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Drawing Acts

Studies in Graphic Expresssion and Representation

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CHAPTER ONE

Criticism, Connoisseurship, and the Phenomenology of Drawing

> . . . I feel my hand move, turn, join, dive, and lift, and often, through the act of correction, delete or expand a line, taking the space right up to the margin, thus constructing from the apparently functional lines of the letters a space that is quite simply that of a work of art. I am an artist, not because I am representing an object, but, in a more basic sense, because in writing my body knows the joy of drawing on and rhythmically incising a virgin surface (its virginity representing the infinitely possible).
>
> – Roland Barthes[1]

Drawing is the fundamental pictorial act. To make a mark or trace a single line upon a surface immediately transforms that surface, energizes its neutrality; the graphic imposition turns the actual flatness of the ground into virtual space, translates its material reality into the fiction of imagination. Disrupting the emptiness, the mark activates the surface, disclosing dimensions latent in its suggestive blankness. Together, mark and surface participate in a dialectic exchange of positive and negative values, shifting object–ground relations. Dividing the space of its field, a line releases the allusive or generative charge of the

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surface – ancient Chinese calligraphers spoke of "generative paper."[2] Out of this pictorial physics is born the full range of painting's possibilities.

But drawing is not painting. By drawing we generally understand a pictorial structure more open than that of painting. Drawing tends to cover its supporting surface only incompletely; the ground retains its own participating presence in the image, just as the marks it hosts, and which so transform it, retain their autonomy. Ambivalence is an essential and functioning aspect of drawing. More insistently than the brush stroke in painting, the drawn mark resists surrender to the mimetic imperative, to pictorial illusion. Painting generally tends to incorporate its constructive units within a tighter texture of representational pretense, complicated by the always more elusive workings of color. In its simplest form, a drawing can be a single mark or line, on any surface – stone, ceramic, cloth, parchment, paper.[3]

Developed more complexly, drawing can indeed approach painting in its representational fullness, but it will always carry the traces of its surface construction; even when heavily worked, it will reveal the processes of its making and, ultimately, the nature of the surface on which it operates. Between its reality as material mark (pigmented substance applied to a particular ground, or an incision of the surface) and its mimetic responsibility in the creation of the visual fiction of an image (its individual role as bounding contour or its contribution to the collective effort of modeling) the drawn line exists, like the surface on which it is applied, *in potentia*. As a graphic sign it is both self-referential and representational, maintaining its own identity even as it alludes to something beyond itself, the object of representation. This semiotic ambivalence invites the interpretation that is requisite for its very functioning: the active participation of the viewer in constructing meaning.

The drawn mark is the record of a gesture, an action in time past now fixed permanently in the present; recalling its origins in the movement of the draftsman's hand, the mark invites us to participate in that recollection of its creation. That invitation to the viewer, to rehearse the creative gestures in his or her imagination, is a distinctive aspect of the appeal of drawing.

The meaning of the mark is the object of these studies. My theme is the phenomenology of drawing, the complex interrelation of marking and meaning, making and viewing. Just what does drawing signify? How does it mean? How is it experienced? These are central questions to be considered in the exploration of the possibilities of meaning in the art and act of drawing.

In the abstraction of geometry, a line is the locus of a point, a length without breadth. Reading that definition in a more active mode, we say that a line traces the progress of a point through space. But such an abstraction must be reified, realized visually before it acquires meaning in art, and that, of course, is our concern. The line that interests us is a drawn line, an extended mark made by an implement guided by a hand. To that kind of line, abstract idea embodied, we can respond personally and directly – although our response, in turn, may indeed lead us back to the abstraction. For in viewing a drawn line we follow the record of a path of motion, and our viewing involves, on several levels, a trajectory of vision, the movement of our eyes, and thus of our body. But we also, and even primarily,

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respond to the particular qualities of the line: to the way in which it was drawn, the nature of the marker's tracing, its material, the weight and velocity of the hand behind it, the physiognomy and affective resonance of the line. To these qualities we respond through the imaginative projection of our own body; indeed, it is that projection that assigns such values to the line. All of this, the full range from making to response, is implicated in the phenomenology of drawing.

Within the disciplines of art history, the connoisseurship of drawings has developed an impressive and most venerable tradition. Combining the subjective sensibility of the evaluating eye with objective research into the historical conditions of artistic production, it has seemed to offer a fully articulated methodological model for study of the art of the past. Monuments to its achievement are the great catalogues raisonnés, compendia of classification, in which the corpora of master draftsmen are described, ordered, and discussed according to the categories and values that have shaped and guided the agenda of connoisseurship: in particular, authorship, dating, and function. But once the drawings of an artist like Michelangelo or Rembrandt have been catalogued, the creations of the master distinguished from those of his disciples and imitators (however such distinctions might shift from one generation of connoisseurs to the next), once chronology has been established and function within the context of production clarified – what then? Is there a discourse beyond the catalogue raisonné? If so, how is it to be continued? One of the basic assumptions of traditional connoisseurship and appreciation is that drawings offer us the most intimate documents of artistic creativity and personality, but what exactly do we expect them to reveal?

Although our aim is to extend the study of drawings beyond the limits of its conventional agenda, we must, nevertheless, at the outset acknowledge our debt to traditional connoisseurship. Indeed, the same phenomena that have guided the observations of the connoisseur provide the foundation for a deeper critical enterprise. The draftsman's choice of medium, the flow of his line and the characteristics of his touch, the distribution of forms and accents over the page: these are some of the factors that determine graphic style, the primary object of connoisseurship. In its open structure, the relative autonomy of its marks and their resistance to representational obedience, drawing offers the connoisseur the possibility of studying the fundamental units of pictorial construction, of discerning and articulating the processes of representation. Such apparent clarity of structure would seem to permit a comparable clarity of analysis: we should be able to distinguish, describe, and categorize individual marks and marking systems, to determine with a certain precision the constituent elements of a style, eventually assigning to that style a name, that of its maker. More readily than painting, drawing promises to reward close analytical investigation of its surface structure. And yet, however it may hold out the prospect of objectifiable conclusion, its inevitable appeal is to subjectivity of response. Bernard Berenson, for example, after arguing the attribution of a prob-

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lematic drawing to Michelangelo, developing his case on the basis of careful observation, finally abandons such objective pretense and concludes instead with an appeal to ultimate authority: the drawing is by Michelangelo because in his "heart of hearts" BB simply knows it to be so.[4]

1. Ancient Lines

. . . the boundary is a thing invisible.
– Leonardo da Vinci[5]

Although the connoisseurs of the eighteenth century brought a particular articulateness to the act of viewing, their effort was in fact the culmination of a very long history of awareness of the revelatory character of the marks of the hand. Certain truths about line had been established as axiomatic early in the Western pictorial tradition. The etiological myth of painting locates its origins in drawing, specifically in contour. All early accounts, as summarized by Pliny the Elder, "agree that painting began with the outlining of a man's shadow" (Fig. 1).[6] From that first primitive stage, of pure contour, art made steady progress toward tone and color. A significant step was taken when the daughter of Boutades of Sikyon, a potter, traced the outline of the shadow of her departing lover's profile (Fig. 2); her father filled in the outline with clay – the beginning of modeling.[7] Discovered in the tracing of a contour, painting developed out of drawing. And that etiology, no matter how

1. Joachim von Sandrart, *The Invention of Drawing,* from *Teutsche Academie der edlen Bau- Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste* (Nuremberg, 1675). New York Public Library.

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2. Joachim von Sandrart, *The Invention of Drawing,* from *Teutsche Academie der edlen Bau- Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste* (Nuremberg, 1675). New York Public Library.

melodramatically elaborated – as in the tale of the Sikyonian maid – proved technically more relevant and compelling than any competing myth.[8]

The distinction between outline and modeling – between schematic simplicity and tonal or chromatic complexity, surface reality and representational illusion – was to become fundamental in Western thought, with ethical implications that could charge aesthetic commentary with particular urgency. In line was to be found the essential truth of representation, the basic structure of idea, to which color could only add a superficial gloss of material nature, the appearance of a more contingent, less stable reality. Indeed, already in antiquity, in response to the full chromatic development of painting, there seems to have developed a sense of nostalgia for the primitive purity of linear expression. Associated with the sure measure of mathematics, with the proportions of creation, line appeals to the mind; color, on a baser level, appeals to the senses. This tradition, which runs from antiquity through the Middle Ages, serves especially in the Renaissance as the basis for a modern aesthetics based on drawing *(disegno):* "drawing," in the words of Matisse, "belongs to the realm of the Spirit and color to that of Sensuality."[9] The fuller implications of such an assumption find further eloquent twentieth-century expression in the words of the literary scholar Ernst Robert Curtius:

> Line is less material and more permanent than colour. It remains when colour fades. Colour is earthbound. Line reigns even in solar systems.

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> Line can say more than colour. It fixes the contingent truths of contour and the eternal truths of mathematics. It can link everything with everything, can rely on the unconfined freedom of the abstract and the unsparing devotion to what is at hand. . . . the metaphysics of line are an aspect of poetic beauty.[10]

In his history of ancient painting the elder Pliny celebrated two lines in particular, each standing for basic qualities that were to prove essential to subsequent pictorial appreciation and analysis. The more famous of the two, and the more problematic, is the line of Apelles: a complex affair that was the result of professional competition of the highest order, the splitting of lines with an admired rival. The locus classicus for all such professional anecdotes, the story enacts the fundamental assumption of connoisseurship, the identity of the artist with and in his mark. It is worth narrating in full:

> A neat story is told of him [sc. Apelles] in connexion with Protogenes, who was living in Rhodes. Thither Apelles sailed, eager to see the works of a man only known to him by reputation, and on his arrival immediately repaired to the studio. Protogenes was not at home, but a solitary old woman was keeping watch over a large panel placed on the easel. In answer to the questions of Apelles, she said that Protogenes was out, and asked the name of the visitor: "Here it is," said Apelles, and snatching up a brush he drew a line of extreme delicacy [*linea summae tenuitatis*] across the board. On the return of Protogenes the old woman told him what had happened. When he had considered the delicate precision of the line he at once declared that his visitor had been Apelles, for no one else could have drawn anything so perfect. Then in another colour he drew a second still finer line upon the first, and went away, bidding her show it to Apelles if he came again, and add that this was the man he was seeking. It fell out as he expected; Apelles did return, and, ashamed to be beaten, drew a third line of another colour cutting the first two down their length and leaving no room for any further refinement. Protogenes owned himself beaten and hurried down to the harbour to find his visitor; they agreed to hand down the painting just as it was to posterity, a marvel to all, but especially to artists. It perished, I am told, in the first fire of the house of the Caesars on the Palatine. Formerly we might look upon it; its wide surface disclosed nothing save lines which eluded sight, and among the numerous works by excellent painters it was like a blank, and it was precisely this that lent it surpassing attraction and renown.[11]

Pliny then confirms Apelles' stature as master of the line, observing that the painter "made it an unvarying rule never to spend a day, however busy, without drawing a line by way of practice; hence the proverb": *nulla dies sine linea* – which, centuries later, was to grace the title page of many a printed drawing book.[12]

Few passages in Pliny's chapters on painting have so exercised interpreters. From the Renaissance on, Pliny's tantalizing description has continued to frustrate crit-

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ics debating the exact nature of those famous lines. In the early Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti, who disclaims telling stories like his ancient predecessor, alludes briefly to the legendary competition. Lorenzo Ghiberti, finding it difficult to believe that so learned a painter as Apelles would have demonstrated his art by anything as simple as a straight line, decides that what must have been at stake was a problem in perspective, a worthy pictorial challenge according to the values of the mid-Quattrocento. Indeed, most commentators since Ghiberti have sought to interpret those three competitive lines in a definitely pictorial light, as in some way representational – whether subtle contour or chiaroscuro.[13] Such interpretations, however, as Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz observed, "deprive the anecdote of its exemplary content – which is nothing other than sheer virtuosity."[14]

With a single stroke of the brush, Apelles left a mark of his presence. In that line Protogenes recognized the identity of his visitor. The line is the mark of the artist: at once a demonstration of his skill and testimony to his authorship, it is both work and signature, and thus a declaration of his professional self; as an index, a pure trace, it is without representational responsibility.

The second line celebrated by Pliny, however, is charged precisely with such responsibility. This is the line of Parrhasios, a painter "unrivalled in the rendering of outline," and this, Pliny adds, was "the verdict of artists." The appeal to professional judgment, so often made by Pliny in his search for authority, confirms the particular challenge and fundamental importance of outline:

> This is the highest subtlety attainable in painting. Merely to paint a figure in relief is no doubt a great achievement, yet many have succeeded thus far. But where an artist is rarely successful is in finding an outline which shall express the contours of the figure. For the contour should appear to fold back, and so enclose the object as to give assurance of the parts behind, thus clearly suggesting even what it conceals.[15]

The line of Parrhasios, this mimetic contour, will indeed prove to be the great challenge to artists: the single line that seems to disrupt the flatness of the surface, subtly inflecting itself into space, disappearing behind its own horizon. This quality of the line – what Leonardo da Vinci will call its *serpeggiare* – stands for the complex potential of line itself, a mark at once created and creating. In such a mark resides the fundamental truth of pictorial representation, its most primitive aspect. Whatever progress may have been made since the first outline was traced around a shadow, the very priority of that original inscribing gesture claimed a special status. The sophisticated advances of painting, advances in illusionistic representation, could be seen only as a loss of original virtue, leading to nostalgia for that early golden age of pure delineation:

> In ancient paintings the scheme of colouring was simple and presented no variety in the tones; but the line was rendered with exquisite perfection, thus lending to these early works a singular grace. This purity of draughtsmanship was gradually lost; its place was taken by a learned

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> technique, by the differentiation of light and shade, by the full resources of the rich colouring to which the works of the later artists owe their strength.[16]

Like the conservative taste voiced by Dionysios of Halikarnassos, Pliny's celebration of the lines of Apelles and of Parrhasios testifies to an ancient aesthetic appreciation of the fine line, of the line as a test of artistic prowess.[17] Each of these lines, however, stands for a distinctive quality of marking. The line of Apelles is self-indicative; its reference is to itself, and, through itself, ultimately to its maker. The line of Parrhasios is pictorial, representational; although a display of art – and in that, of course, it too is self-demonstrative – its intended reference is ultimately to a notional reality beyond art. These two lines embody basic polarities of picturemaking: the mark on the surface and the illusion behind, graphic reality and representational fiction.

Whatever "exquisite perfection" and "singular grace" we may imagine informing the line of Parrhasios, the ultimate beauty of that line lay in its functional performance as a bounding line, its ability to inflect itself in space, to transcend and transform the flatness of the surface on which it was drawn – to become, in effect, one with the object depicted. The heritage of Parrhasios is renewed in those demonstrations of linear purity that mark the history of European draftsmanship, from the interlacing patterns of early medieval manuscript illumination to the elegant linearity of Gothic contour and the continuous traditions of drawing since the Renaissance – from Pollaiuolo, Leonardo, and Raphael through Ingres and Degas to Picasso and Matisse.[18]

Outline itself is an abstraction in nature, but not in art. Painters recognize that the contours imagined surrounding solid bodies have no reality in nature: "The outlines which show the shapes of surfaces of dense bodies are called contours and . . . do not have substance," as Leonardo declared, distinguishing the mathematical line from the drawn line.[19] But they also recognize them as necessary graphic fictions, essential to representation. The substance of the contour is itself the drawn line, the very materiality of the art. Its mimetic responsibility is realized in the act of being drawn, for the movement of the draftsman's hand is simultaneously a tracing on the surface and a probing of a world beyond.[20]

In the very character of the bounding line of the drawing we recognize the object, not seen but projected, imagined. Whether the line is sharp and even or irregular and varied, whether it rhythmically expands and contracts, whether its edges are neat or fade into the surrounding surface, whether its texture is smooth or rough, its trace continuous or broken, firm or tentative, thick or thin: such variables will inevitably inform representation, determining the quality or character of the object rendered as well as its relation to the ambient ground. Changes in contour – a thinning of the ink, a lessening of the density of chalk or crayon – may record the velocity of the drawing gesture, which, in turn, is measured over time as well as space, adding yet a further dimension to our experience of the line (Fig. 3). That velocity, moreover, may transfer to the depicted object, investing it with associated qualities, countering its own gravity and inertia. Or the kinesthetics may be reversed (Fig. 4). The draftsman's hand may move with slow deliberateness, or it may return to

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3. Edgar Degas, *Studies of Horses* (ca. 1866). Black chalk, 23.2 × 35.6 cm. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass. (1955.1391).

repeat its motion, thickening the substance of a line, adding to its material as well as visual weight; the resulting line might then brake its directional momentum, becoming by its very thickness less a directed trace than a spreading mark, an object in its own right. Such an expansion of its own inner field modulates the directional impulse of the line, effectively diffusing linear energy laterally, over a broader spread of surface. When a contour becomes so heavy, when it thickens across its directional axis, blunting its own momentum, we may speak of a "pictorialization" of the line – an extension into painting of the line of Parrhasios.

2. *The Desire of the Line*

> Draw a straight line and follow it.
> October 1960
>
> – LaMonte Young
> *Composition 1960 No. 10*[21]

Paul Klee opens his *Pedagogical Sketchbook* by introducing the concept of line as an independent force, a momentum: "An active line on a walk, moving freely without goal. A walk for a walk's sake" (Fig. 5). However apparently casual, this energy is directed: "The mobility agent is a point, shifting its position forward." In his sec-

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