

August 3, 2015

Thank you, thank you, M., if I may use this letter as a first name. The M. of Ian Fleming vs. the K. of Franz Kafka. Or of the anagrams for Gylhmat, I like “myth gal” the best.

Thank you not only for treating my questions and comments seriously and compassionately, and not only for expertly weaving Bill and Billina – a Hamburg but precisely not a hamburger? – through your reply, an epic and master allegory we have here, and not only for going meta with me on the matter of seeing that one sees that one sees... Not only this x, y, and z, but also for falling even harder for Barthes. Below I’ll extend our thoughts a bit around the difference between playing a painting and playing a musical instrument.

Barthes would likely – and he does as much with Twombly – want to put us in touch with the hand, with the gesture. When Eros is at stake, in other words, always, the body comes calling. As he writes about the music one plays, just below the passage you cite:

It is the music which you or I can play, alone or among friends, with no other audience than its participants (that is, with all risk of theatre, all temptation of hysteria removed); a muscular music in which the part taken by the sense of hearing is one only of ratification, as though the body were hearing – and not “the soul”; a music which is not played “by heart”: seated at the keyboard or the music stand, the body controls, conducts, co-ordinates, having itself to transcribe what it reads, making sound and meaning, the body as inscriber and not just transmitter, simple receiver. This music has disappeared ...

Leaving aside the “alone or among friends,” which has disappeared, though the Order too, I suppose *is* only as it has disappeared, I would emphasize the sympathy, the bodily resonance given here as foundational. And if Barthes would authorize the analogy – elsewhere he does reserve harsh words for analogy! – to participate in a painting is to treat it as a score, yes, though not to be read, in the strict sense, but to be performed and be performed by it. Here I have great sympathy (that word again) for Elaine Scarry’s work on drawing and for the nascent and possibly silly work of our contemporary neuroscientists on mirror neurons. Her “On Beauty...” opens as follows:

What is the felt experience of cognition at the moment one stands in the presence of a beautiful boy or flower or bird? It seems to incite, even to require, the act of replication. Wittgenstein says that when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it.

The bird in this passage is too good to be true, especially if one imagine the bird could so stand in the presence of beauty as well. Not that Barthes, Scarry, and Wittgenstein should enjoy the same page: Scarry and the neuro folks literalize and reduce what Barthes would hand over to polymorphous and perverse compulsions. Still, the experiences of listening to the grain of voice, of feeling the grain of touch – as painters and crafts people talk of

touch – is to share, if only in fantasy (thus does Barthes write above, “as though...”) a body. And thus to be moved.

So, I wonder then whether it's enough to play or sight read a painting. Shouldn't one replicate it? Copy it? Move one's hands, wrists, elbows, shoulders, etc. The Hans Namuth film of Pollock painting comes to mind. How to include making and remaking, “the act of replication,” in the protocol? Doesn't it insist that Negation be an unmaking: “Unmake the work and self”? I would appreciate a version of Attending that likewise insisted upon making, replicating, handling. If only in this Barthesian spirit – or rather, since spirit and soul are to be neutralized, this Barthesian etiquette, his discretion.

Thanks for your time and attention.