

Mark Rothko: A Biography

by James E. B. Breslin
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience

by Stephen Polcari
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

JAMES BRESLIN BEGINS HIS BOOK BY "exposing" his subject's contradictory soul. Rothko is described as working eight hours a day, harder than he ever had before, painting murals he "was proclaiming [had an] exalted, even sacred character" for New York's Four Seasons restaurant in the new Seagram Building. But he also quotes Rothko as saying, "I accepted this assignment as a challenge, with strictly malicious intentions. I hope to paint something that will ruin the appetite of every son of a bitch who ever eats in that room." Eventually Rothko resolved this conflict himself by turning back the commission and having the paintings installed in a chapel-like room of their own at the Tate Gallery in London, but Breslin does not fare as well with his basic conflict over whether or not to like his own subject, Rothko.

It matters, especially when the biographer has had no first hand experience of the subject, as Breslin did not, and must rely on other people who did. All of those people have naturally had their own conflicts with the person in question, which no biographer can resolve. My personal belief is that one must make a decision about the subject based on your feeling about that person's work and then pick amongst your sources to support that feeling. Breslin started off with such an essential feeling based upon his gut response to Rothko's work, but it doesn't seem to have sustained him through the long process of getting to know the man through the people in his life. For instance, when you interview them, as I did for my book, *The Turning Point: The Abstract Expressionists and the Transformation of American Art*, one friend praises Rothko's erudition to the skies while another says he rarely read a book, and some of Rothko's most intimate friends would say terrible things about him behind his back even

while he was alive. Because their own places in the art world pantheon are so marginal, fellow artists being interviewed commonly develop intense jealousies about the artists now considered to be the major abstract expressionists. The biographer walks a minefield retracing the subject's steps through life, just as the subject did while making the journey that was important enough to warrant post-mortem scrutiny. Giving credence to both sides of every Rothko story can, as it has here, make a conflicted man seem hopelessly mired in unresolvable contradictions.

All artists are full of contradictions. They "contain multitudes," as Walt Whitman put it. One has the idea that Breslin simply compiled all the myriad conflicting quotes, statements, and opinions he heard and presented them to us for us to make up our minds about what kind of a man Rothko was. Biographers should get beyond or beneath the material they gather and find the underlying streams of consciousness which run most consistently through their subject. Breslin tries again and again to do this with the idea that Rothko's boyhood emigration to this country was the major traumatic event of his life, affecting just about every thing that happened later. He brings it in like a haunting refrain so often that the reader begins to anticipate its imminent arrival with dread. The loss of his father so soon thereafter might have been a more important event psychologically, but neither trauma seems to have kept Rothko from making amazingly swift progress in the English language and in school in the next few years. One is sorely tempted to think the author protests too much about the importance of either event. In his February 17, 1994, response to Jack Flam's review in the *New York Review of Books*, however, Breslin pointed us to a really important insight

into Rothko (which was only mentioned in passing in the book) when he wrote, "Rothko was a claustrophobic, and my argument about his signature paintings as attempts to create a space of freedom is developed throughout the book." It was, over and over, but without the author having constructed a strong psychological anchor to tie that complex to the body of Rothko's work, it just floated repeatedly on and off the page like one of his incessant rectangles.

In his angry response to Flam's criticism of his book's unquestionably annoying repetitiveness, Breslin states the following about one particular instance: "I repeated the language from the first sentence not because I am an idiot who can't remember from one page to the next what I've written, but as a lead into an elaboration . . ." Perhaps Mr. Breslin thinks that his readers are idiots because they need constant reminders of what was just said in order to understand what is about to be said. We don't. Is he condescending to the art world as a lower intellectual order than his accustomed literary circles? I wouldn't be surprised if he couldn't have eliminated at least one third of the 700-page length of his book if he had cut out all the unnecessary, repetitious verbiage. Did someone edit this book? And, while I'm on it, who fact checked the book? It's Jeanne Bultman, not Joan, Selina Trief, Hubert Crehan, Asheville, and so on.

But these are petty matters. The real problem with the book is the author's lack of familiarity with art. He is a literary critic who is led to examine paintings in detail for subject matter that isn't there and he can be blind before Rothko's nuanced ambiguity, particularly in his treatment of the mythological paintings of the early '40s. Breslin doesn't mention the obvious influence of John Marin on Rothko's early watercolors, though it has been cited before, as has the importance of his teacher Max Weber. Bernard Karfiol, who selected Rothko for an early exhibition, might well have borne examination for potential influence, as might have the more obscure fellow members of The Ten. Because his interviewing of survivors from the 1930s brought him to Joseph Solman's door, he didn't miss the effect Solman's subway scenes had on Rothko's own. Reading other recent theorists on Rothko, he found Anna Chave's connections between Rothko's horizontally-oriented Entombment paintings and his mature, stacked rectangles. But Breslin failed to see the

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connection between *The Rothkowitz Family*, an early painting he is probably the first to have reproduced, and Rothko's mature image. Drop out the features and details and all you have is warm red and pink nested rectangles with blurry edges. Even the reclining positions of mother and baby are worth mentioning in light of the horizontality that characterizes most of Rothko's mature work, and which was a favorite Rothko position in life.

Because of his background as a literary critic, Breslin's forte as Rothko's biographer is his careful reconstruction of Rothko's Russian background and his family life. One gets more of a feeling for Rothko there than from the author's use of Rothko's close friends. Actually Rothko never comes alive as a member of a group of friends. Breslin is on firm ground using Rothko's student's recollections of what their teacher said and the transcript of the talk he gave at Pratt Institute in 1958; his "Scribble Book," a notebook he kept in the late '30s; and the records of the trial of his lawsuit over some very early commercial work. All this was new information and as welcome as water in a desert to those of us who have reread Rothko's statements and writings of the '40s so often in every exegesis on abstract expressionism that they have practically lost their meaning. Breslin is good about using Kierkegaard and Nietzsche to help us understand Rothko's paintings, but since he surely knows those sources of inspiration better than many of us in the art world, he might have done even more with them. The same is true of the importance of the Greek tragedies to Rothko; one doesn't feel that Breslin understands the gut wrenching emotion Rothko got out of those works. Rothko was rereading Tolstoy's immensely depressing diaries when he committed suicide, but they are not mentioned. And those Greek Patristic scholars some friends claim Rothko loved to read, obscure and difficult as they might be, why no discussion of them or their possible influence on the Rothko chapel in Houston? (Perhaps Breslin believed the friend who said he didn't think Rothko really did read.) Then there are the contemporaries. Stanley Kunitz was a close friend who merits a host of citations in the index about Rothko, but no discussion of his own very highly-regarded poetry and its possible meaning for Rothko.

And then there is the strange case of Ezra Pound who gets left out of yet another discussion of the literary influences on the abstract expressionists, but who was actually at least as important to many of them as T.S. Eliot, and far more important to some, like Adolph Gottlieb. In 1940, Gottlieb and Rothko collaborated on an exploration of mythological themes inspired by Pound's idea that all tradition is ever

present which Pound expressed in four key words: "All ages are contemporaneous" Pound's "motto;" "Make strong old dreams lest this our world lose heart;" gave the intellectual artists of the early '40s war years a rallying cry, and his concept of Imagism—things "that hath a code but not a core"—pervades their thinking. Pound was so important to the group most central to Rothko during the '30s—Avery, Gottlieb and Newman—that his influence must be assessed. Pound's is the voice you hear echoed in their numerous statements and writings of the '40s, not Eliot's. Pound's subsequent fall from grace during World War II clouds his picture to this day. I would have thought a literary scholar like Breslin might have cleared it up.

In art historian Stephen Polcari's discussion of Rothko in his book *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* the author does little better in the Pound department, but his analysis of Rothko's paintings in the light of the Greek tragedies is fascinating and he is very good on Nietzsche as well. It sounds like one imagines Rothko thinking. Polcari's discussion of the meaning and the events of World War II had for Rothko was particularly illuminating:

The bitter irony for Rothko and his generation was that the living tradition was one of tragedy, death, and periodic entombment. Rothko's early choice of the *Orestia* was auspicious for him, for as an archaic tale of suffering and strife, it asked why and to what end human beings suffer, a most relevant question in the 1940s.

And, expectably, Polcari far surpasses Breslin in the analysis of Rothko's paintings. He establishes very convincing visual ties between Rothko's paintings, both early and mature, and the art Rothko often visited in the Metropolitan Museum, especially the Greek objects and the Roman frescos. Now we better understand why Rothko claimed in later years to have been painting Greek temples all his life.

Polcari is also excellent on the connections he makes between visual elements of World War II—such as the snarly-toothed mouths on the Flying Tigers' fighter planes—and some of Adolph Gottlieb's imagery. Gottlieb and Barnett Newman were Polcari's initial inspiration, and so it is fitting that he shines in their and Rothko's chapters, the places where he best fulfills his book's mandate. Rejecting the formalism of yesteryear which ignored the artists' endlessly stated commitment to content in their abstractions, Polcari sets out to redefine abstract expressionism as a mid-'40s movement concerned with highly specific kinds of content:

In the 1940s mytho-ritual is one, if not the most important, subject and theme of abstract expressionism. It distinguished

abstract expressionism from surrealism and most of the art of the period.

Most of the abstract expressionists employ myth, ritual, and ceremony in their work, from Rothko's and Pollock's *Rituals* of 1944 and 1953 to Gottlieb's *Quest of 1948* to Lipton's *The Grail* of 1965.

But do they? Rothko and Gottlieb purposefully focused on Greek mythology in their search for new forms of expression, but not for long. Newman wrote and talked a good deal about myths, but he wasn't painting at all in the late '30s and early '40s. The strongest painters of these years were Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Motherwell, each of whom had little or no use for rituals and ceremonies, though they might upon occasion title a painting as if they had. To the extent of his involvement with Jung and Native American art, Pollock can be said to have been mythologizing, but in a highly unorganized, hit-or-miss manner. In the main, like Gorky, de Kooning, and Motherwell, he was busy taking on the great painters who had defined modernism up until then—Picasso and Matisse, Mondrian and Kandinsky, Miro and, in his special case, the Mexican muralists. The other important abstract expressionist painters, Franz Kline, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Lee Krasner, Hans Hofmann, Philip Guston and James Brooks, were all dealing with cubism's aftermath and were not interested in myth. The situation is more complex with William Baziotes and Clyfford Still who were, at least in part.

William Baziotes was fascinated by all manner of mythic and mysterious things, but he too was dealing with Picasso. He said the following about his exhaustive study of Picasso's 1939 MoMA retrospective (quoted in Rudi Blesh, *Modern Art USA*, Knopf, 1956):

Well, I looked at Picasso until I could smell his armpits and the cigarette smoke on his breath. Finally, in front of one picture—a lone figure on a beach—I got it. I saw that the figure was not his real subject. The plasticity wasn't either—although the plasticity was great. No. Picasso had uncovered a feverishness in himself and is painting it—a feverishness of death and beauty.

Clyfford Still, as always, is a different case. He rejected all of European and American modernism and found inspiration instead in Turner and Blake, Cezanne, and American eccentrics like Charles Burchfield. But because a colleague likened Still to a shaman by calling him an "Earth Shaker," Polcari constructs an elaborate structure of mythic, primitive, shamanistic content around Still to which he can only make

the most tenuous ties. Titles, Polcari's customary crutch in such an endeavor, are of no help with an artist whose oeuvre is largely untitled. It might be that the colleague was involved with shamanistic signs, but one doesn't leave the chapter convinced that Still was.

Except for some minor sculptors like Seymour Lipton and David Hare who took up the cause and articulated it in a way that comforts later scholars (just as Gleizes and Metzinger did with cubism), it simply isn't true that "most of the abstract expressionists employ myth, ritual and ceremony in their work." Polcari has had to wield a mighty shoehorn to convince anybody that they did. He is at his best in his discussions of Rothko, Gottlieb, and Newman where he has their words and their real commitment to the modern experiences he deems crucial. Motherwell, despite his love of Frazier's *The Golden Bough*, which he remembered thinking of then as the artist's Bible, saw Picasso and Matisse as the crucial "modern experiences."

Polcari is trying to link very disparate artists, which is an admirable goal, but very tricky with this particular group. Some were interested in recapitulation theory and universal archetypes, and some weren't. *The Golden Bough* wasn't everyone's Bible, but there's no denying that Fraser and Jung were common parlance among intellectuals in the '40s just as Mead and Freud were in the '50s. Artists, however, have traditionally been separated from intellectuals by an "and." In defining abstract expressionism as a 1940s movement, rather than as one which crystallized in 1950, as I and most critics and involved artists believe it did, Polcari is twisting its shape to fit his Procrustean bed.

—APRIL KINGSLEY

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