

## The Last Glance

Mark Young

This moment, in the gallery, I stand  
in what must almost be the same  
position as you stood in your studio  
to cast the last glance that completes  
the painting....

**Your Fallen Orpheus** (c.1964)

Most, if not all, of the paintings I have used as inspiration for poems have been narrative; or, if not narrative, then figurative enough to have openings to draw words through. This does not imply that these are the only paintings that I like. Far from it. It's just that when it comes to writing into a painting, poems come easier when the idea for a subject is already there.

In my formative years as a poet I mixed mainly with painters. Poetry in New Zealand was Anglophile, & if it did look towards the U.S. occasionally, it was towards people like Frost or Roethke or Wallace Stevens. To me it was out of date before it was written, concerned with creating a national identity that I didn't identify with. Painting has always been about moving forward, being open to varieties of influence, shaping them as something new. & just as the painters I knew looked towards the U.S. for the new & the last 100 years of Europe for precedents, so too did I look towards the New American Poetry & the French from Baudelaire through to Prévert.

Because I was both comfortable with & stimulated by the medium, I often wrote poems about paintings in general, about specific paintings. Later I wrote about painting, worked as an art critic. My first book, in the late sixties, was about Modern Art in New Zealand. (What a strange term that now seems.)

When I moved away from New Zealand, I lost touch with both the painters I knew & with painting in general. I didn't replace them with anything – I lost touch with most things, even poetry. There was a brief spell towards the middle of the seventies when I came back to writing, & amongst that a small poem about a de Chirico painting that sits there – hangs there? – as if it were part of a collection where the absence of finance has meant only small paintings by major painters could be purchased.

Then another hiatus, twenty-five years before I came back to poetry &, eventually, poems about paintings. Magritte this time, started on a scratch-pad in a motel room just outside Melbourne. Three words. From which have grown two years of poems, currently over a hundred of them, & a blog dedicated solely to the series.

But I'm running out of paintings. I have around 700 reproductions of Magritte works across four books, but I don't like & do not want to write about those paintings from his *Vache* period, when he used Renoir as a stylistic influence; there are a large number of portraits, obviously done on commission; &, especially in his later years, Magritte would return to reproducing his earlier works, albeit with small variations, but these added nothing to the original pieces.

So, time for something totally different. A kind of trial, an abstract painting, to find what I can do, if anything, with it. &, to make it even harder, I decide to do a painting by Franz Kline, who worked mainly in black & white, with patches of grey in some. All lines & planes. I have no books to refer to so I search Google Images. Decide to cheat a little, have picked one that has a reasonable amount of detail in it. **Mahoning** (1), done in 1956. Print it out on my crappy printer, & cellotape it to the wall in front of me.

No books, so I do a bit of background searching on Google. Copy & paste a few paragraphs from various things I find. Not too much, because they might tend to lead where I don't really want to be led, but I need something to refer to, to be able to touch. It's a similar technique to that which I use to



ensure the historical accuracy of my *ficciones*.

It's time for the evening tv news, so I go upstairs, detouring via the front porch to have a cigarette. Halfway through the cigarette some lines come to me, seep through even though I am not thinking about any potential poem.

*It is a room  
not swept, gray  
in the corners.*

Then I remember part of one of paragraphs I downloaded, describing the painting as  
“....a zooming, dynamic hymn to American industrial muscle in (Kline’s) trademark,  
massive black-and-white, girderlike gestures.”(2) So I add

*No,  
not a room, those black  
swipes are girders.*

I finish my cigarette, go inside, jot down what I’ve got so far on the pad we use for our  
shopping lists, tear out the page & put in my my pocket, & go & watch the news.

After the news is over, & dinner’s made & eaten, I go downstairs again, after a cigarette  
of course, & open a new document & transcribe what I’ve written. It’s a start, that seems  
to be working towards, at this time anyway, a description of the piece. I look up at the  
painting & am reminded that one of my first impressions was of a railway trestle bridge,  
the kind you see in western movies. I continue

*Stanch-  
ions perhaps,*

breaking the word to bridge two lines, & then

*a bridge  
between*

decide I don’t like that immediately following on so insert

*or in  
construction.*

& make “A bridge” a new sentence & insert

*or bridge*

before “between”.

But between what? One of the pieces I copied for reference referred to Kline’s habit of  
using pages torn from a telephone book to draw his preparatory sketches. (3) Kline liked  
to give the impression that his paintings were spontaneous, like the calligraphy of the  
Japanese *sumi-e* painters, but they were, in reality, carefully pre-conceived, carefully  
balanced, a series of strokes of a precise thickness around a, usually invisible, fulcrum.  
They had an architecture, just like a building.

& buildings have tenants, & tenants have telephones. So we have a continuity, a transition, but it's almost the continuity that one finds in an Escher piece, where everything somehow returns to the point at which it started.

The end, then.

*Escher transition. Page  
from a telephone  
book, a number  
found upon it.*

In a sense what I end up with is a generic Kline poem. Which is perhaps wrong given that the painting has a specific title, not *Untitled #* as many of his works were or called after a particular aspect of the painting such as *Orange Outline*. It is named for a place about which I know nothing except that it's a place, & that information found by other references passed over in my Google search. Or perhaps it's the correct way to approach Kline, given this explanation in an interview Frank O'Hara once did with him ". . . you don't paint the way someone, by observing your life, thinks you *have* to paint, you paint the way you have to in order to *give*, that's life itself, and someone will look and say it is the product of knowing, but it has nothing to do with knowing, it has to do with giving. The question about knowing will naturally be wrong. When you've finished giving, the look surprises you as well as anyone else." (4)

### **Mahoning**

It is a room  
not swept, gray  
in the corners. No,  
not a room, those black  
swipes ~~are~~ girders. Stanch-  
ions perhaps, or in  
construction. A bridge,  
or bridge between.  
Escher transition. Page  
from a telephone  
book, a number  
found upon it.

(In the morning I came back & crossed out *are*.)

(1) Kline, Franz, **Mahoning**. 1956. 6'8" x 8'4". Oil on Canvas. Collection of the Whitney Museum of Modern Art.

(2) Sherman, Ann Elliott, **New York, New York**; *Metro*; Dec. 7-14, 1995.

(3) Southgate, M. Therese, **The Cover Section**; *JAMA – Journal of the American Medical Association*; June 2002.

(4) O'Hara, Frank, **Franz Kline Speaking**; *Evergreen Review* #6; Autumn, 1958.

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(The above piece was to have appeared in the ekphrastic issue of Crag Hill's print journal *Spore*, but circumstances forced Crag to discontinue the journal's publication. It was then posted to my now-retired blog, *Pelican Dreaming*, in January, 2005.

The final version of the *Mahoning* poem was included, as *Franz Kline's Mahoning*, in *Pelican Dreaming: Poems 1959-2008*, Selected and with an Introduction by Thomas Fink, Meritage Press, San Francisco & St. Helena, CA, U.S.A., 2008.

My series of poems on Magritte paintings now contains over 300 poems, & can be found on line at [mark young's Series Magritte](#).)

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Mark Young is the editor of [Otoliths](#), lives in a small town in North Queensland in Australia, & has been publishing poetry for more than fifty-five years. He is the author of over thirty books, primarily text poetry but also including speculative fiction, vispo, & art history. His work has been widely anthologized, & his essays & poetry translated into a number of languages. A new collection of poems, *Bandicoot habitat*, is out from gradient books of Finland.