What do you think, you Higher Men? Am I a prophet?
A dreamer? A drunkard? An interpreter of dreams?
A midnight bell? A drop of dew? An odour and scent
of eternity? Do you not hear it? Do you not smell it?
My world has just become perfect, midnight is also
noonday, pain is also a joy, a curse is also a blessing,
the night is also a sun — be gone, or you will learn:
a wise man is also a fool.1

On the night of February 24, 1970, probably a little after midnight, Mark Rothko,
the Abstract Expressionist painter, committed suicide.2 It is the task of this paper
to suggest that Rothko, who was known to have been profoundly influenced by
Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music3, probably made the
decision to commit suicide long before its accomplishment and that the decision
was influenced by his understanding of Nietzsche. Further, it will be suggested
that, in his Houston Chapel paintings, Rothko “solved” the dialectical problem
that plagued Nietzsche, to wit, the tendency of the Apollonian and Dionysian
modalities to pressure each other into being. It will also be proposed that it is
likely that Rothko found, in painting as well as in his death, a means of stating the
synthesis between the two modalities which Nietzsche in his later work still chose
to call Dionysian.

Born Marcus Rothkowitz (1903, Drinsk, Russia) Mark Rothko’s family were
ardent Zionists. He received a traditional Cheder education with its emphasis on
Hebrew scripture and Talmud and the authority of the teacher4. After his
emigration to the United States in 1913, Rothko’s family moved to Portland,
Oregon. Arduous years of growing up followed the death of his father, which
occurred shortly after.

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for
Everyone and No One, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Baltimore: Penguin
2 Rothko had a telephone conversation about midnight. Lee Seldes, The Legacy of Mark Rothko
3 It has been suggested that because Rothko was so deeply transported by music, it was this
longer, original title rather than The Birth of Tragedy, that Rothko found compelling; see Dore
4 The ritualized structure of this experience may well have contributed to his adult “hatred of
invested authority,” as Dore Ashton, who knew Rothko for twenty years, put it. Ashton, 7.
It was most likely in Portland at the public lectures of the anarchist Emma Goldman that Rothko first heard discussions of the philosophy of Nietzsche. Rothko had the opportunity to enter Yale on a scholarship in 1921. Rothko’s own reading of Nietzsche probably began during his two years there, although rather poor English translations had been available since 1911.5

It was through his acquaintance with the work of Nietzsche that Rothko began to articulate his own sense of the tragic and the “direct knowledge of the nature of the world unknown to...reason.”6 Ashton, who presents the links between Rothko’s vision and Nietzsche’s more astutely and completely than does any other art critic, nevertheless does not extend those links to an understanding of Rothko’s suicide. Perhaps her awareness of the importance of the Birth of Tragedy to Rothko, Ashton passes on connections to other works, such as Thus Spoke Zarathustra. That this too, played a significant role for Rothko is suggested by a conversation that he once had with Ashton, in which he spoke of an introduction he had written, claiming that he was a “materialist”:

When I wrote the introduction to Clyfford Still’s catalogue for Peggy Guggenhein, I spoke of earth worms (primordial matter)—that’s far from otherworldliness?

In quoting this statement, Ashton notes that Rothko “resolutely resisted attempts to thrust him into categories that bordered on mysticism.” This is consistent with an earlier statement in which he wrote:

I adhere to the material reality of the world and the substance of things....I repudiate the denial of the material existence of the whole of reality. For art to me is an anecdote of the spirit, and the only means of making concrete its varied quickness and stillness.8

Chave notes that a friend recalled Rothko’s response to a remark that he must be a mystic: “not a mystic. A prophet perhaps—but I don’t prophesy the woes to come. I just paint the woes already here.”9 This painting of the “woes already here” was carried out on a large scale because, Rothko said:

...I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a

5 Ibid., 51.
6 Ibid., 54.
7 Ibid., 4. Rothko was referring her to the catalogue of Clyfford Still’s exhibition held at Peggy Guggenheim’s gallery Art of this Century, New York, February 12-March 7, 1946.
9 Anna C. Chave, Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 192.
stereopticon view or with a reducing glass....However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn’t something you command.\textsuperscript{10}

and in 1958, he asserted:

I exclude no emotion from being actual and therefore pertinent. I take the liberty to play on any string of my existence.\textsuperscript{11}

For, as Rothko said years before, in his now-famous statement of October 1949 in \textit{The Tiger’s Eye}, the paintings were dramas:

...the shapes in my pictures are the performers. They have been created from the need for a group of actors who are able to move dramatically without embarrassment and execute gestures without shame.

Neither the action nor the actors can be anticipated, or described in advance. They begin as an unknown adventure in an unknown space. It is at the moment of completion that in a flash of recognition, they seem to have the quantity and function which was intended. Ideas and plans that existed in the mind at the start were simply the doorway though which one left the world in which they occur.

....Pictures must be miraculous: the instant one is completed, the intimacy between the creation and the creator is ended. He is an outside. The picture must be for him, as for anyone experiencing it later, a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need.

....The presentation of this drama in the familiar world was never possible, unless everyday acts belonged to a ritual accepted as referring to a transcendent realm.

....The familiar identity of these things has to be pulverized in order to destroy the finite associations with which our society increasingly enshrouds every aspect of our environment.

Without monsters and gods, art cannot enact our drama....For me the great achievements of the centuries in which the artist accepted the probable and familiar as his subjects were the pictures of the single human figure—alone in a moment of utter immobility.

But the solitary figure could not raise its limbs in a single gesture that might indicate its concern with the fact of mortality and an insatiable appetite for the ubiquitous experience in face of this fact. Nor could the solitude be overcome. It could gather on beaches and streets and in parks only through coincidence, and, with its companions, form a \textit{tableau vivant} of human incommunicability.

I do not believe there was ever a question of being abstract or representational. It is really a matter of ending this silence and solitude, of breathing and stretching one’s arms again.\textsuperscript{12}


\textsuperscript{11} From a conversation with Elaine de Kooning, recalled in her “Two Americans in Action: Franz Line and Mark Rothko,” in \textit{Art News Annual 27} (1958), 174-179, cited in Ashton, 134.

This final paragraph will be recalled below, in the discussion of Rothko’s suicide.

Despite these early statements, Ashton observes that:

...The large abstract paintings that moved so many...could not be perceived as the work of a “materialist,” and there were times when Rothko himself alluded to their “transcendence.”

Pfeffer notes that for Nietzsche transcendence

...is not to the supernatural order but to “this world to which we must remain true”; this world of change and contradiction and tragic involvement.

It is the contention of this paper that Rothko was acutely aware of the paradox. Nietzsche had stated it thus in the words of Zarathustra:

I entreat, you my brothers, remain true to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of superterrestrial [i.e, otherworldly] hopes!

yet later in the “Song of Intoxication” says:

You Higher Men, redeem the graves, awaken the corpses! Alas, why does the worm still burrow? The hour approaches, it approaches, the bell booms, the heart still drones, the woodworm, the heart’s worm, still burrows. Alas! The world is deep!

The tension between remaining true to the earth and awaking out of it is central in Rothko’s paintings and it is the resolution of this tension, this writer believes, that characterizes the progression of Rothko’s paintings in the last portion of his career. Chave suggests that

He acquired from Nietzsche a vision of myth as “a concentrated image of the world, an emblem of appearance....” The mature pictures reflect ‘the expression of emotion,’ as ‘emotion turned into image...’[and] communicate Rothko’s deep concern with ‘the basic principle of all

13 Ibid., 4
16 Ibid., p. 329.
mythology’: the journey, ‘full circle, from the tomb of the womb, to the womb of the tomb.’”

Chave, in fact, makes powerful arguments to the effect that Rothko’s abstractions are “subjects,” and that they evoke the emotional experience of a Pieta or a Mother and Child. In fact, in 1943, Rothko himself referred to his “surrealistic” and “abstract” paintings as “portraits.” However, in 1958, by the time he had completed some of the paintings in the mural sequence for the Seagram commission, he could say, “They are not pictures,” and yet in 1961 maintain that his paintings were “portraits of states of the soul.” He had told Selden Rodman that he was neither an abstractionist nor a colorist and that he was “interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom.”

It was from this perspective that he was to begin work on the commission for the Houston Chapel, a work by which he would be profoundly challenged:

The magnitude on every level of experience and meaning, of the task in which you have involved me, exceeds all my preconceptions. And it is teaching me to extend myself beyond what I thought was possible for me. For this I thank you.

For Ashton, the chapel

...would fulfill his vision, expressed some fifteen years earlier to [William] Seitz that antitheses are neither synthesized nor neutralized in his work but held in a confronted unity which is a momentary stasis.

How then, are we to understand Rothko’s Houston Chapel paintings in terms of his interpretation of Nietzsche?

In the Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche presents the notions of the Dionysian and Apollonian tendencies and their fundamental significance in art:

....Every artist is an “imitator,” that is to say, either an Apollinian [sic] artist in dreams or a Dionysian artist in ecstasies, or finally—as for example in Greek tragedy—at once artist in both dreams and ecstasies; so we may perhaps picture him sinking down in his Dionysian intoxication and mystical self-abnegation, alone and apart from the singing revelers, and we may imagine how, through Apollinian [sic] dream-inspiration, his

17 Anna Chave, Mark Rothko: Subjects, (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1983), 27.
19 Ashton, 155.
20 Ashton, 167.
21 A response in the late 1950’s, as reported by Rodman, cited by Bonnie Clearwater in “Selected Statements by Mark Rothko,” Mark Rothko, 1903-1970, 73.
22 Letter to John de Menil, January 1, 1966; reprinted in Ashton, 176.
23 Ashton, 176.
own state, *i.e.*, his oneness with the inmost ground of the world, is revealed to him in a *symbolic dream image*.24

For Nietzsche, in the process of making art the artist is no longer an artist but is himself a work of art.25 The “Dionysian artist...has identified himself with the primal unity, its pain and contradiction.”26 Apollo, on the other hand, is the “divine incarnation of the principle of individuation,” who constructs the “appearance of the appearance, the beautiful appearance...and is thus freed from suffering.”27 In “shattering the individual,” Dionysus resolves the contradiction by “making us participate in the superabundance of unique being or universal willing.”28 But, as Deleuze puts it, “Dionysus is like the background on which Apollo embroiders beautiful appearances; but beneath Apollo, Dionysus rumbles.”29 Tragedy, then is the reconciliation of the antithesis of these two.

The nature of the Dionysian is revealed by analogy with intoxication, for among primal people, under the influence of a narcotic beverage the Dionysian emotions awake, and ...”as they grow in intensity everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness.”30 It is not insignificant in this regard that Rothko himself had relied on intoxicants, valium and, like Nietzsche, particularly chloral hydrate which seemed to enable him to sink into sleep.31

During the summer of 1966, Ashton reports that, as Rothko relaxed in Rome, having more or less finalized the plans for the Chapel, he listened over and over again to Mozart’s *Magic Flute*.32 Rothko, who understood his own paintings to be tragic, considered Mozart a tragic composer.33 It might be easy to assume that *Don Giovanni*, say, is more the tragic opera than *Magic Flute*. However, it is a premise of this paper that *Magic Flute* was indeed a serious part of Rothko’s preparation for the Chapel paintings. In Rothko’s view, the chapel was to be a union of East (*i.e.*, Eastern Orthodox) and West. The *Magic Flute* is an opera about pairs of opposites: male and female, dark and light, emotion and reason. The tension between (and the potentially tragic incompatibility of) these opposites is finally resolved by marriage, the union of the opposites with its promise that all will yet be well. Thus it is not irrelevant to the synthesis of the Dionysian and Apollonian that Nietzsche was to arrive at in his later work. Certainly, Rothko,

29 Loc. cit.
31 Rothko took the latter on the night of his suicide, Seldes, 99.
32 Ashton, 181.
33 Tate Gallery, 52
who had always responded profoundly to music, presumably shared Nietzsche’s perspective:

> Whoever gives himself up entirely to the impression of a symphony seems to see all the possible events of life and the world take place in himself...music makes every painting...appear at once with a higher significance, certainly all the more, in proportion as its melody is analogous to the inner spirit of the given phenomenon.\(^{34}\)

Long part of Rothko’s preparation for much of his painting, as well as for the chapel, were repeated visits to the Museum of Modern Art to see Matisse’s *The Red Studio*.\(^ {35}\) A prolonged examination of that Matisse work in fact evokes the peculiar Nietzschean concept of eternal recurrence, which is so important to the concept of the Dionysian mode as to have been called the “Dionysian faith.”\(^ {36}\) As Kaufmann defines it:

> The man....who has organized the chaos of his passions and integrated every feature of his character, redeeming even the ugly by giving it a meaning in a beautiful totality—this Übermensch would also realize how inextricably his own being was involved in the totality of the cosmos; and in affirming his own being, he would also affirm all that is, has been, or will be....”Thereupon Zarathustra related, out of the joy of the Übermensch, the secret that all recurs.”\(^ {37}\)

Kaufmann continues by quoting Nietzsche’s explanation of the relation between joy and eternal recurrence:

> Pain, too, is a joy....All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored...Eternal ones, love it eternally and evermore...do learn this, joy wants eternity. Joy wants the eternity of all things, wants deep, wants deep eternity!\(^ {38}\)

In examining Matisse’s *The Red Studio*, one finds that those objects that appear to have life, include, not surprisingly, paintings and sculptures. A plant, an empty wineglass (*i.e* awaiting the fulfillment of its purpose), drawing pencils, a plate and an empty picture frame (also awaiting their fulfillment). A particular object need not be beautiful, because the artist, in this case Matisse, has “organized his passions” and therefore every object is integrated in the beauty of the whole. The items of furniture which appear only in faint

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\(^{34}\) Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 102.

\(^{35}\) Ashton, 112-115. As he was later to remind his wife, Mell: “from those months and that looking every day all of my painting was born.” Reported by Gabriella Drudi who visited Rothko in 1950, Ashton, 187.


outline, are objects that one might say have no power to transform or illuminate, which are devoid of passion even in their potential.

Rothko was often deeply depressed, he was estranged from his wife, had few friends whom he felt he could consistently trust, felt unappreciated; had severe medical problems (gout, high blood pressure, an aortic aneurysm); and was beleaguered by those who sought to take financial advantage of him. Suicide is often anger turned inward. A month or so before his suicide, during a particularly difficult depression, Rothko had told Katharine Kuh:

I just don’t know what to do about it all. The best thing would be to do away with myself. They would all be better off if I was dead.

Nevertheless, on the day of his suicide, Rothko had received a positive report from his doctor indicating that his blood pressure was nicely under control and that he could expect to live a normal life span. A perfectly acceptable psychological explanation can perhaps be formulated for his suicide, but examination makes it clear that the actual decision and method had additional profound philosophical implications for Rothko, and were not spur-of-the-moment, or the end results of a deepening depression. Even the fact of the “good news” concerning his medical condition may have signaled that this was the time to proceed with the determination of his own life span. Through Zarathustra Nietzsche had proclaimed:

Die at the right time!....Everyone treats death as an important matter: but as yet, death is not a festival.... The man consummating his life dies his death triumphantly.... I commend to you my sort of death, voluntary death that comes to me because I wish it.

In the period after his aneurysm (for which he was hospitalized in 1968), he had been unable to work with canvas, and was restricted to working on paper. This surely contributed to his anticipation of a period when he might be totally incapacitated as a painter. Better not to die “too late.” “For many a man,” says Nietzsche, “never becomes sweet, he rots even in the summer. It is cowardice that keeps him fastened to his branch.” Would it not be far better to heed

39 Nietzsche’s Zarathustra reminds us that “all suppressed truths become poisonous.” Thus Spake Zarathustra, 139.
40 Seldes, 98.
41 Seldes, 102-103. For a discussion of the lack of clear communication between Rothko’s physicians, see Lester, David, “Disagreement Between Therapists and Subsequent Suicide of the Patient,” Psychological Reports, 1989, 64, 104-106.
42 Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 97.
44 Ibid., 98.
Zarathustra: “In your death, your spirit and your virtue should still glow like a sunset, glow around the earth...”

For Rothko, the tragic understanding of life had long informed his art. For instance, Ashton reports:

In 1956 when he still worked in a cramped room and could never have more than one or two of his large canvases visible, he used to keep one of his earliest huge abstractions, *Number 22, 1949*, against a wall in a narrow storage area. This early essay into a kind of limitless space, with huge areas of floating yellow and orange, interrupted only by a red band straddling the canvas from side to side, shocked unaccustomed eyes. Rothko had not quite reached the ambiguity he would shortly perfect and, to call attention to the picture plane and its function as the final determinant of the image, he had scored the rectangular red form with scraped lines. This painting, he said, with its large area of yellow and its bright red was perceived by most people as optimistic. But, he emphasized, “it is tragedy instead.”

As an art therapist, this writer can easily see, in retrospect, that this particular painting graphically, if semi-consciously, prefigured the method of Rothko’s suicide twenty-one years later. Rothko efficiently committed suicide by slashing his brachial arteries. He accomplished this by means of a razor blade with which he made a couple of tentative cuts. His natural skin color was an ivory with a slight yellowish cast (the legacy one would suppose of his Slavic heritage)—by eight hours after his suicide, a neighbor who not only knew Rothko, but who was a medical illustrator, found him to look “jaundiced,” the pallor induced by the blood loss apparently accentuating the yellow aspect of his coloration. As we shall see the prefiguring of the suicide in painting is carried through in the Houston Chapel.

Rothko’s psychological state, the array and dynamics of the relationships in his personal universe, his philosophy and his work are of course, all intensely interwoven. It is perhaps, however, our poetic understanding that may more nearly mirror the artist’s own concept of himself. Perhaps one could say with Nietzsche

Poetry does not lie outside of the world as a fantastic invention of poetic vision, but it wants to be the unadorned expression of truth itself.

As Sallis suggests, “If it can be said that lyric poetry, commencing as Dionysian art, begins with a certain death of its author, such death is to be thought

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46 Ashton, 135.
47 Seldes, 2.
48 Pfeffer, 221.
ecstatically and not metaphysically.” The suffering involved in creating a work of art is no minor process. Rothko was explicit in his statements about the emotional impact of his work: “The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.” He knew, as Nietzsche put it, that “tragedy is seated in the midst of this excess of life, suffering and joy, in sublime ecstasy, listening to a distant melancholy song that tells of the mothers of being whose names are delusion, will, woe.”

Earlier in his career, Rothko had painted several surrealistic paintings referring to the theme of entombment—exactly the subject matter of the fourteenth Station of the Cross, which Rothko had originally planned for the Houston Chapel. One of these paintings, The Entombment, mid-1940’s, contains a three-headed female figure who cradles a male figure across its lap as in a traditional Christian pieta. In analyzing this image, Chave notes that the female figure may be emblematic of the triple-goddess of myth: mother, bride, mourner. But it is this writer’s contention that the figure could as well have represented Nietzsche’s mothers of being, told by the melancholy song heard at the locus of tragedy.

Sallis comments that Nietzsche characterized the artist as the medium through which the truly existent subject produces the artwork:

...it is from the abysmal Dionysian circuit of transgression, disruption, reinstatement, into which the artist is cast, that the artwork is produced, nature adding art to itself in a kind of mimetic excess...Dionysian mimesis has nothing to do with images...the mimetic double produced in Dionysian art must be a resounding in which the Dionysian somehow announces itself, becomes manifest, yet without its manifestation occurring in and through images.

Rothko began to work on the Houston Chapel commission in 1964. He had been inspired by the Byzantine baptistery on the island of Torcello near Venice, and drawn by its apse and by the Last Judgment which opposed it. The Houston Chapel was also to be octagonal. Rothko’s original conception was to do paintings that corresponded to the fourteen Stations of the Cross:

50 Seldes, 38.
51 Sallis, 96.
52 Chave, 149-150.
53 Sallis, 72.
54 Ashton, 171.
His theme was the Passion of Christ and he had, at one point, planned to place the numbers of the Fourteen Stations of the Cross on the exterior of the building to indicate the location of each panel inside the structure.\(^{56}\)

This plan was retained in part: the final number of paintings for the chapel is indeed fourteen, but instead of the fourteenth Station, the Entombment, Rothko seems to have returned to the Torcello motif and opposed the triptych of the apse with a panel that corresponds to the Last Judgment. In a superb thesis entitled “Mark Rothko: A Philosophical Interpretation of His Work Through the Work of Matisse, Kierkegaard and Hegel,” Kathleen Shields describes this particular (south wall) panel:

> The black interior rectangle becomes the solid, or figure, in the red field which previously delimited the physicality of the chapel environment. This black form now presents an obstacle to the viewer’s imaginative entrance into the red field, accentuated by its lower edge being placed approximately neck-high, and creates a spatial distance between itself and the red field. In addition its texture, smooth and more luminous than that of its surround, causes it to seem to float forward.

> Another formal device in the panel contributes to the surface’s incapacity for containing the black shape—the ambiguous contour line at its lower edge, which allows both volumes on either side to assume alternately a positive or negative space. This effect contradicts the black rectangle’s role as figure and creates a situation in which neither the red nor the black field assumes a distinct role as figure or ground. The virtually simultaneous existence of a real and ideal space once again presents the chapel viewer with the circumstance for existential choice and self-definition, now intensified by his being totally immersed in a charged physical environment that affirms his presence and individuality.\(^{57}\)

Shields’ description resonates with the experience of others who spent time in the chapel. It became apparent to this viewer, during a five-hour visit that persistent meditation on the panel just preceding the fourteenth panel seemed to reveal three “patches” under the surface which created the effect of a pieta. This would be consistent with the identification of the south wall painting as an Entombment. However, because of the particular qualities of the south wall painting as indicated by Shields, it may be appropriately suggested that, in mythic fashion, the two concepts have somehow merged in the artist’s work. The south wall painting thus becomes both Entombment and Last Judgment. This is not so bizarre a notion if one recalls that Rothko was not a Christian, probably agreed with Nietzsche that the only real Christian was Christ, and had long before

\(^{56}\) Waldman, 68. Barnes, however, suggests that such a plan was made in reluctant compromise to possible liturgical requirements. Barnes, Susan J., *The Rothko Chapel: An Act of Faith*. (Houston: Rothko Chapel, 1989), 67.

\(^{57}\) Kathleen Shields, “Mark Rothko: A Philosophical Interpretation of His Work Through the Work of Matisse, Kierkegaard and Hegel” (M.F.A. thesis, University of New Mexico, 1982), 18.
understood the mythic journey from what Joseph Campbell neatly called “the tomb of the womb to the womb of the tomb.” The Entombment, depicting the entry of the body into the earth, an act of faithfulness, nevertheless makes possible the awakening which overcomes. Whether one accepts the dual nature of the south wall painting or perceives it only as the Last Judgment, the colors of this panel become startlingly evocative. A black rectangle floats on a dark wine red ground. The south wall painting is fifteen feet high by eight feet seven inches wide. When Mark Rothko’s body was discovered hours after his suicide, he lay, arms outstretched, in a pool of congealed blood “six by eight feet wide.”

Having carefully folded his trousers and placed them out of the way, he wore long black socks, a white undershirt, and long johns, over which he had, astonishingly, pulled on a pair of blue under shorts. The redundant, non-functional character of these under shorts and his decision to be found in them lends powerful support to the hypothesis that, whatever else he was “doing” with his suicide, Rothko was also creating a powerful visual image. The method of preparation for the chapel canvases involved “staining” the canvas as preparation of a ground for the dominant colors, plum, wine-red, and black. The blood from Rothko’s slashed arteries was absorbed by his underclothing much as paint is absorbed by canvas. The question arises: why wear under shorts over, rather than under, a pair of long johns? The under shorts were a solid blue; blue cloth absorbing red becomes a deep wine/black color. This master could not have been unaware of the effect of saturating a blue field with crimson. The methodical Rothko had to know that the colors in his last “painting” would themselves create a companion piece to the Last Judgment painting in the chapel. He was found with his arms outstretched, the figure of the dead Christ being mourned by the onlookers.

Nietzsche had implied that one of the functions of great art was to prepare the artist for a heroic act. The art itself, which had served in effect as the scaffolding for the real work, which is the action itself. The hallmark of the heroic is courage in the face of fear. It was known among Rothko’s friends that he was terrified of anything that involved blood, so much so that he strongly resisted the drawing of blood even for urgent medical purposes. For Rothko to have slashed his arteries in a way that precipitated cascades of blood was a heroic triumph over a terrible fear.

By identifying himself as a prophet rather than a mystic, Rothko had explicitly raised for himself a demand that his art have an impact on life. The Dionysian rite was a means by which one actively and ecstatically entered new realms of existence. The scandal created by those rites in ancient times lay in the fact that

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58 Chave, Mark Rothko, Subjects, 27.
59 Sheldon Nodelman, Marden, Novros, Rothko: Painting in the Age of Actuality (HOUSTON: Institute for Fine Arts, Rice University, 1978), 34.
60 Seldes, 2.
61 Tate Gallery, 194.
62 E.g., in Rogier van der Weyden’s Descent from the Cross, c. 1435, Museo del Prado, Madrid, or the Avignon Pieta attributed to Enguerrand Quarton, c. 1460, Musee du Louvre, Paris.
they led otherwise rational people into shocking forms of behavior, in effect obliterating the old boundaries of the former self.

That Rothko’s intention was at least semi-conscious as he worked on the Houston paintings may be indicated by his choice of color for the Chapel walls. Seldes says that after the dedication of the Chapel, one year after Rothko’s death, a former associate, the architect Howard Barnstone, was ‘aghast’ at the gray color of the walls. He reported that during a discussion with Rothko about the desirable color, Rothko had rolled up his sleeve and pointed to the flesh on the inside of his forearm, saying “It must be this color,” (i.e, pale ivory with a yellowish cast). Barnstone’s account has been discounted by some because he suffered a nervous breakdown before the paintings were completed, received electroshock treatments which affected his memory, and may have been unduly influenced by details of the suicide. Nevertheless, a test undertaken by this author to determine whether Barnstone was correct, produced interesting results. Color chips corresponding to the colors in the Chapel paintings were tested over a variety of yellowish ivory backgrounds. The effect was startling. The chips appeared to be illuminated from within as do many of Rothko’s other paintings completed before the chapel sequence. Barnstone’s account offers further reason to believe that Rothko’s involvement with the chapel represented for him a kind of ultimate struggle in which his own fate was to be explored. To put this struggle in a Nietzschean context, Deleuze may be of assistance. Asking why Nietzsche “presents affirmation as inseparable from a preliminary negative condition,” he quotes from *Ecce Homo*: “I know the pleasure in destroying to a degree that accords with my powers to destroy.” Deleuze answers his own question powerfully:

There is no affirmation which is not immediately followed by a negation no less tremendous and unbounded than itself...Destruction as the active destruction of all known values is the trail of the creator...There is no affirmation which is not preceded by an immense negation...Destruction as the active destruction of the man who wants to perish and to be overcome announces the creator...

But, we must be careful here because, as Kaufmann notes, the Dionysus of Nietzsche’s last book is not the Dionysus of his first:

The later Dionysus is the synthesis of the two forces represented by Dionysus and Apollo in *The Birth of Tragedy*...the Dionysian represents

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63 Even Seldes, whose major interest is in the scandal of Rothko’s estate and his degenerating psyche, nevertheless recognizes that the scene in the studio kitchen where Rothko committed suicide was in fact his last painting, and perhaps reflected Nietzsche’s description: “No longer the artist, he has himself become art.” Seldes, 111.

64 Seldes, 142.
65 Deleuze, 177.
that negative and yet necessary dialectic element without which the creation of aesthetic values would be...an impossibility...\(^{67}\)

And further:

...the Dionysian stands for the creative employment of the passions and the affirmation of life in spite of suffering...\(^{68}\)

In other words, Nietzsche’s later use of “Dionysian” refers to the controlled passions. Rothko’s disavowal of synthesis in his paintings may reflect a misunderstanding about the Nietzsche’s later formulation. At the same time, he himself was moved over time to the same resolution. It is precisely the synthesis Nietzsche reached that we can see in Rothko’s chapel paintings and, possibly in his suicide.

When one examines other paintings by Rothko, such as *Black, Red over Black on Red*, of 1964, we can see that the edges of the black rectangle appear to be feathered. These boundaries thus imply an ambiguity about the relationship between the red and the black. The black rectangle appears to be a dark space into which one might peer, thus leaving the red to the foreground which is nevertheless uncertain because it seems to want to flow into the black. This painting shares some of the aspects of color and form present in the south wall Chapel painting and yet it is perceived in an entirely different way. It is unsettling where the Chapel painting is firm and demanding. Its ambiguity and fluidity partake of a Dionysian blurring of boundaries, the undifferentiated ecstatic beckoning. In the chapel painting, however, the edges of the black rectangle hold firm and the painting acknowledges, even demands, and at the same time challenges our individuality in a most Apollonian fashion. Nevertheless, the painting is urgent, the energy of its presence partaking in the invitation to the dissolution which, in its Dionysian circuit, will be ecstatic renewal. There could hardly be a more profound evocation of the notion of a final judgment.

Similarly, although less clearly perhaps, Rothko may have carefully planned his suicide, for years, recognizing, as Valadier has put it, that for the Dionysian artist

transfigured existence is an ever renewed act of transfiguration: it is neither a giving in to resentment, nor is it a deliverance from the necessity of having to will oneself. Rather it is the ever new return of affirmation, and affirmation of a reality that is always other.\(^{69}\)

Rothko had in fact told a friend that “My paintings are my ‘not-me.’”\(^{70}\)

\(^{67}\) Kaufmann n, 129.


\(^{70}\) Seldes, 49.
For his last creation, Rothko took pains to wear items of clothing that would absorb his blood and change color appropriately. He uttered no sound, which could be heard by the artist working through the night scarcely six feet away on the other side of a very thin wall. Like Zarathustra’s midnight, Rothko’s midnight was the time for the great NO! which was his lion’s roar, his faithfulness to the earth (which is blood in its essence), and his liberation into the awakening that is the transformation into art itself and the profoundest of affirmations.

71 Seldes, 104.
BIBLIOGRAPHY