

ONE
The Static Pulse

Perfection looked from the finical
panes of the mirror and said to him:
“There are names for images. You may call me . . .”
But the painter had painted another: his own.

—Rafael Alberti¹
“Velazquez”

Underlying, and indeed burgeoning within, every great work of the Abstract Expressionists . . . exists the traumatic consciousness of emergency and crisis experienced as personal event, the artist assuming responsibility for being, however accidentally, alive here and now. Their gift was for a somber and joyful art: somber because it does not merely reflect but sees what is about it, and joyful because it is able to exist. It is just as possible for art to look out at the world as it is for the world to look at art.

—Frank O’Hara
Robert Motherwell

All that summer I was writing the book, Motherwell’s *A la pintura* prints were on view in the gallery across the river. I read Alberti’s poem and crossed the footbridge often in the muggy heat. They were always there and never the same. Twenty-one prints, framed, hanging in a long hallway. Blue rectangles unmarked, barely shaded, on the first page and on the last, facing each other across the carpet. To read this book one must walk down the hallway and walk back again to where one began. Joyce would have liked the idea. The first blue rectangle is clean, “a la pintura” carefully scripted in the white space beneath it at an angle, like an autograph or an afterthought. The last blue rectangle is likewise scripted but less carefully and a larger white impressed area is smudged with sepia, just a little. On the sheets between these two blue fields, as one walks down the hall and back, the rectangle moves about the page, enlarging and contracting, changing colors and now marked by straight lines and angles usually, intersecting, suggesting other rectangles. But once, in red, in the middle, when the rectangle is at its largest, a figure threatens to happen, almost a Japanese ideogram in black, bold, curving,

suggesting, just once in this geometric series, brush strokes instead of the etcher's slash. The lines in the other prints seem to want to move, to vibrate, to make a sound. For this one moment they do, a blur of black on red, and the timbre is atonal, oriental, sharp, almost hurtful. Then things quiet down. The noise and colors fade, turn placid, almost arid, letting us out easily.

It's so simple really: the aesthetic of pulsation. It is the going in and the coming out that holds us. All musical instruments throb: the reed, the string, the skin, even the rigid metallic shimmering brass. The painter's hand going away and coming back. We study paintings to see all the little motions that make them. The sculptor's finger going in, pulling out, marking matter as human touched. The singer's breath, the dancer's leap. The same gesture. And the poet's breath as well.

But to turn around takes a constraint, something to impel the going back, even something so light as an idea. The significance of the middle is the moment when we wonder if the artist will let us out. If the artist doesn't, it is a violation of the agreement: polemic or pornography as young Stephen Daedalus explained it. We hold our breath. The flanking undeclarative blue fields, the nervous ambitious motions of the lines leading up and leading away. All surround the central fluidity of Motherwell's big black stroke on bright red. It is the boldest of the sheets, down there at the hallway's turning, and it's the one out of all of them that you remember: those lines of stark and urgent immediacy surrounding the florid ease of its middle. It's the still point, of course, when things burst into flowers. The going in, the coming out.

And what of Alberti in all this? His words accompany the walk in the hall. Same thing. On one end of his poem, a section addressed to the palette, a field, he says, the brush will glean; on the other end, a section addressed to the paintbrush, the wheat in its tassel. In between that board and these gathered bristles are the colors, but not the squirts of tubes on palette; these are the colors in the painter's eyes, the ones of the world and the ones in the paintings he loves. These are the colors he wants and the colors Alberti spends the rest of the poem talking about. Middles within middles within middles. As Wallace Stevens says about Mrs. Pappadopoulos, "She floats in the contention, the flux/between the thing as idea and/the idea as thing."¹

Black begins Alberti's catalog—solemn, funereal, yet handmaiden to fire as ash; "Cuando soy puro, cuando/soy tan total como una pared blanca (most purely of all,/intact and entire like the white of a wall)." White ends—abstract, intellectual, "Mi vieja historia es la pared (walls are my history)," and nostalgic. In between an aetherial, otherworldly blue and violent earthbound red. Apollo and Dionysius perhaps. And in the section on red something bursts out, like a feverish black brush stroke:

Como el clavel que estalla en los cenidos
marfiles de unos senos apretados.
(Carnation explosions, erect
in the ivory round of the tightening nipple.)

The emotional climax never happens at the end where we would leave the poem or the pictures warm from its passion. It is in each case in the middle where it can be controlled and all is brought back.

But why come back at all? Why corral the effusion when such reaction smacks so much of deliberation and the thwarting of the imagination? To turn around takes a constraint, something outside the thing to impel the going back, even indeed something so light as an idea. The fight in poetry between the camp of imposed form and the camp of discovered form, if such a fight still continues, is no real fight at all. Form is the constant, the kind of form is the variable. Why can't the discovered form be a conventional form? I have written rough drafts of poems giving little thought to their form only to discover that with a little tinkering it could be a sonnet or blank verse or even a villanelle. The question then becomes merely Do I want that kind of rigidity? The answer is usually in the poem and many times the answer is simply, Why not?

And here is a wonder: we have far more poets than judges and interpreters of poetry; it is easier to write than to understand it.²

If the form of free verse is somehow the form of nature itself, then one must turn away from poetic theory and, if possible, from language itself. But this continues to be language you are reading and I am writing. So the second thing is impossible. To do the first I think we need only shift our gaze a little in looking, still, at poems, at language. I think, for example, that the choice of images, those things of the physical world that a writer chooses either as the subject matter or analogical stand-in for an abstract idea, are manifestoes of formal constraint. To choose to write a poem about a painting, to continue the subject that began this discussion, is a limiting choice. To pick the tide of the sea or the stitch of a needle may be an even more limiting choice. But they all have limits and in most cases, they also have pulsations.

Metaphor would make the broken whole, whereas images flash and fall, fragments that cannot form.³

A few books on American poetry of the post–Lowell-Berryman-Roethke generation have tried to say something all encompassing: They are good books but books I would not care to have written. If I were of a mind to write a book that might try to make things coalesce I would like it to be like those books, informed, clear, graceful and committed to their theses. But I wonder. If all this talk about open form and the associational power of the imagination is true and relevant (and I think it is both) and if what I have said up until now about the wispy nature of form in these trying days is true and relevant, then one must question criticism that has as its aim some abstraction that can be logically apprehended. Perhaps the essential difference between theory and practice still remains, but it seems to me if the nature of the thing you are talking about radically alters, then the way you talk

about that thing must necessarily alter, too. For my model I would prefer something like Robert Hass and *Twentieth-Century Pleasures*,⁴ a book I am also glad I have not written. One of art's problems in the past has been that people with keen brains and dull imaginations too often have been the arbiters of taste and, worse, of method. The danger I run, of course, is that I am one of that kind trying to venture into work for which I am psychologically unfit.

I started out to say that poetry is an accomplishment beyond technique. Of course we always knew. Meanwhile, the Academy spoke of technique in one or two ways, the Black Mountaineers spoke of technique in another way, the Deep Imagists in their way, the Minimalists briefly, etc. Do you know why more and better articles about poetry don't appear? Because now that poetry is no longer written between the lines, the critics don't know what to say.

The critics have gone off into Structuralism, post-Structuralism, cartographies of misinterpretation, talk about semiotics and hermeneutics—which is to say they have left the scene. For American poetry this is a time of rapid growth not separate from profound cultural/political/psychological changes. It was probably necessary to get the critics out of town for a while, to have a period when one was seldom being told what it was one had done and could not do. With all the damn talk about particulars of writing nowadays, it's sometimes hard to imagine anyone doing anything new, but of course there will always be some who don't know any better.

—Marvin Bell⁵

I read the book reviews in *Poetry* and *The Georgia Review* and *Field*. They are fine, but not as touchstones for a book. They don't have enough space to address particular poems in depth so they tend to do two things: quote extensively and address the personality of the poet as it is exposed in the book.

Thus I take as my text some ephemeral epigram like Frank O'Hara saying that "it is just as possible for art to look out at the world as it is for the world to look at art." The gaze of the reader and the gaze of the writer from off the page meet in the air somewhere between them. The painting and the symphony are made up of similar collisions. Light, like Donne's eyebeams, bounces back to our eyes and whatever the poem saw "out there" bounds back to the page. As those whose sensitivity includes the irritant of neon know, light and sound are waves not seamless monads whose pulsations we try to ignore with our limited senses, creating through them the illusion of continuity and the comfort of corporeality, of things going in one direction only instead of all directions at once.

. . . nothing must stand
Between you and the shapes you take
When the crust of shape has been destroyed.

—Wallace Stevens

"The Man with the Blue Guitar"⁶