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Rothko's deep darkness

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Abstract. The paintings of artist, Mark Rothko (1903–1970), are considered in their religious dimension. The essay pursues the significance of Rothko's words and works by moving from biographies and Rothko's own writings to sites Rothko purportedly loved (e. g., Fra Angelico's paintings at San Marco in Florence, Santa Maria Assunta on Torcello in Venice, Matisse's *Red Studio* at the Museum of Modern Art). Moreover, the essay seeks to illuminate insight into the meaning of Rothko's luminous panels (considering the artist's claim to "paint reality"), and the reasoning behind his idiosyncratic instructions for installing his works low to the ground and in groups. The context of the Rothko Chapel (Houston, Texas) is also considered. Rothko's Jewish heritage and education recall the "luminous cloud" of the Hebrew Bible, while his love for San Marco and Torcello evoke the all-encompassing beauty of historic sacred spaces. Perhaps in these images Rothko saw glimpses of the reality he sought to paint and discovered a way to display his work and communicate its reality most effectively.

Keywords: Mark Rothko, abstract expressionism, apophatic theology, sacred space, Rothko Chapel, art and religion, Bible.

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A version of this essay appears as the Afterword for a forthcoming collection of essays (working title, *Revisiting the Rothko Chapel*, edited by Aaron Rosen, to be published by Brepols in 2024). An adapted version of the Afterword also appears at "Chasing the Rothko Trail", ReligionUnplugged.com (December 7, 2022).

Глубокая тьма Марка Ротко

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Аннотация. Эссе посвящено религиозной интерпретации картин художника Марка Ротко (1903–1970). В исследовании анализируется значение высказываний и произведений Ротко путём выявления связей между его работами и его биографией в контексте любви художника к определённым местам и шедеврам. Это, например, картины Фра Анджелико в соборе Сан-Марко во Флоренции, базилика Санта-Мария-Ассунта на Торчелло в Венеции, «Красная студия» Матисса в Музее современного искусства. Автор эссе стремится реконструировать смысл светящихся панелей Ротко, учитывая утверждение художника о том, что он «рисует реальность», а также обосновать его настойчивые инструкции по установке его работ группами и низко к уровню земли. Специально рассмотрен культурный контекст интерьерной программы часовни Ротко (Хьюстон, штат Техас). Еврейское наследие и образование Ротко заставляют вспоминать о «светящемся облаке» из еврейской Библии, а его любовь к Сан-Марко и Торчелло – о всеобъемлющей красоте сакральных пространств. Возможно, в этих образах Ротко созерцал проблески реальности, которую он стремился изобразить, напряжённо думая при этом, как представить зрителю свою работу и передать реальность её содержания наиболее эффективно.

Ключевые слова: Марк Ротко, абстрактный экспрессионизм, апофатическая теология, сакральное пространство, часовня Ротко, искусство и религия, Библия.

Mark Rothko has long been the mid-century artist whose work I thought had the most to say about the human condition. By that I mean it was the work that seemed to communicate the dilemma, the tragedy, and the glimmer of hope of the 20th century, the century in which I was born.

It was a century that juxtaposed the monotony of material abundance in North America with the horrors of war and genocide, poverty and disease that erupted across the globe. Rothko, a reader of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, often said that tragedy was at the heart of human experience, that in solitude our deep loneliness was palpable[1]. And,

[1] Rothko cites or quotes Nietzsche and Kierkegaard in several instances. For example, in his "Address to the Pratt Institute" (November 1958), Rothko describes Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling as a "marvelous book" [Rothko 2006, 126]. In a fragment of an essay on Nietzsche and Greek gods ("Whenever one begins to speculate, ca. 1954"), Rothko describes the Birth of Tragedy by Nietzsche as having "left an indelible impression upon my mind and has forever colored the syntax of my own reflections in the questions of art" [Rothko 2006, 109; cf. Breslin 1993, 357]. Moreover, various Rothko experts have written about his literary influences. For

there, in that deep place, we long for something, for someone, to give it meaning, to make it better. That tragedy, that unquenchable longing in that deepest of places is what Mark Rothko set out to paint.

For me what started as research for a book I am writing on the ways Western art and architecture have embodied our longing for God, for a safe home, ended up in part as a study of the work and life of Mark Rothko.



Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea by Mark Rothko, 1944
https://religionunplugged.com/news/2022/11/3/the-rothko-trail

I started by reading biographies by Dore Ashton, James Breslin, and Annie Cohen-Solal[2]. The more I read the more fascinated I became. Rothko loved the places in Europe, especially Italy, that I love – San Marco in Florence, the old churches of Rome, Santa Maria Assunta on Torcello in Venice.

There is a route called the Piero Trail leading you from Arezzo through Monterchi to San Sepolcro, Piero della Francesca's hometown. For me there grew a Rothko Trail: the old churches of Rome, San Marco and the Laurentian Library vestibule in Florence, Santa Maria Assunta in Venice. Add to that the Tate Britain reinstallation of the Seagram murals and the Pace show in London of late works, mostly on paper, both in 2021. Layer on that the Rothko Room at the Phillips in Washington, D.C. and *The Red Studio* show at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) that closed in September 2022. And, of course, the Rothko Chapel itself.

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example, Anne Seymour has shown, ac-cording to the Introduction of Rothko's Writings on Art, that "among the artists of the New York School, Rothko was one of the most well-grounded intellectually; he was an expert in both Judeo-Christian and Greek tradition, and in the works of Shakespeare, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard" [Rothko 2006, xiv]. Dore Ashton's biography, in part, situates Rothko in light of Nietzsche's appeal [see: Ashton 2003, chapter 4, cf. 118, 119].

[2] See, for example: Ashton 2003; Breslin 1993; Cohen-Solal 2015.

Though I had been a Rothko fan for decades, it was focusing on longing for my forthcoming book that drove me to this artist in such depth.

Rothko insisted he was painting reality. He also insisted that his large paintings be hung close to the floor and in groups[3]. He was said to be fratchety and cantankerous about that[4]. The two went together. It mattered.



No. 5 / 22 & *No. 10* by Mark Rothko, 1950
https://religionunplugged.com/news/2022/11/3/the-rothko-trail

[3] For Rothko's perspective on 'painting reality', see the block quote from Rothko on page 3 of this article. Moreover, concerning why Rothko valued 'large pictures', see his 1951 remarks where he situ-ates his perspective in light of "people who are looking for a spiritual basis for communion". He said, in part, "I paint very large pictures, I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them however – I think it applies to other painters I know – is precisely because I want to be intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn't something you command" (from his 1951 "How to Combine Architecture, Painting, and Sculpture" in: Rothko 2006, 74). Addi-tionally, in his September 25, 1954 letter to curator Katharine Kuh, he writes about why he hangs the largest pictures: "so that they must be first encountered at close quarters, so that the first experience is to be within the picture. This may well give the key to the observer of the ideal relationship between himself and the rest of the pictures". Rothko goes on to say that he hangs "the pictures low rather than high, and particularly in the case of the largest ones, often as close to the floor as is feasible [sic], for that is the way they are painted" [from: Rothko 2006, 99–100].

[4] Multiple examples are documented by various biographers. For example, Rothko is described as 'demanding' and 'controlling' regarding how his work is to be installed, and even 'unwilling' to appear in group exhibitions (Ashton 2003, 130). Breslin says that Rothko's social behavior "varied according to the particular circumstances" and that he could be rather "touchy and suspicious <…> 'difficult', com-bative, explode with anger, affront with deliberative vulgarity, 'make a scene', threaten to sue, slash a painting" [Breslin 1993, 322]. Even when describing his relation to surrealist and abstract art, he de-scribes it in 'quarreling' terms, "as one quarrels with his father and mother recognizing the inevitability and function of my roots, but insistent upon my dissension; I, being both they, and an integral com-pletely independent of them" ("Personal Statement, 1945" in: Rothko 2006, 45).

As for the first insistence, Rothko himself had written this personal statement in the catalog for an exhibition curated by David Porter in 1945:

> I adhere to the material reality of the world and the substance of the things. I merely enlarge the extent of this reality, extending to it coequal attributes with experiences in our more familiar environment. I insist upon the equal existence of the world engendered in the mind and the world engendered by God outside of it [Rothko 2006, 45].

As I read and looked and thought about Rothko's work, it occurred to me that there might be yet another source for the luminous clouds that seemed to hover about to lift off from his canvases. As a forthcoming essay makes clear [Myers 2024], Rothko's education began in a cheder, an orthodox Jewish school in his hometown in what is now Latvia. For six years from age 4 to age 10 this young boy learned Hebrew, studied Torah, and worshiped with the Psalms.

Searching those sources with Rothko's images in mind was revealing. For one thing, deep darkness and luminous clouds suffuse the text. Genesis opens with it:

> In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters[5].

Reading on in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, whenever God appears, it is in a luminous dark cloud or a pillar of glowing fire. When they leave Egypt, the Children of Israel are led by a cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night. Clouds and darkness protect them before the crossing of the Red Sea. When God calls Moses to Mount Sinai to give him the Ten Commandments, frightening things occur. God tells Moses he will appear to him in a cloud so that the people will be able to hear God speak but not see him because seeing him they would die. Then in Exodus 19…

> On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.

The Psalms reinforce the image. This passage from Psalm 97 is but one example:

> The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad! Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around. His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles.

Whether or not the adult Mark Rothko was conscious of those images, they were part of the fabric of his education. The deepest realities are shrouded and we long to

[5] All scripture quotes from the English Standard Version (2016).

break through. But, breaking through can be dangerous. The clouds on Sinai were there to protect the Children of Israel from dying from being overwhelmed by the stark and penetrating brilliance of the light and power of the reality of God. I can't help but wonder if those childhood images played some even small part in the Rothko paintings that speak so profoundly.



Rothko Chapel with the reflecting pool and the sculpture 'Broken Obelisk' by Barnett Newman to honor Martin Luther King Jr.
https://religionunplugged.com/news/2022/11/3/the-rothko-trail



Rothko Chapel. Interior. Dark panels. Photo by Hickey Robertson.
https://religionunplugged.com/news/2022/11/3/the-rothko-trail

When I revisited the Rothko Chapel to experience the restoration, the thing that struck me most was the way these dark panels grew more luminous the more I looked. They became an enveloping presence. The overall hovering presence was both calming

and enticing. That made the flat black rectangle at the exit stand out more than ever before, no doubt as Rothko intended as we'll see.

That leads to Rothko's second insistence – large pictures hung close to the ground in groups.

On September 25, 1954 (his birthday), Rothko had written to the curator Katharine Kuh that he feared his paintings could become nothing but decorative features on huge museum walls. He continued:

> This would be a distortion of their meaning, since the pictures are intimate and intense, and are the opposite of what is decorative; and have been painted in a scale of normal living rather than an institutional scale. I have on occasion successfully dealt with this problem by tending to crowd the show rather than making it spare. By saturating the room with the feeling of the work, the walls are defeated and the poignancy of each single work had for me become more visible [Rothko 2006, 99].

Again and again, Rothko found opportunities to create groups of works and put them together – the works for the Harvard dining room, the Seagram panels that echoed Michelangelo's Laurentian Library planned first for a restaurant but finally landing in their own room in Tate Britain, the Rothko Room at the Phillips, the installation of his 1961 MoMA show, and, of course, the chapel commissioned by John and Dominque de Menil in Houston.



Rothko Chapel. Information table
https://religionunplugged.com/news/2022/11/3/the-rothko-trail

The Russian art historian Alexei Lidov has coined the term *hierotopy* to describe the creation of sacred spaces as an art form all their own [Lidov 2006]. Orthodox Christian churches are a prime example – the icons, the scent of the incense, the taste of the eucharist, the haunting strains of the chants, the touch of the vestments all work

together to create the space. Examples abound: Zen temples. Installation art works. Hindu ashrams. These are intimate spaces, public but private. It seems to me that Mark Rothko was creating just such spaces, intimate spaces in which to face the deepest questions of the human heart.

In his address to the Pratt Institute in November 1958, published in *Writings on Art*, Rothko said:

> Since I am involved with the human element, I want to create a state of intimacy – an immediate transaction. Large pictures take you into them… When I went to Europe and saw the old masters, I was involved with the credibility of the drama. Would Christ on the cross if he opened his eyes believe the spectators? I think that small pictures since the Renaissance are like novels; large pictures are like dramas in which one participates in a direct way [Rothko 2006, 128].



The Red Studio by Henri Matisse, 1911
https://religionunplugged.com/news/2022/11/3/the-rothko-trail

When I read that I couldn't help but think of Fra Angelico's paintings in the San Marco Monastery in Florence, a place Rothko visited more than once. Breslin recounts Robert Motherwell recalling how Rothko, being disgusted with the need for the modern artist to "steal a place on a rich man's wall," was impressed with the fact that in Fra Angelico's world art had a legitimate human place [Breslin 1993, 285]. The monk's frescoes were emanations of the sacred, often painted life-size, spaces integral with daily life. Looking at, say, Fra Angelico's painting of the Transfiguration, an image saturated with blazing white light inviting you in, I couldn't help but think of Rothko's own images. The painting almost compels you to enter it. It's purpose was just that – to take the viewer to the foot of Mount Tabor, gazing with Peter and James and John at the glory of God in Jesus Christ, to take you into another world, to the deep place where loneliness and longing might be both revealed and satisfied.

Rothko's challenge was to find a way to create such spaces in the 20th century with his own canvases. Matisse's painting *The Red Studio* had come to MoMA in 1949; it was a work Rothko contemplated for hours. The Italian writer Gabriela Drudi visited the Rothko in 1960 just after they moved into the brownstone on 95th Street. In a letter to Dore Ashton after the visit, she recounts Rothko telling his wife Mell what it was about *The Red Studio* that drew him to it:

> You asked: why always that and only that picture? You thought I was wasting my time. But this house you owe to Matisse's *Red Studio.* And from those months and that looking every day all of my painting was born [Ashton 2003, 187].

Breslin quotes Rothko with this further insight: "When you looked at that painting, you became that color, you became totally saturated with it," as if it were music [Breslin 1993, 283]. That is exactly what Lidov says happens in sacred spaces: Participants are no longer observers; they/we are part of the whole. Inside, not outside looking in.

Many have made the point that the Rothko Chapel harks back to the Church of Santa Maria Assunta on Torcello in the Venice lagoon, a space Rothko loved[6]. It is also a place I have visited every year but one since 1995. It compels me to return. The back wall is the world's oldest existing mosaic of the Last Judgment of its size and scale, the scene where Christ returns to judge the living and the dead forever, a sobering image as one leaves the church. But at the front in the apse the Virgin Mary holds the Christ Child in a shimmering sea of eternal gold. In Christ the Judgment need not be fearful but rather the door into the glorious home we all long for.

And, Rothko himself, the man who as a boy walked out of the synagogue never to return but who loved Fra Angelico's luminous paintings and the church at Torcello, I would argue, was striving to create such sacred spaces. He often described his work as creating a window or a door. Like Fra Angelico. But for Rothko those spaces take us to the question rather than the answer. They offer room and time to reach our own deep spaces. Room for the question of life and spaces to hope. As poet Robert Frost put it ("Desert Places"):

> They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
> Between stars – on stars where no human race is.
> I have it in me so much nearer home
> To scare myself with my own desert places
> [Frost 1979, 296].

At the Rothko Chapel the luminous paintings at the front echo that hovering, hopeful Virgin and Child and the blood red panel with a flat black rectangle at the back suggests that Torcello Last Judgment. Hope and the question, the question of life and of our own lives.

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[6] Commenting about Rothko's panels in the Chapel, Annie Cohen-Solal writes that "Though Rothko mostly rejected any analogy of religious art to his work, he did mention to [art patron] Dominique de Menil the strong impression the Byzantine church of Santa Maria Assunta in Torcello, near Venice, made on him. He had been deeply shaken by the mosaic of the Last Judgement over the altar <…> and the sight of the gold background Madonna and Child opposite the altar, in the apse. This was precisely the tension, between condemnation and promise, 'tragedy and hope', he sought to re-create in Hou-ston" [Cohen-Solal 2015, 189].



Last Judgment in Santa Maria Assunta on Torcello, 12th century
https://www.icon-art.info/hires.php?type=1&id=3723

There was no question that Rothko himself understood his work to be religious. He said so:

> I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on – and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I *communicate* those basic emotions… The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them [Rothko 2006, 119–120][7].

James Breslin recounts that Rothko called his paintings "'portraits' of the states of the soul" [Breslin 1993, 282]. Rothko himself often called them "facades" or "windows"[8].

[7] Breslin observers that Rothko "wished to be thought of as a religious but not as a specifically Jewish painter; that ruled out synagogues. Catholic churches were safe, since no one was likely to accuse him of being a Catholic painter, but no Catholic offers were forthcoming, at least not until John and Dominique de Menil came along with their Houston chapel a few years later" [Breslin 1993, 377].

[8] For further context, see Breslin 1993, 281–282. Moreover, in his Address to the Pratt Institute (1958), Rothko says that "Some artists want to tell all like a confessional. I as a craftsman prefer to tell little. My pictures are indeed facades (as they have been called). Sometimes I open one door and one win-dow or two doors and two windows. I do this only through shrewdness. There is more power in telling little than in telling all. Two things that painting is involved with: the uniqueness of clarity of image and how much does one have to tell. Art is shrewdly contrived article" [Rothko 2006, 126].

Those portraits, facades, and windows each in their own way hover over or lead to the deep places in each of us, the places where we face the secret of the cosmos shrouded in luminous darkness as the Torah and the Psalms describe. In order to experience them, to encounter and enter into them, those places need to be close, on our level. Mark Rothko intuitively understood all this. He painted the dark places that frighten us and yet draw us to them, the deepest places. Religious indeed.

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[9] An unabridged republication of the Oxford University Press edition first published in New York in 1983.