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Sacrifice and Creation in the Paintings of Rothko

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CHAPTER IV. ORDER AND DISORDER OF THE VISIBLE

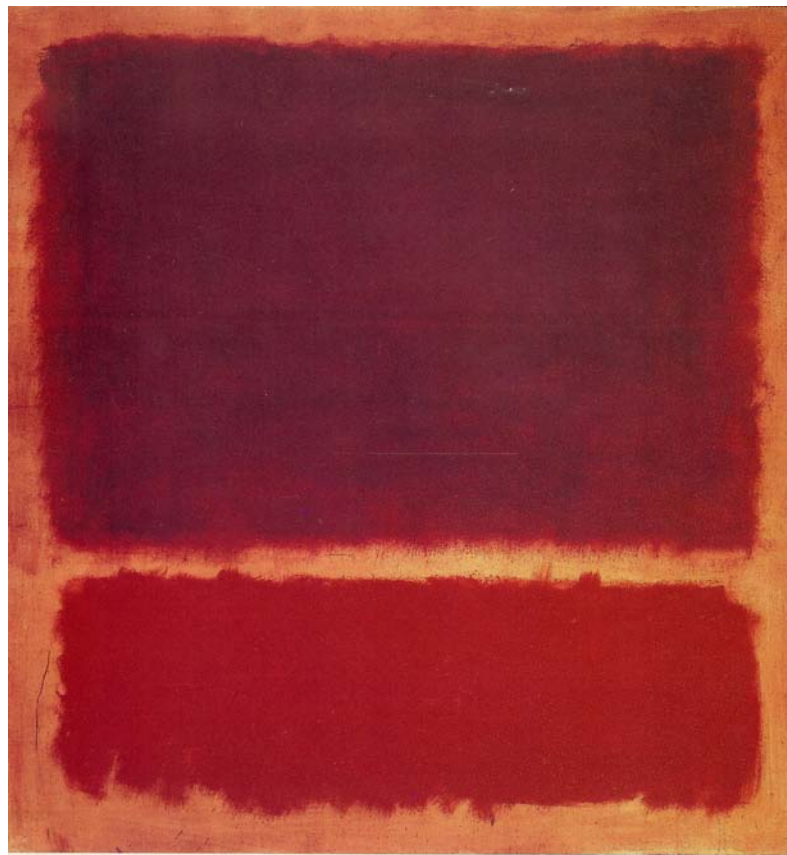
By the beginning of the 1950's, with the series of paintings known as the Sectionals, Mark Rothko had found his own language in his creative work: the paintings show different sections, mostly vertical rectangular spaces, whose variations in color are the only complement to their expression. Space and color become the elements of this language, based on which the artist would develop his unique combinatorial structure. The apparent poverty of expression is due to the scarcity of motion these elements are reduced to within the limits of the pictorial space. And, in fact, the dialogue that emerged in this period tended, precisely, to accentuate the crisis of meaning of limits. We see a combination that arises from a limited number of elements, in a limited space, and whose impact on the observer's perception is aimed at showing us to what extent the apparent simplicity of the structure and use of color are merely the result of an snap judgment of the artist's work and ideas.

An analysis of his paintings will allow us, in effect, to see the complex network of relationships and combinations established among a very limited number of elements, as well as the dramatic consequences that can be derived from this form of expression. For, although the structure found in this period of his life allowed Rothko to establish a new type of language, this same structure could have ended up smothering his ability to communicate. In any case, the new structure, to the extent that it is seen as a plastic invention, is always at the root of a new order of formal representation¹.

Rothko's paintings, as he pointed out on numerous occasions, were aimed at transmission, and the disappearance of the human figure as the pictorial subject did not herald a crisis of what is human, or distrust of the means of

¹*Philosophies*, p. 90: "Particularly of note is that new subject matter does not appear spontaneously but is always the result of new plastic occurrences."

transmission, but rather of our ability to perceive what is human. What Rothko's painting warns of is the poverty of the way we perceive day-to-day reality: emotions such as joy and suffering, the true subjects of art and life. For that reason, his paintings are a violent reaction to our image of the world and to how much we are capable of seeing. The visible elements are space and color, precisely those which most perturbed the artist, in the extent to which they could be perceived from an exclusively aesthetic viewpoint, thus provoking a mistaken impression of his work. But, set in an ordinary reality, these two elements, combined and repeated, open up before us an invisible order that visible reality already holds; space and color, as the most essential elements of his painting, and combination and repetition as ways of understanding them².



1. Rothko, *Untitled* (1962)

One of his paintings on show at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum [1] allows us to duly situate the elements of our analysis. Except in the large murals from the 1960's, the usual format of Rothko's paintings is the vertical rectangle. In this case there are two horizontal rectangles drawn within it, dividing the work into two main parts. The upper part is larger than the lower. Unlike other paintings, where the sections are partially superimposed and where their edges are not clearly defined, here each one shows a certain autonomy defined by the

² "To a certain extent, all of Rothko's mature work is related to strategies of repetition and variation", Borchardt-Hume 2008, p. 19; cf. Fer 2005.

two sections or areas of color. And yet, even when they are delimited by their color, it is that color which tends to blur the edges of the rectangles with regard to the background against which they hang. At first sight, the purely formal elements of these horizontal rectangles could be interpreted, as opposed to the chromatic element, as individual shapes that give expression to a certain subjective dimension. In our case, however, it seems difficult to isolate the shape from the color it is made up of, given the intervention of the color in the conceptualization or materialization of the content and representation.

In these rectangular areas, the lack of definition of the edges, which spread out over the background in an irregular manner owing to the use of wide brushstrokes, sponges or cloths on the canvas, makes us think of the color as a medium for the figurative individuality of the geometric shape³. The rhetoric of individuality, which was preceded in Rothko's work of previous years by the theme of classical myths, now moves from form into expression: from geometry into color, to the extent that expression and emotion, the two categories used by the artist, may be treated as ways of understanding form.

It is not possible, in this painting, to establish an order of priority between the idea or the theme and the content, for, as Rothko reminds us in his book, formal content and representation are the manifestation of plastic elements, that is to say of the idea, and without them, the others cannot arise⁴. Even in abstract representations, we have to consider the matter of theme, which painting itself entails, as an order by means of which we can speak of plastic continuity in art. In the painting from 1962, color, as a basic plastic element, also affects the form or representation expressed or manifested in the work. If what gives the figure, as a representation, a certain individuality, is its autonomy with regard to the other individual elements, that is to say, if what makes a subject unique is its ability to separate itself from the others, that is, its abstract being, here the area of color has a negative effect, dissolving formal individuality. If the shape is blurred, thus losing a part of its individuality or autonomy, it is due to the shape-dissolving action of the color. But as the color spreads out over the background of the canvas, destroying the figurative edges of the rectangle, the contrast with the background becomes greater because of the chromatic contrast of the magenta on the ochre base coat covering the canvas. This dialogue on a subject with a dual chromatic (expressive) and formal (geometric) manifestation is not always to be found in such a clear manner. And yet, the unique and simple nature of this work, with regard to its elements, will allow us to trace these features through the artist's final creations, although they were to become less and less perceptible, as seen in the enormous panels in the Chapel in Houston.

I do not believe it is possible to speak about evolution in the painting of this period. But to the extent that Rothko's painting is aimed at communicating the basic emotions of existence, there has been a maturing in his dramatic concept of self, which makes us think it may be necessary to establish a whole new

³*Writings*, p. 77: "My new areas of color are things. I put them on the surface. They do not reach the edges, they stop before they reach them".

⁴Rothko makes very specific use of the terms *subject*, the theme or aim of a picture, and *subject matter*, the content or representation. In his own words, the theme would be the spirit and the content the flesh of a picture, cf *Philosophies*, pp. 76-82.

concept of the plastic arts. Once established the language of the Sectionals, as the period that begins around 1949-1950 is known, his preoccupation with the ways of perceiving painting and the pictorial unit, expressed through the principles of harmony and proportion, comes to the forefront. Rothko wants the viewer to participate in his experience and point of view, just as he told Katharine Kuh, curator of the Chicago Institute of Art, during the 1954 “Recent Paintings by Mark Rothko” exhibition:

If I had to place my trust in something, it would be in the psyche of sensitive observers, who are free of conventions about understanding. I would have no apprehensions about the use they might make of these paintings for their spiritual needs. If both are present, need and spirit, there must be a real transaction⁵.

Art not only plays a social function by establishing communication between the artist and the observer⁶; it must also stimulate the latter spiritually. This stimulation is marked by a mutual need of the observer and the artist. The decisive element is no longer the object of transmission, as art does not represent anything but only expresses emotions. If the idea does not link back to the experience it is because it has nothing to say, but the problem is still how to express the experience in such a way that it can stimulate others. Rothko is far from his initial position regarding “abstract expressionism”, but he understands transmission as expression and not as mere communication. Both parties are emotionally involved in the expression: artist and observer. Rothko answered one of the questions that followed his lecture at the Pratt Institute regarding the possibility of reconciling communication and self-expression, as follows:

I prefer to communicate a view of the world that is not only about me. Self-expression is boring [...]. Perhaps the word “self-expression” is not very clear. Any person who wishes to say something about the world has to implicate himself in the expression of himself, but without stripping the self of will, intelligence, civilization [...]. The truth should strip itself of ego, which may be very disappointing.⁷

Rothko’s ideas about the role of self are not well defined in this conversation, of which we have a transcript, but they warn us of what could be understood as a criticism of crude subjectivity. Anyone who wishes to express himself has to jettison not his culture or his mental faculties but that individual element that prevents the expression of an image or view of the world, like anecdotes or personal details for example. It is all easier to understand if we remember that for Rothko art is an “anecdote of the spirit”, and that anything that does not contribute to the universal expression of the spirit must be eliminated, including art itself.

Criticism of the individual subject, according to this, implies a crisis of subjectivity and, along with it, of the ways of perceiving or seeing the work of art. For if the state of de-differentiation or ambiguity of the figurative limits, as a consequence on the road towards abstraction throws a way of understanding what is human into crisis, in some way this crisis affects the paths through which we access visible reality, as well as communicative ability itself or the

⁵ “Letter to Katharine Kuh” (14 July, 1945), *Writings*, p. 91.

⁶ “Given that art is not only expressive but communicable, this communicability has a social function”, *Writings*, p. 28.

⁷ “Lecture at the Pratt Institute”, *Writings*, p. 128.

artwork's capacity to transmit. The crisis manifested in the painting, and which begins with a crisis of the very limits of expression, is one that is transmitted to the viewer, also a subject witnessing this crisis. Here the empathetic element is crucial, for only a subject in crisis, it seems, could recognize a critical context. There is a transmission between subjects in crisis. It is clear we could say that all human subjects are, by nature, always in crisis, but what matters here is the awareness or perception of this crisis, and whether such awareness is able to open up to a viewpoint that the mundane things in life do not permit. Thanks to the perception of the painting as an internal drama, the viewer discovers a critical situation within himself, although to do that there must be an inner need, a willingness on the part of a subject who seeks to express himself.

The vertical rectangle inscribed with the two colored horizontal rectangular shapes, the painting from 1962, continues to speak to us. The painting's tendency to dissolve the content, or the figurative element, results in a vagueness of place, and this radical attitude could lead to a crisis in the difference between top and bottom, and to the abandonment of the structure in sections. However, this structure is maintained thanks to the uniform ochre background that separates the two colored rectangles. The whole background emerges, from the base, with a light that moves dimly across the top section, while the bottom part remains murky because of the intensity of the vermilion. But the place where they intersect does not act so much as a separating edge, as in many of Rothko's other paintings, but rather as a reminder of the initial background in which everything was indistinct and undifferentiated. As if the observer had to avoid the visible duality in this picture in order, seeing beyond it, to be able to deal with a more basic or elemental reality of which he would himself become a part.

Even more than the top rectangle, the bottom one exhibits indefinite edges, especially in the lower left-hand corner, where the artist's work becomes more tentative. The density and decisiveness of the color, however, seem to balance a possible fragility of form. In the top area, the design of a more regular section is accompanied by a weaker chromatic intensity, while in the bottom area, a more irregular composition of form is accompanied by greater coverage of color. The eye moves between the top and bottom parts, drawn by the differences in structure and color, and this happens, alternately, between strong positions – from the top rectangle to the color vermilion – and weak positions – from the chromatic transparency of the top area to the fragility of form of the bottom section. It is a play of combinations in which the structure is perceived through the color, perhaps with the aim of destroying any hierarchy between the top and bottom. It is true that here plastic invention takes precedence over any idea, but it is still striking that, in spite of his insistence on thematic duality, as a result of the artist's plastic continuity, Rothko's Sectionals reaffirmed his decision not to overstep the limits of possible reality. The following reflections are found in notes written between 1950 and 1960:

When I say that my pictures are Western what I mean is that they do not seek the realization of something beyond the limits of Western reason, of the esoteric, the extra-sensitive or of divine attributes which are acquired through prayer and terror. Those who affirm that [these limits] have been crossed are only limiting the flexible limits of the imagination within those limits. In other words, in these paintings there is no

longing for Paradise or for divination. On the contrary, they are deeply committed to the possibility of ordinary humanity.⁸

Humanity and the emotions that express it make up the entire framework of reality on which his ideas are forged. Top and bottom lack a metaphysical meaning if as such we understand an extrasensory reality. Rothko's metaphysics never leaves the bastions of the senses insofar as his emotions must be expressed and perceived, too, through the senses. But the two orders of sections insist on appearing separately with the idea, perhaps forcing a new understanding of the limits of Western reason, for only in the context of this tradition does it become possible to develop hermeneutics between the sensitive and the intelligible, without having to turn, for the moment, to poetic metaphor or paradox.

Trust in Western reason is based precisely on something that this same tradition generally reviles: the imagination. But the text introduces something of great interest, since it discusses the limits of the imagination within the limits of reason. And the fact is that Rothko does not seem ready to relegate reason to a mere mental function. The imagination would act as the faculty that makes the limits of reason flexible, so that we can move within it without the need to renounce it by going beyond its limits, with the illusion of mythical paradises, or to reduce it to a narrow mental framework. Top and bottom do not mark the distance between the human and the divine; the distance is the margin of freedom by virtue of which we can develop a view of the world which will bring us closer to a metaphysical dimension, without, as the artist said, having to do without free will or civilization.

The painting does not offer an answer, but rather poses the issue of limits and the crisis of reason that this issue involves. But restraint within limits has as its purpose: paradoxically, a greater explosion of these limits. Perhaps for this reason the areas of color move, testing the space on the canvas, without entirely abandoning their place, and without relinquishing a tensing, at the same time, of the lines of their formal identity: "the areas are things"⁹, he told William Seitz in an interview in 1952, and these things find their extension and continuity on the wall, by virtue of the absence of a frame and because of the position that the painting should have with regard to other external items and to the total space in which they are exhibited.

And here is where we need to look again at the 1962 painting from the Smart Museum in Chicago. The two colored rectangles on the ochre background of the canvas are separated by a strip that belongs to the background itself. The intersection is not so much a separator, as is the case in many other paintings, as a reminder of the primary background in which everything is indistinct and undifferentiated. It seems as if the viewer is being invited to avoid the obvious duality of the two sections in order to deal with a more basic or elemental reality of which the observer would become part. From the point of view of radical

⁸ *Writings*, p. 143; cf. *Ibid.*, p. 126: "The problem of the artist's civilization. There has been exploitation of the primitive, of the subconscious, of the primordial that has affected our thought. People ask me if I am a Zen Buddhist. I am not. I am not interested in any civilization other than our own. The whole problem with art consists of establishing human values in this specific civilization."

⁹ "Notes on an interview with William Seitz" (22nd January, 1952), *Writings*, p. 75.

phenomenology, such as is practiced by Michel Henry when he comments on Kandinsky's work, we could say something similar about Rothko, with regard to what in his work would be radical subjectivity:

When considered in its radical inner world and in this way in that abyssal Nothingness in which no Outside stands forth, subjectivity is not something abstract in the sense of what would still lack reality, a reality that could not be found except through the addition of an exterior element, the outsideness of the world. On the contrary, subjectivity defines that reality, that fullness of being, outside of which there is nothing¹⁰.

This subjectivity is constituted by the painting's emotional impact on the viewer, through which any objective mediation or representation would be destroyed. Art does not represent anything or any world¹¹. Furthermore, it gives us an idea of how much we currently have to understand as a "mystery" or something "invisible". Not what is located beyond metaphysical order and meaning, characteristic of religious duality. Invisibility that art, as an expression of life, sets before our astonished gaze. It would be a question, therefore, of educating that gaze to allow it to penetrate the depth of things, as Rothko said, in order to access their most intimate layers.

The division of spaces in Rothko's painting answers the need to come up with a living unit. Each one of the sections that make up the painting is destined to become a single whole, a space that may overlap any other divisions. A stage of awareness in which the former unit of the myth has become impossible, breaking down into many forms, it seems that only through a criticism of visibility and the way it is perceived can we understand the pictorial structure that tells us of the new unit he sought in the series of paintings from the 1950's. Rothko is aware of the urgency to find a representational method that will transmit universal emotions in a unified setting in which the representation would only be ruled by color and the shapes that it creates. But before finding the emotional unit to which, in a kind of universal empathy, the artist aspired, his paintings had to undergo a deepening in the concept of space, which would make feasible the birth of light as the element responsible for bringing together this emotional unit. Because of all this, it is necessary to understand the meaning of light in Rothko's work, setting out from the possible meaning of the sections that divide the whole space of the painting, although here we should warn that it is not a matter of divisions, as, for example, those made by Mondrian, but of the superimposition of planes¹².

If, as we saw earlier, top and bottom can come to be of no importance in the placing of the sections it is because these sections could be presented as the remainder of some fallen order from a previous unit that still comes between the observer and the secret space that the painting holds. We could say that the

¹⁰ Henry 2008, p. 37

¹¹ Cf. Colli 1996: "Art is the expression of an expression, and not of a representative object. For an expression that is expressed we sometimes cannot find a corresponding representation. This happens because of the evanescent nature of such representations, for which it is not possible to recover either the subject or the object. One feels stupor, as if faced with the miraculous emergence of artistic expression: the representation from which it stems is impossible to grasp", p. 61.

¹² *Writings*, p. 78: "Mondrian divides up the picture, I put things in it."

sections are the shadows of a reality to which they are attached, and they, like a dividing veil or curtain, tell us, although weakly, of such an invisible reality. Although Rothko was determined to destroy any kind of mediation, it is not possible to do without that mediation entirely, since it could also be understood as a ladder on which to move up and down through the different orders of creation or as Jacob's ladder, as the image that Michel Buttor suggested¹³. It seems as if the artist had to create the conditions for the birth of things to take place, even when he himself then stayed off stage.

The whole process of shaping and un-shaping that we see in Rothko's work reproduces the dual movement of creation/destruction which is transmitted to us through the plastic continuity of Western painting, as a receptacle and world of shapes which come together and fall apart and which make up the very path of the artist. The work of art would thus become the space from which to invoke the time that passes between creation and destruction, according to a certain narrative sequence; but we might also think of a morphological sequence in three orders, like the three levels of the created cosmos (heaven, earth, hell), or even three states corresponding to a tri-form anthropology (soul, body, spirit). However, from the point of view of plastic continuity, which is all that interested the artist, we would need to turn to the knowledge that Rothko may have had of the Spanish Mozarabic codices, from the visit he made to the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York in the company of Meyer Schapiro, the mediaeval art historian, specialist in Romanesque art and professor at Columbia University. Schapiro had been at the Benedictine monastery in Silos, in the province of Burgos, and had spent four wonderful days there during a long study trip in August 1927¹⁴. As Thomas Crow pointed out, Rothko's interest in the 10th century Mozarabic codex lies in the relationship between the hierarchical formalism and the bands of color¹⁵.

The format of the monastic codex, which should be seen as an iconographic commentary on the *Apocalypse of John*, is subject to the symbolism of the final destruction of the world and the birth of a new earth and a new heaven, characteristic of the revealed text [2].

¹³Buttor 1962, p. 18.

¹⁴ Schapiro 2009, pp. 113-114.

¹⁵ Crow 2005, p. 32.



2. Beatus, Magius, fol. 207

This is not intended to mean that Rothko was inspired by the illuminated text, but he was probably able to find there the proof of plastic continuity itself, especially with regard to structure in sections, which he had already come across at the start of his artistic career. But if we want to feel the emotional presence of the different orders of the sections, and not merely grasp their possible meaning, we must look to the formal, doctrinaire context in which these codices

were created, with the intention of discovering to what extent the formal structure transmitted the mystery of the text and how that same structure could, in Rothko's case, impress a feeling of religious emotion on his work, present by virtue of that plastic continuity.

The structure of all the Beatus manuscripts, such as that of Magius which Rothko may have seen in New York, is symmetrical: they remind us of the orders created by God on the first day, with the different divisions between the creatures, while John's Revelation also warns us of the destruction of those very orders, on the last days, and the final combat that will precede them, once again between the forces of light and those of darkness. As Mireille Mentré pointed out, the disorganization in the composition of some images in the Beatus manuscripts with the striped background evokes the destruction of the created world and the confusion of the orders. It would be a question of a "deconstruction" of the universe in a parallelism between the days of creation (Genesis) and those of destruction (Revelations)¹⁶. We must not forget that what the miniaturist has recreated reproduces a visionary space in which the time and space of creation are eliminated, giving way to a new reality which, to use St Paul's words, we would "see face to face" (1 Cor 13:12). When the angels have destroyed the orders of creation (Rev 15:1) there is no sense, then, in speaking of top and bottom. In the divine creation, however, the order of the worlds responded to a sense that the complex elaborations of mediaeval Christian Neo-Platonism conceived as a *scala creaturarum* in which man occupied a privileged position. In the Mozarabic codices, the sections, each of a different color, correspond to the different worlds created by God between heaven and earth, even perhaps to the various climates of the earth according to what is shown on some maps of the time. What is truly surprising is the freedom with which the figures that appear on the pages of the manuscripts cross those spatial hierarchies without any difficulty, showing perhaps the end of all ordering such as it is known by man on earth.

In a comparative study of the Mozarabic codices and other illuminated manuscripts of the period, we can observe that the pictorial space is presented in three or more planes. Thus, for example, in the famous *Clavisphysicae* manuscript [3] by Honorius of Autun (12th century), which reflects the "symbolic cosmos", according to the ideas about creation taken from the *De divisione naturae* (Periphyseon) by Johannes Scotus Eriugena (9th century), we can see how each of the strips into which the illustration is divided obeys one of the four divisions of nature, according to a hierarchical order that ranges from God to the creatures and returns to God through the incarnation of Jesus Christ¹⁷. In a certain manner, the four spaces point to a path of *exitus-reditus* that runs throughout the created orb. This model is repeated, with variations, in many other documents.

¹⁶Mentré, 1996, p. 12.

¹⁷ Cf. Mentré, 1984, pp. 46 on.



3 . Honorius of Autun, *Clavis physicae* (12th century)

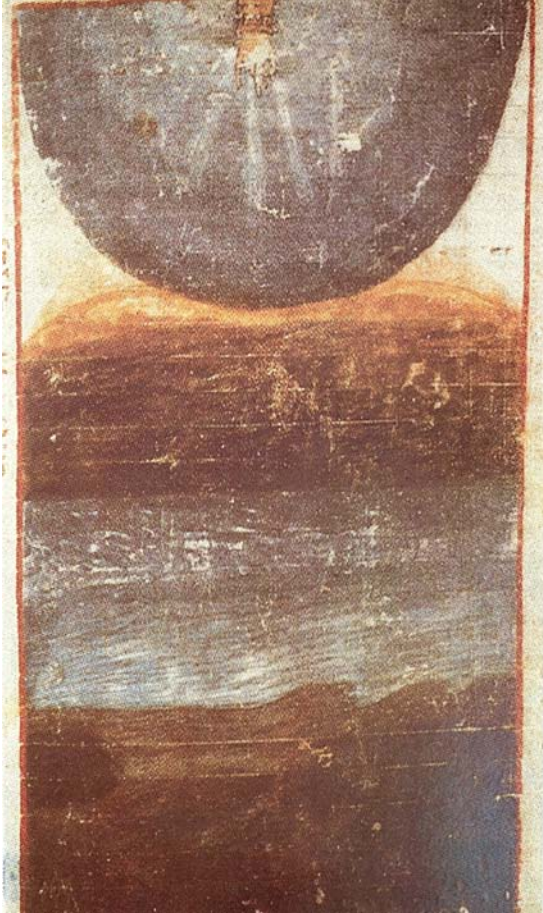
The concern of mediaeval authors for creating a graphic description of the days of the creation is clear in this material, but the central theme throughout is still the first day of divine activity, when light and darkness were separated. This manner of understanding the spaces and divisions of creation will continue; thus, for example, in the *Bible Historiale* by Guiart des Moulins from the 14th century [4] we can see the Creator of the world with a hemisphere in his left hand on which the clear division between light and dark, or between divine and earthly order, is evident¹⁸;



4 .Bible Historiale by Guiart des Moulins (14th century)

¹⁸ Cf. Ibid, p. 59.

or in the Byzantine *Octateuch* from the 12th century [5], where we can see the first moments of the Creator's act: the heavens, the earth not yet visible, and the darkness over the abyss. As Peter Selz noted in his introduction to the catalog on the Rothko retrospective in 1961: "Rothko has given us the first day of creation, not the sixth"¹⁹.



5. Byzantine *Octateuch* (12th century)

Above the strips of colour, which probably indicate the separation of the waters, the hand of God may be seen, with three rays coming out of it, which indicate who is responsible²⁰.

The separation into sections or strips of colour seems, therefore, to be due to an analytical attempt to understand the division of time and the situation of the creatures in the space created. But the division occurs as the first act of creation, which is to say after the separation of the elements, which until then were mixed up in chaotic confusion. It is an interesting fact that in Rothko's pictorial process, the Sectionals, as the most significant formal invention of the artist, would emerge after the brief period of the Multiforms, which suggest a chaos of colours and shapes that preceded the new language. The destruction-creation, or sacrifice-creation, sequence is always present as a structure which shows, on

¹⁹ Seitz 1961, p. 18. ²⁰ Ashton 2003, p. 155.

²⁰Cf. *ibid.*, P. 35.

one hand, the desired unity, as well as, on the other hand, the need to remain in the fragments.

The separation of light and dark as the first act of divine creation, and the subsequent creation of the other beings and orders, provides us with an ideal framework for situating the move from pictures with a basically dual structure to those with more sections, even though duality would re-emerge at the end of Rothko's life with great clarity in the Dark Paintings, underlining not so much the separation and opposition of two worlds as, according to the artist, its complementarity ²¹. But such a conjunction of the spaces separated was the result of a slow understanding of and reflection on space, which had been evolving since 1950 and which would find its greatest expression throughout that same decade in the series of murals that Rothko painted between 1959 and 1967.

²¹*Philosophies*, P. 27: "The duality of the subjective and the objective which we face today is not as disturbing as it might be, because any classification believes in the final aim of its orientation [...]. Man knows that he can express himself totally in the two terms of duality. These terms are rapidly approaching the position of implicit complementarity rather than one of opposition."