity with a classical past; rather, he urges the viewer to find a piece of themselves in the verse. ‘Fifty Days at Iliam’ sees Twombly document the *Iliad*, a ubiquitous story yet still so distant to many modern viewers, while also managing to convey

the raw emotion of the epic. To some, Twombly's work is an affront to his classical themes, seen as pompous and self-indulgent. Yet, I argue that Twombly is a poetic painter in the same way that Homer is a visual poet. I wish to analyse Cy Twombly's 'Fifty Days at Iliam' – his most obvious confluence of poetry and visual art – as a dialogue between the artist and Homer, and thus, the literary heritage of Western civilisation.

The Space Between Poetry and Paint

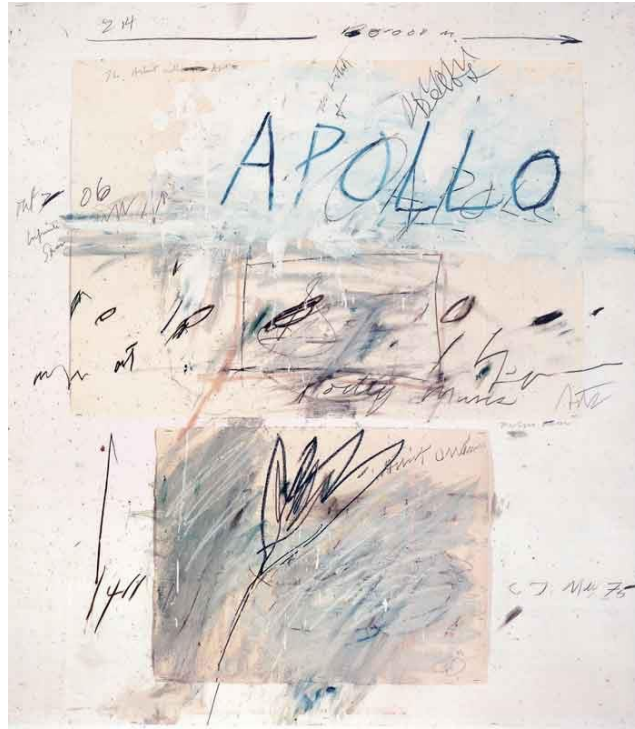
In the villa of Nicola Del Roscio in a small Italian fishing village, Cy Twombly's books can be found. Mary Jacobus gained access to these books for her dissertation *Reading Cy Twombly: Poetry in Paint*. The collection she describes is eclectic and jumbled, with titles ranging from George Seferis to Edmund Spenser. Flicking through the pages, they are completely daubed with paint, with chunks of text written over or completely crossed out. Jacobus likens the experience of fingering these pages to "overhearing the artist talk to himself".¹ And, indeed, Cy Twombly did talk in his paintings through verse, employing these words as a tool just like a bristle brush or scalpel. Through a mesh of seemingly incoherent scribbles will emerge the names Achilles, Agamemnon, Athena.

In the 1975 painting *Apollo and the Artist*, Twombly makes his artistic intentions apparent. The canvas screams the name Apollo in a bright cerulean, Twombly expressing his affinity with the god of the arts. Apollo was thought to inspire poetic rapture, bestowing the gift of poetry on a select few individuals – and Twombly counts himself as among those few. When Frank O'Hara first encountered Twombly's work in 1955 at his first major exhibition, he remarked that 'a bird seems to have passed through the impasto with cream-coloured screams and bitter claw marks'.² This account perfectly sums up how the line between sound and sight is blurred in so much of Twombly's work, asking of the reader: when do letters become drawing and scribbles poetry? After all, Twombly works literally with book in hand, "I never really separated painting and literature because I've always used reference."³

¹ Mary Jacobus, *Reading Cy Twombly: Poetry in Paint*, p.3 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016)

² Frank O'Hara, 'Cy Twombly' in Nicola Del Roscio, *Writings on Cy Twombly*, 34 (Munich: [Schirmer/Mosel for] Art Data, 2002). Found in Jon Bird, 'Indeterminacy and (Dis)order in the Work of Cy Twombly', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2007, pp. 486–504. JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4500075?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents>

³ Nicholas Serota interview, 'Cy Twombly: History Behind the Thought', 45



Cy Twombly, *Apollo and the Artist*, 1975
Oil paint, wax crayon, pencil and collage on paper
Gagosian Gallery, New York

‘Fifty Days at Ilium’ is Twombly’s most ambitious attempt to unify poetry and paint. The series, described by the artist as a “painting in ten parts”, follows the arc of Homer’s epic, the *Iliad*, translated by Alexander Pope.⁴ The series opens with *Shield of Achilles*, a whirlpool of concentric circles, spiralling into a red rage at the centre. It is fitting that this is the painting with which Twombly opens: the shield is the most pervasive symbol of the *Iliad*, representing martial bonds and Achilles’ indomitable rage, while Homer’s ekphrastic description of the shield is what led Homer, in the words of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “to be considered by the ancients a master of painting”.⁵ In Pope’s translation:

*Rich various artifice emblazed the field;
Its utmost verge a threefold circle bound;
A silver chain suspends the massy round:
Five ample plates the broad expanse compose,
And godlike labours on the surface rose.*⁶

⁴ Cy Twombly on ‘Fifty Days at Ilium’ for the Philadelphia Museum of Art
<<https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/85709.html>>

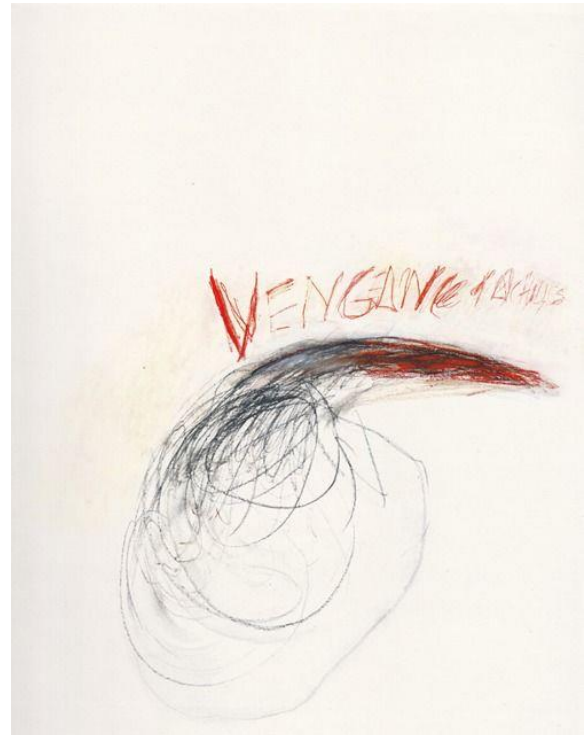
⁵ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, ‘Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry’, 1766, found in Mary Jacobus’ *Reading Cy Twombly: Poetry in Paint*, p.126

⁶ *Iliad* translated by Alexander Pope (xviii. 337-341)
<[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Iliad_of_Homer_\(Pope\)/Book_18](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Iliad_of_Homer_(Pope)/Book_18)>

The rich opulence of Homer's description has been rendered in *Shield of Achilles* as a mass of frenzied scribbles, invoking the sheer power of the most fearful of the Achaeans. Twombly sees himself in dialogue with Homer in the space between word and image, poetry and paint.



Cy Twombly, *Shield of Achilles*, 1978
Oil, oil crayon, and graphite on canvas
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia



Cy Twombly, *Vengeance of Achilles*
Oil, oil crayon, and graphite on canvas
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

Shield of Achilles swiftly morphs into *Vengeance of Achilles*. The circular icon grows a sharp tongue, a poisonous sting. The shield, the source of Achilles' power, now has a stabbing fury. Such symbols resurface in Twombly's work, appearing not merely in the iconography of the prick of *Vengeance of Achilles*, but even within the words themselves. The V of a scrawled "Venus" is open and voluptuous, while the A of "Achilles" – deliberately inserted into the title, 'Fifty Days at Iliam' – is a dagger, pointed and sharp, pricking anyone who dares approach. Thus, language itself becomes art, not merely in the manner of poetry, but as a *visual* currency. As John Berger articulates, Cy Twombly "visualises with living colours the silent space between and around words".⁷

⁷ John Berger on Cy Twombly found in Claire Daigle, 'Lingering at the Threshold Between Word and Image', Tate Etc. 1 May 2008

The Civilised Barbarian

When looking through the catalogue of Cy Twombly's paintings, with titles like *Leda and the Swan*, *Hero and Leandro* and *Primavera*, you would be forgiven for imagining the Arcadian scenes of Titian or Botticelli. But what we find instead are massacres, unfiltered and unhinged, paint hurled freely at a canvas or a phantom hand scribbling over a page, heedless of whether any of it is comprehensible. Cy Twombly's work infuriates people. Rosalind E. Krauss characterised the paintings as going "down the attack route which is that of the graffitist, the marauder, the maimer of the blank wall" – and yet, Twombly's classical themes are the furthest thing possible from an "attack", they are profoundly conservative.⁸ And so, an interesting tension springs up between Twombly's topic and his form, civilisation and barbarism.



Cy Twombly, *Leda and the Swan*, 1962
Oil paint, pencil, and crayon on canvas
Museum of Modern Art, New York

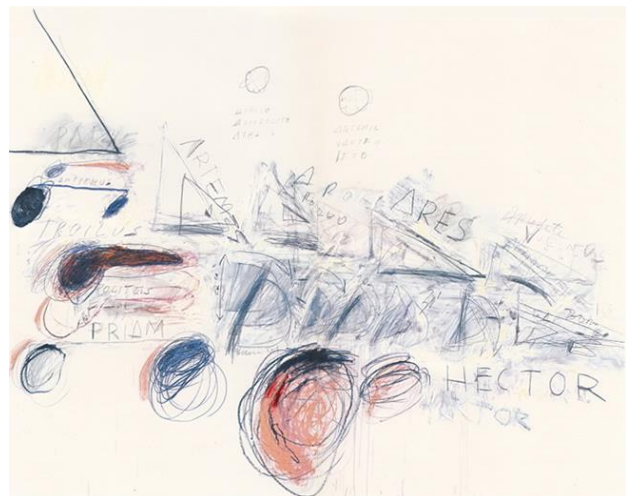
As has already been established, Cy Twombly was incredibly well-read. While at the experimental Black Mountain College, he followed Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading* which lays out an ambitious programme of study, in which a reader cultivates their appreciation and understanding of literature. He *cared* about poets and poetry, yet painting was, for Twombly, a primal and unhewn practise, apart from any concept of intelligence. In short, he taught himself to paint like a child again. In a similar vein is Twombly's attitude to his national identity. He moved from the US to Italy in 1957, aged 29, and stayed there, pretty much, until his death in 2011. He was a "European" painter – and yet, he is reported as saying that his hometown of Lexington, Virginia had more columns than all of Rome and Greece put together. Even with Twombly's classical subject matter – the pinnacle of "culture" – we find the same paradoxes. Is his decision to recount myths and epics a serious engagement with the legacy of Greece and Rome? Or, as Rosalind E. Krauss suggests, are Twombly's classical preoccupations merely irreverence, the doodlings of a bored schoolboy?

⁸ Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, p.259 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993)

The same undercurrents of savage and scholarly, civilised and barbarian run through ‘Fifty Days at Iliam’. The series was completed in 1978, in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War. Twombly sets himself the almost impossible task of translating Homer to image, but his “translation” entails none of the glory of the *Iliad*. Instead, Twombly is interposing American responses to a war no longer considered just: senseless murdering just for the sake of it. In the series, Twombly offers pictorial echoes between *Achaeans in Battle* and *Ilians in Battle*. The paintings depict opposing forces, yet there are striking similarities between the two. On one side, there are the Achaeans, a blur of brown and pink, with their supporting goddesses, Athena and Thetis, as onlookers. Once more, we find the circular icon of *Achilles’ Shield*. In the other corner, are the Ilians, assembling with all their forces to ward off the attackers. The dominant image in both paintings is that of the phallus. On both sides, phallic symbols thrust in one direction, driving forward with a feverish mania. The warriors of the Trojan war, so famed in Western culture, here are reduced only to penises. Twombly was convinced this is the most visceral expression of a man: “The male thing is the phallus, and what better way to describe the symbol for a man than the phallus, no?”⁹ The battlefield is littered with phallic imagery, as if all of the *Iliad* comes down to libidinal aggression and the male ego.



Cy Twombly, *Achaeans in Battle*, 1978
Oil, oil crayon, and graphite on canvas
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia



Cy Twombly, *Ilians in Battle*, 1978
Oil, oil crayon, and graphite on canvas
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

Similarly, with *The Fire that Consumes All Before It*, the Trojan War amounts to an accretion of red, the red of bodies, blood, weapons, rage. Twombly’s ‘Bacchus’ series, completed between 2003 and 2008 amidst the invasion of Iraq, picks up on the raw brutality of *The Fire that Consumes All Before It*. Red paint is flung against the canvas with the same careless abandon of the Bacchantes. The utter lavishness and unrelenting savagery infused into the paintings are fearful, Twombly told Nicholas Serota, “it was just very physical” – a mad

⁹ Interview with David Sylvester, ‘Cy Twombly’ quoted in Mary Jacobus, *Reading Cy Twombly, Poetry in Paint*, p.120 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016)

crescendo.¹⁰ In 'Fifty Days at Iliam', Twombly appeals to human savagery, impressing on the viewer that war, and the making of civilisations, is a barbaric practise.



Cy Twombly, *Untitled (Bacchus)*, 2008
Acrylic paint on canvas
Tate, London

In the Vietnam War and the invasion of Iraq, Cy Twombly finds the sequels to Troy. Mary Jacobus explains this preoccupation with war as a digestion of the major world conflicts of the twentieth century. Achilles, who “*From his fierce Eye-balls living Flames expire / And flash incessant like a stream of Fire*”, becomes the leaders of Twombly’s day, urging their people forward into battle.¹¹ The *Iliad*, the founding text of Greece and, by extension, of Western culture, has, in Twombly’s eyes, a barbaric essence. At the dawn of Western literature, there is only a torrent of red.

Shades of Eternal Night

As he mourns ancient killers and lovers, Twombly traces well-trodden earth. Interactions with the *Iliad* are no novelty, yet this is something that appeals to Twombly, he values the centuries of interpretations, revisions and re-evaluations under his feet. Roland Barthes outlines this as the key facet of Twombly’s work:

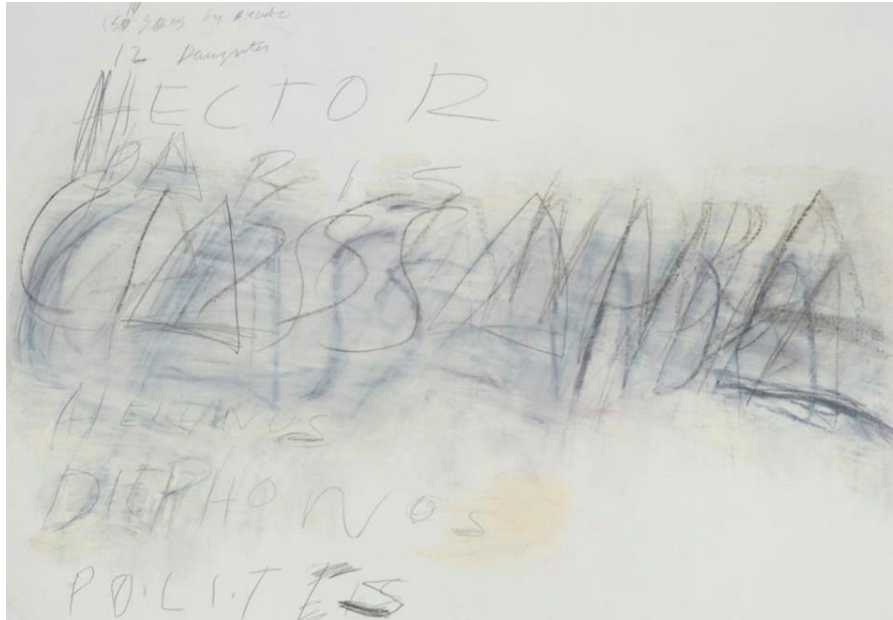
“No surface, wherever we consider it, is a virgin surface: everything is always, already, rough, discontinuous, unequal, set in motion by some accident: there is the texture of the paper, then the stains, the hatchings, the tracery of strokes, the diagrams, the words.”¹²

¹⁰ Nicholas Serota, ‘I Work in Waves’, The Guardian, 3 Jun 2008
<<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/jun/03/art1>>

¹¹ *Iliad* translated by Alexander Pope (xix. 21-22) <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Homer_-_Iliad,_translation_Pope,_1909.djvu/351>

¹² Roland Barthes, ‘Cy Twombly: Works on Paper’, 1979

In *House of Priam*, the names of the Trojans, a dead family, are scored into the canvas. They become like waifs, rubbed out and blending into each other, as if fading into obsolescence after the sacking of Troy. Cassandra, who famously was cursed with the gift of prophecy, is the most prominent among the names of the *House of Priam*. However, her name has been frequently erased and rewritten so that it becomes a nebulous shapeshifter. Here, present, past and future coalesce.



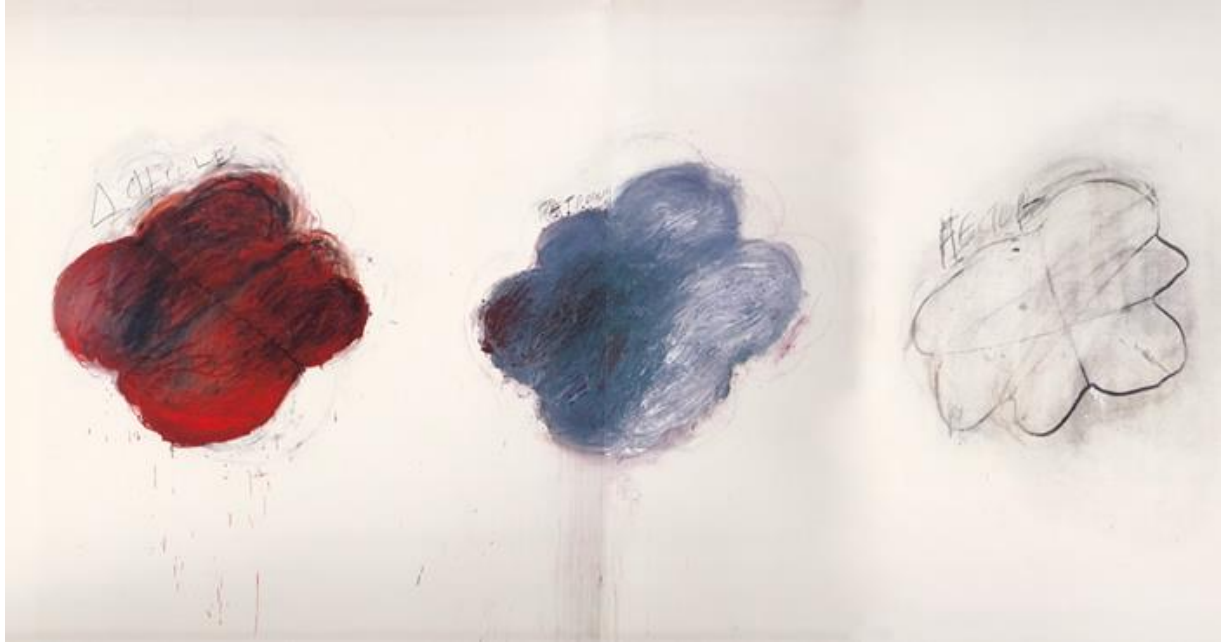
Cy Twombly, *House of Priam*, 1978
Oil, oil crayon, and graphite on canvas
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

Cy Twombly treated his paintings like memory. He uses paint as a kind of eraser, to the extent that thick layers of overpainting represent a sudden whim or second guessing. Sometimes whole pieces of text are obliterated, so that a peculiar tension arises between quoting something designed to be read, and a sudden illegibility. When Twombly writes names into his paintings, they become dislocated from their story, lost in a bizarre hinterland between ages. The viewer is prompted to see the heroes of the lost age of the *Iliad* walking among us. He confronts us with the humanity of those people whom we walk about as myth: Tu Hongtao relates how when asked “if his works had to do with historical stories and myths, he answered with a smile: “Only to do with sex”.¹³

In *Shades of Achilles, Patroclus and Hector*, three cloud-like forms are shown next to one another, each one labelled with a different name. The colours move from red to blue to translucent, as though they were slowly fading as shades into the underworld. The painting depicts the killed alongside their killer, almost like a food chain, yet each form is alike, as if they have become one in death. Twombly employs the “shade” motif liberally, the dead haunting ‘Fifty Days at Iliam’ just as they do the *Iliad* itself. The final painting in the series, *Shades of Eternal Night* sees the dark crimson cloud of *The Fire that Consumes All Before It* diminish to a listless grey pallor, the heat and passion of the *Iliad* gradually fading more and

¹³ Tu Hongtao on Cy Twombly for Lévy Gorvy, 2 Apr 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymCGjLyLGwk>>

more into the realm of myth. The “shades” of those at Troy are morphing into the forms we know them as. In ‘Fifty Days at Iliam’, Twombly draws an uninterrupted line from antiquity right up to his contemporary viewers, confronting them with a visceral way of *feeling* about classics.



Cy Twombly, *Shades of Achilles, Patroclus, and Hector*, 1978
Oil, oil crayon, and graphite on canvas
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia



Cy Twombly, *Shades of Eternal Night*, 1978
Oil, oil crayon, and graphite on canvas
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

Conclusion

With the signature, etched in his distinctive handwriting, Cy Twombly writes himself into the legacy of Homer. He is not necessarily painting for classicists, never demanding a rollcall of all those mentioned in the *Iliad* or a word-for-word recant of the catalogue of ships. In fact, if such knowledge or a classicist's explanation of the paintings were required, Twombly has failed in his mission of "translating" Homer. And so, I do wonder, faced with an essay like this, analysing his interaction with the classics, how he would react. Would he be laughing? Despairing? Twombly infamously hated interviews, complaining that "I spill my guts out on the paintings, and then they want me to say something about them" – so, in many ways, his paintings will always remain enigmatic, imbued with the complexity and ambiguity of the *Iliad* itself.¹⁴

In the triptych *Ilium (One Morning Ten Years Later)*, painted in 1964, we find a pre-figuring of 'Fifty Days at Ilium'. As if satirising those who dubbed his work as graffiti, Twombly marks the canvas with various indecipherable scratches: a heart, a phallus, a chariot, an arrow. Ten years on from its destruction, Troy is a desolate collection of forgotten memories, stray wisps of smoke woven together as old wives' tales. Each panel seems to reach out and ask: what was this all for, anyway? who were these men and women watching the decay of a heroic age? Thus, in his characteristic way, Twombly plays with a viewer's handle on time, overshadowing 'Fifty Days at Ilium' with a pervasive sense of downfall all the while. Just as we know the names Achilles, Agamemnon, Hector and Paris, we too, know of their deaths. 'Fifty Days at Ilium' is Twombly's contribution towards the memorialisation of the dead, not merely as names inscribed onto a canvas, but as beings capable of great love and great loss. Homer, Twombly's predecessor, closes the *Iliad* in this same manner: "*Last o'er the Urn the sacred Earth they spread, / And rais'd the Tomb, Memorial of the Dead*".¹⁵

¹⁴ Paul Winkler, 'Just About Perfect: A Recollection' in Sylvester and Del Roscio, *Cy Twombly Gallery*, p.26

¹⁵ *Iliad* translated by Alexander Pope (xxiv. 1007-1008)
<https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page%3AHomer_-_Iliad%2C_translation_Pope%2C_1909.djvu/450>



Cy Twombly, *Ilium (One Morning Ten Years Later) [Part I]*, 1964
Oil, lead pencil and wax crayon on canvas
The Broad, Los Angeles

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