

Rothko's assessment of his biomorphic hybrids as the actors in the drama that is his painting indicates a reliance on Nietzsche's theory espoused in his *Birth of Tragedy*. Only in Rothko's work the tragedy takes place on a stage that is the pictorial counterpart of the darkened passages of the mind, the unconscious. His light is both a symbolic and necessary ingredient of his art. By analogy the dim glow of his light serves as the little understood pathways of the mind, those areas approached only by indirection: by Dionysian empathetic intuition, not Apollinian reason. Deliberately vague and shrouded in semidarkness, his art causes the viewer to rely heavily on peripheral vision and thus his own unconscious reactions. Primitive drama, as Nietzsche conceived it, was similar to Rothko's paintings; it was an event with the precise aim of focusing a viewer's attention on himself. The spectator imagined himself a part of the chorus, and according to Nietzsche "the chorus in its primitive form, in proto-tragedy [was] the mirror image in which the Dionysian man contemplates himself." By extension Rothko's paintings with their satyric hybrid choruses and darkened stages are mirrors in which the Dionysus in modern man is reflected.

- *Robert Carlton Hobbes.*

## A NIETZSCHEAN READING OF ROTHKO. TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM OF MARK ROTHKO INCORPORATE ELEMENTS OF NIETZSCHE'S THEORY OF ART AS EXPLORED IN THE *BIRTH OF TRAGEDY*?

At first glance, one would not immediately associate Rothko's 'deep, serious, sublime abstract paintings' with Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, but on closer inspection there appears to be an alarming array of parallels between them. Rothko himself was a proclaimed reader of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. So it is with this in mind that we can carefully explore both Rothko's philosophy of art and his paintings themselves within a Nietzschean backdrop. The discussion will focus upon his mature work, his large, brooding classic abstractions as they have often been called.

The exploration itself will be highly experimental in nature. There exists within the academic annals of art theory only a limited number of published reflections that explore the possible threads of compatibility that exists between his art and Nietzsche. For this reason, one must guard against making shaky, speculative, or hackneyed interpretations of his work and it would be all too easy to oversimplify particular aspects of such interpretations in order to support the ambitions of this particular inquiry. So it is with caution that we must proceed.

Before we even begin such an experimental exploration, we are immediately confronted with a major problem. Rothko was a firm believer in the direct experiential nature of art. For this reason he strongly objected to any theoretical interpretations of his work and he frequently withheld his own remarks upon the meanings/subject of his paintings simply because they paralyze the mind and imagination of the observer: "*He was hostile to critics, whom he believed trivialized art.... He did not demand technical expertise or cultural sophistication but rather a direct, passionate response, based on deep experience and concern for art.... There are few clues to Rothko's philosophy, and the effects of the paintings themselves are almost beyond the reach of the word.*" (M. Compton, *Mark Rothko*, pp. 9, 58-9). It seems that already the success of any academic or theoretical interpretations of this work is thrown into jeopardy and the very nature of reflective judgement must work in direct opposition to Rothko's philosophy as an artist.

Perhaps the very move of labeling Rothko an Abstract Expressionist is in itself paradoxical: “*Real identity is incompatible with schools and categories, except by mutilation.*” (Rothko – Letters to the Editor, *ART NEWS*, vol.56, no.8, Dec 1957). But the purpose of making such a move enables us to better position his work into a historical and cultural context. In fact, by looking at Abstract Expressionism as a modern art movement we already unravel possible connections to Nietzsche.

The small group of artists who formed and led the American Abstract Expressionist movement during the 1950s all shared a variety of central beliefs and had common themes regarding artistic subject matter – although their portrayal of such themes were often divergent. Among the common themes that characterized this movement were: mythology, biomorphism, elevating the notion of artist to a heroic state, belief in a direct experience of art, and more importantly (for this discussion) belief in the human situation as essentially tragic and the belief in modern man’s alienation and consequent feelings of terror. (The two latter themes were extensively incorporated into Rothko’s work and form direct parallels to the themes developed in *The Birth of Tragedy*). The artistic movement itself sought to express basic human emotions and it focused upon the importance of the role of the spectator. Artistic content was favored above form and the issues central to such disciplines as psychology and philosophy resonate throughout:

There were claims made by many who saw Abstract Expressionism as an ‘extra-aesthetic, almost existential experience’.... The movement is seen as an unavoidable development conditioned by the harsh necessities of existentialist philosophic realizations and their resultant demands.... They were not so much concerned to draw attention to the pathos of isolation and insecurity in man’s relationships with man as to embody the priority of the ‘aesthetic act’ over the social. (Shapiro, *Abstract Expressionism - A Critical Record*, p. 140-146).

It can be said that Abstract Expressionism as a modern art movement aimed not at celebrating the position of modern man, as much modern art seems to do, but sought to expose it as essentially tragic and problematic. In the same way that Nietzsche abhorred the rise of modernity (and modern art itself) for reasons we will explore Rothko too, in the same vein, was acutely aware of modern man’s ‘lost’ position and perhaps he too believed in art’s capacity to bring about a form of salvation. His own personal life as an artist reflects this: “*Rothko’s apartment and studio represented painting and the life of*

*art as a release from the dirty and crowded neighbourhoods of Manhattan where he lived – a salvation in art.”* (Compton, *Mark Rothko*, p.40)

Unraveled within the dense, exhilarating pages of Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* lie a myriad of complex and ambiguous themes. Approaching the text as complete per se or exploring it in isolation from Nietzsche’s later texts is perhaps not a particularly wise move to make – but for the purpose of this discussion it is *The Birth of Tragedy* that must be the focus of our concentration.

*The Birth of Tragedy* develops the key notion of ‘aesthetic justification’. It seeks to find a form of solution to Schopenhauerian pessimism and the meaningless absurdity of life through an examination of Greek Tragedy and the Dionysian. Modern man, and modernity as a cultural phenomenon itself, has found itself devoid of any real intrinsic meaning. Life has become a broken, labyrinthine plurality absent of direction or inherent value. The modern attitude toward life is fundamentally ‘momentary,’ grounded in the present and meanings are sought that are disconnected from any unity, eternity, or sense of continuity. Nietzsche, like Rothko, blames this on modernity’s disconnection with myth – which Nietzsche blames on Socrates who brought about the birth of rationalism and a scientific outlook. With such scientism, the notion of myth became outdated and the Greek-Tragic life affirmative style of living was superseded with a style pertaining to passing pleasure pursuits and the “*consuming desire for knowledge.*” (*Birth of Tragedy*, 23). For Nietzsche, “*without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of its creativity: only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a whole cultural movement.*” (*BT*, 23).

As we have already established, Rothko had read in close detail *The Birth of Tragedy*. No doubt he found a strong affinity with the idea of a mythless modernity that Nietzsche discusses: “*Modern life is so heavily weighted toward the rational, the material, science and technology that man’s non-rational, spiritual side has been strongly neglected.*” (M. Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, p.62). Does this explain why spectators and critics of Rothko’s paintings have observed a deep presence of a return to myth? Rothko had often discussed the problem he had in the modern world of objects and symbols – how they had been stripped of transcendence – and how they would fail, if used in his art, to capture the notion of universality (his version of

alienation theory). He therefore aimed at a generalised sense of myth and moved away from the realm of symbolisation, which he had once used in his earlier work. To achieve such universality and myth generalisations, Rothko would have to shatter or pulverize actual phenomena – abstraction would be the only possible and plausible way. To emphasise his position further: *“Rothko came to feel that myth was defunct in the contemporary world and that, since its expression in rituals and objects was no longer possible, only a non-specific expression would have power.”* (Compton, *Mark Rothko*, p.45)

It is important to state that neither Nietzsche nor Rothko perceived the notion of myth in any romanticized or nostalgic way. Nietzsche did not passionately seek to recapture the Greek-Tragic vision of life in *The Birth of Tragedy* for any romantic reasons and the same can be said of Rothko. *“Myth holds us, therefore, not through its romantic flavour, not through the remembrance of the beauty of some bygone age, not through the possibilities of fantasy, but because it expresses to us something real and existing in ourselves.”* (Rothko, as quoted in *Mark Rothko*). Rothko’s ambition as an artist was always to reveal the truth as he saw it. In this sense his paintings do not represent a celebration of various fancies or feelings, exploration of random particularities, and neither should they be related to the trends prevalent in modern art which aims at shock tactics, confused dissembling, and exploitation of the more edifying functions of art: *“The purpose of art in general is to reveal the truth.”* (Rothko, *Mark Rothko*).

Myth, for Rothko and Nietzsche acts like a tool within the culture that incorporates it. For Nietzsche myth allowed the Greeks to affirm life and for Rothko myth represents the possibility of real and existent revelations regarding the very nature of the human condition. The compatibility between Nietzsche and Rothko on the function and importance of myth is apparent. There is no doubting the importance of myth within Rothko’s abstract paintings and Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*. The question that now arises is how such myth is represented. For both, it is against the horizon of tragedy that myth (tragic-myth) is enacted.

Within *The Birth of Tragedy* art, myth, and Greek Tragedy are inextricably linked and tied in with two crucial notions: the Apollinian and Dionysian. The question

of what characterises each notion (or 'tendency' within human nature) and how Nietzsche distinguishes between them is highly problematic and often controversial. Various conventional readings interpret the Apollinian and Dionysian as oppositional but closer reading of *The Birth of Tragedy* suggests that their relationship is not so straightforward. Clarification of each tendency is perhaps not possible at this point so for now we will (in line with conventional interpretations) regard the Apollinian as referring to the orderly, limiting, rational faculty of the mind/world. It inhabits the realm of representation, subjectivity, and individuation. Often, and more controversially, it is associated with illusion. Keeping with the conventional reading, the Dionysian is characterised by such adjectives as 'ecstasy', 'intoxication', 'chaos', 'excess', and 'enchantment.' The Dionysian perceives reality and the world as an interconnected whole of 'universal unity' and once within this state any barriers between human beings and between humanity and nature are ecstatically broken down, and the harmony of existence is glorified. For Nietzsche, acceptance of the meaninglessness and absurdity of life is what the Dionysian exuberantly embraces. It is within Greek Tragedy that this and the Apollinian/Dionysian duality is effectively played out.

Aware of the dangers of oversimplification we can understand tragic drama as consisting of three main elements. Firstly there is the audience – the mass of people collectively engaged in experiencing (as opposed to simply observing) the drama. Secondly there is the actual drama/tragedy itself - where the tragic hero, in the form of Dionysus, will come to his end. The third, often regarded as the most important element, is the chorus – the musical, ecstatic, expressive element that communicates the essence of the tragic drama to the audience. The chorus is responsible for drawing the audience into a rapturous state of empathy with the Dionysian hero. The tragedy represents the cruel horror and absurdity of individual existence, but through the chorus the spirits of the audience are elevated to ecstatic heights. They realize that their hero, through death, will be thrown into a realm of restored oneness. Dionysus, the hero, through his annihilation, points to a higher level of existence. The beauty of his greatness is not celebrated or magnified through his victories but through his ultimate death.

Within Rothko's large, silent, abstract paintings the portrayal of tragedy can be observed (and Rothko himself had long thought of his paintings as essentially tragic). "We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless.... I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom.... The exhilarated tragic experience is for me the only source book for art..." (Rothko in a letter to *The Times*). In fact *The Guardian* once labeled him "the great tragedian." Through the tragic experience of his art, Rothko desired a shattering of the subject/object, internal/external, painting/spectator divisions. He wanted more from his paintings than to be just looked at. This is perhaps why he articulated strict viewing and arrangement instructions concerning his paintings and why he painted on such large canvases. "Rothko spoke of the intimacy of large scale: the effect is like looking in a cheval mirror – you are in it....a large picture is an immediate transaction; it takes you into it..."(Rothko, in *Mark Rothko*, p.87). Intimacy was a crucial element within Rothko's art. When we further explore why intimacy and exceptionally large paintings were favoured within his 'tragic art' we observe parallels between his own beliefs and those of Nietzsche. Bearing in mind the Nietzschean role of the chorus:

*It is as if Rothko wanted to detach the observers from their prosaic environment and attachments which prevent self-transcendence and at the same time, to convey this experience dramatically – purely with colour. In this sense, Rothko's pictures can be viewed as backdrops in front of which observers are transformed into live actors...the evolution of Rothko's paintings can be interpreted in dramaturgical terms as the assimilation of myth-inspired action – the shapes are performers against banded backgrounds – into scene – the horizontal rectangles as a kind of stage set. And yet, the hovering rectangles also function as performers of a sort; their colours and sizes and the intervals between them are varied, directing attention to their interactions. (I. Sandler, *Mark Rothko*).*

For further reflection on this point refer to the opening quote. Absorption of the spectator into the painting is desired by Rothko and an abandonment of a contingent sense of the spectator's self. The parallels between Rothko and Nietzsche on this point are clear. "This process of the tragic chorus is the dramatic proto-phenomenon: to see oneself transformed before one's own eyes and to begin to act as if one had actually entered into another body, another character.... Such magic transformation is the presupposition of all dramatic art." (BT, 8). Both Nietzsche and Rothko disregard the possibility of the aesthetic-tragic experience as something static. Tragedy as representation of myth, as

revelation of the nature of reality, seeks, through its drama, artistic self-transformation within the spectator. Rothko's paintings, though alarmingly silent and often dark and dense, seek to induce a dynamic, powerful response within a sensitive observer – or perhaps we should now say, within the sensitive participant.

Until now one of the most crucial questions has not been posed – are Rothko's paintings essentially Apollinian or Dionysian? At first sight, one would assume that they were characteristically Apollinian but Rothko himself persistently challenged this view (as would any 'sensitive' viewer) by saying that on the contrary they were not quietist but decidedly violent, not Apollinian but quintessentially Dionysian:

*The hushed colour, the design in terms of horizontals – are traditionally associated with serenity and stillness.... The value of his paintings lies precisely in the paradox that he uses seductive colour so that we disregard its seductiveness, that he uses the apparatus of serenity in achieving violence. For, of course, the stillness is there as well, and that is just the point: violence and serenity are reconciled and fused – this is what makes Rothko's a tragic art. (D. Sylvester, **Mark Rothko**)*

For Nietzsche, discussed in *The Birth of Tragedy*, beauty within art, can be found in an expression or depiction, it is not confined, limited, or dependent upon the actual subject matter. In this respect the representation or form of the subject matter is given precedence over the content itself. This is characteristic of Apollinian art: one's attention is directed toward the beauty of the portrayal, not on the subject, theme, emotion, or truth that is being portrayed. For this reason we are safe in our judgements that Rothko's art is Dionysian in nature – not Apollinian. For the Abstract Expressionists subject matter was of the greatest importance in art and its very function is to reveal to the outside world the artist's perceptions and understandings of the world and reality. Art should never be purely decorative and above all else they abhorred beauty for beauty's sake. Many conventional readings of *The Birth of Tragedy* regard Apollinian art as essentially a lie. Because of its superficiality and grounding in the mundane (although these charges themselves are highly controversial) it is unable to convey any depth of feeling or real insight – once again we have enough evidence to support our position that Rothko's own art cannot be Apollinian in nature.

It would be, however, a dangerous and ignorant move to completely denigrate the function of the Apollinian in favour of pure Dionysian art. Close inspection of *The Birth*



*of Tragedy* urges us to reconsider the conventional habits of positing the Apollinian against the Dionysian in an oppositional, antagonistic relationship (for example, as truth versus illusion). The relationship is better understood as being mutually dependent, necessary, and harmonious (forming a completion) for in many ways it is the Apollinian that makes the Dionysian possible. Without the Apollinian, anarchy would prevail and human action within the context of finite mortality would be stunted or perhaps made impossible. There are some interpretations that take this position even further. Where the Dionysian, by its very definitive nature, makes exuberant claims concerning the reality of the world and where it seeks revelry in the primal unity and oneness of being – from the perspective of the Ur-ein (will in-itself) everything perceived by the mortal, human perspective remains on the level of appearance. Of course, it is the ultimate aim of the Dionysian to shatter all finite associations and destroy all appearances, but the extent to which this ambition is achieved or at all possible (in the human realm) must remain open to question. If we do momentarily accept this position as a possibility then we must consider that perhaps the Apollinian is in fact a ‘truthful’ illusion and the Dionysian is the greatest lie/illusion of all – simply because of its claims. Perhaps the Dionysian itself is only a representation: for it has access to the primal unity and Ur-ein, but access remains purely that – access. Perhaps the questions and problems raised here are too large to be handled by this particular discussion but nevertheless serve to divulge the intangible web that exists within Nietzsche’s philosophy and within *The Birth of Tragedy* itself.

It is fair to say, returning to a more conventional position that the Dionysian aims at shattering individuation whereas the Apollinian seeks to dominate it. Apollinian art conveys the joy of existence by a glorification of phenomenal reality whereas: “*Dionysian art wishes to convince us of the eternal joy of existence: only we are to seek this joy not in phenomena, but behind them.*” (BT, 17).

This strikes direct parallels to Rothko’s Tragic-Dionysian paintings. For many art is regarded as a medium. A painting exists before the viewer as an expression, reflection, or representation of the artist’s own personal perceptions of the world/reality he inhabits.

Certainly for Nietzsche Dionysian art rises above this common understanding of art, and the same can be said of Rothko's art:

*The mystery of Rothko's mature work, its unity, its subversity, and its enigma, arises most basically because the painting is itself deemed an idea (not a product of an idea), but it is also in some sense a representation (but not of what is seen)... The morality in Rothko's work required that the paintings themselves should not be representations of an idea about the world but were conceived as being themselves the idea. That idea is one of a universal, unspecific, and unlocalised state of being. (M. Compton, **Mark Rothko**, p 51-59).*

It appears that Rothko's art does not seek to remain on the surface, in the realm of representation or portrayal, but aims to 'go behind' the appearance. Perhaps Rothko aims to go beyond phenomena and behind appearance in order to find universals or absolutes: "*The idea of one idea demands a format that can stand for the inexpressible through being denuded of all particulars and associations and detached from the contingencies of nature.... by 1950, Rothko had conceived his conclusive insigne of a disembodied absolute.*" (H. Rosenberg, **Mark Rothko**). Once again, we observe parallels between Nietzsche's own philosophy of art and Rothko's.

Returning to *The Birth of Tragedy* we must not ignore the importance Nietzsche places upon music, as so far we have only concentrated on his theory of visual and dramatic art. Where Greek Tragedy and art both contain elements of the Apollinian - music belongs solely to the realm of the Dionysian. The role of music within *The Birth of Tragedy* is relatively straight forward. Music acts as a direct path to the metaphysical dimension. Like the eventual death of Dionysus in tragic drama, music transports us to the Dionysian state whereby we creatively identify with something higher than our meager selves. The ecstatic feelings that are indulged in through the Dionysian musical experience correspond directly to the impulses of the Ur-ein and therefore reach beyond representation (this is, however, only a brief and somewhat simplified account). Rothko, it appears:

*responded to the Nietzschean view of the primacy of music and sought to liken his own work to music....His paintings begin and end with an intense and utterly direct expression of feeling through the interaction of coloured areas of a certain size. They are the complete fulfillment of Van Gogh's notion of using colour to convey man's emotions. They are the realization of what abstract artists have dreamed for fifty years of doing - making painting as inherently expressive as music. More than this: for not even with music, where the inevitable sense of the performer's activity introduces more of the*

*effects of personality, does isolated emotion touch the nervous system so directly.*  
(Sylvester, **Mark Rothko**, p.36)

It is not so clear whether Nietzsche himself would have deemed such painting/music similarities as at all possible or desirable. To claim that visual art can be as immediate, expressive, and as powerful as music is perhaps quite controversial and it may even take the interpretation of Rothko's art too far down the line of wishful thinking. But whatever the extent of the power and impact Rothko's paintings may have upon the observer, it is apparent that they contain an abundance of Nietzschean overtones. The likening of Rothko's paintings to music (by Rothko himself and his critics) serves to illuminate further the threads of compatibility that exist between Rothko and Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*.

It can be said that the Dionysian has within it a duality – a double-edged sword. Within the intoxication there exists both a *"benign and disgusting expression"* (Young). With reference to the original conception of the Greek god Dionysus we realize that he was essentially a god of masks. Because of this the notion 'Dionysian,' in the purer sense, can symbolise what is simultaneously present and absent and what is at once purely beautiful and repulsive. By raising this dualistic, complex element that exists within the Dionysian, we can observe further parallels between Nietzsche and Rothko. Rothko once remarked, *"I don't express myself in my painting, I express my not-self."* (As quoted in **Mark Rothko**). Following in this direction, *"compressing his feelings into a few zones of colour, he was at once dramatist, actor, and audience of his self-negation....Rothko posed the anti-self. His purged paintings affirmed the purged ego – or, rather, the actor purging. Each work has an evidence of the mind's approximation to zero, an image of the not-seen."* (H. Rosenberg, **Mark Rothko**). If we accept this as a possible reading of Rothko's paintings then we can perhaps place his work even closer to the Nietzschean concept of the Dionysian.

With all that has been raised in the discussion so far, it would not be difficult to notice threads of a deeply depressive tone prevalent within Rothko's work. The act of purging that becomes more and more apparent in his later work, the highly confrontational aspect of his art, and the embracing of the void seem to hint at something ominous and dark within Rothko the man as well as Rothko the artist. Confrontation

with death therefore becomes an important part of Rothko's art and can be related to Nietzsche's philosophy too. With regards to Rothko:

*Rothko implied that modern man's tragic awareness of death freed him to live. This is an existentialist conception: as William Barrett, a philosopher, friendly with the Abstract Expressionists, wrote: 'in the face of death, life has an absolute value. The meaning of death is precisely the revelation of this value.'....In his later work, Rothko, became far more pessimistic in mood. No longer did the awareness of death give rise to an urge for life; now both were barely endurable. Rothko's growing anguish caused him to darken his palette. The atmosphere in most of his pictures turns oppressive, making it difficult, figuratively, to breathe and stretch. (I. Sandler, **Mark Rothko**, p.16)*

If we return to a consideration of Greek Tragedy – it is through the tragic hero's ultimate death that 'aesthetic justification' is discovered. Acceptance of the meaninglessness, terror, and brutality of life is what the Dionysian emphatically embraces. The aesthetic celebration of life's horrors becomes itself a form of artistic creation. The very creation of a unity between the audience and chorus and the ecstatic heights they coordinate, becomes joyous, and the terrible death of the hero becomes a rapturous and positive event through the newfound Dionysian wisdom. This Dionysian wisdom reveals that the world is created by a 'reckless and amoral artist God' for the pleasure of the Ur-ein. It is the role of art to deliver insight into the cosmic game and it is the role of art to deliver us into the sense of aesthetic justification. Does this position (though condensed and simplified) reveal that appearances belonging to the Apollinian are created by us in order for us to continue living? Perhaps connections can be made at this point to the Abstract Expressionist Barnett Newman who claimed that modern man is his own terror:

*Is it by will or necessity that modern man terrifies himself?...Our tragedy is again a tragedy of action in the chaos that is society (it is interesting that this Greek idea is also a Hebraic concept); and no matter how heroic, or innocent, or moral our individual lives may be, this new fate hangs over us. We are living, then, through a Greek drama; and each of us now stands like Oedipus and can by his acts or lack of action, in innocence, kill his father and desecrate his mother....The human agency in modern brutality is recognized, but it is wrapped securely in tragic inevitability....Man may cause his own suffering, but he is compelled to do so.(Newman, as quoted in **Reframing Abstract Expressionism**)*

Perhaps it is only through art that human salvation from the terror of existence (maybe self-imposed terror) can be achieved. In the words of Nietzsche, "it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified." (BT, 6).

Within *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche shows how the Greek-tragic-vision, expressed through myth, saved the Greeks from pessimism, life-negation, and nausea. It is through the Dionysian and Apollinian working together that this can be accomplished. At the point of Dionysian realization, one sees the futility of action. Does Nietzsche urge us to annihilate ourselves with the tragic hero? Do we surrender ourselves and die at the point of Dionysian revelation? The conventional readings would answer no. In order for humanity to continue the futility of action the Apollinian pulls us down from our Dionysian heights and cloaks us with its beautiful veils so we can continue to live.

Departing from the conventional readings the question arises as to whether or not Nietzsche actually succeeds in his ambition of employing aesthetic justification to achieve salvation. Perhaps justification can only be experienced by a 'reckless, amoral artist God' who Nietzsche places at the source of our existence. If this is possible then nausea in the face of our existence cannot be overcome and the shrill words of Silenus: "*what is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is – to die soon,*" (*BT*, 3) looms hauntingly over our heads. Emphasizing further Nietzsche's mysterious emphasis on death we can turn to another quote. "*The sense of all that comes to be is forever removed from human knowledge. The more one seeks to further it, the darker the night becomes. Human life then can never understand itself, the only way the human world of the many and of the becoming can ever be reconciled with the primal Ur-ein is through death.*" (Strong, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* p.155). If we were to accept this as a possibility then Rothko's suicide in 1970 stands as a perfect and tragic enactment of Nietzsche's possible failings (because the attraction of death may become insurmountable). Nietzsche himself once remarked that all intellectual and spiritually sensitive people stand in danger of suicide. But perhaps making connections between the possible failings of Nietzsche and Rothko's suicide is taking things too far. There does remain though chilling parallels between their treatment of death – and human life in the face of it – especially as both of their positions remain flawed and open to question.

Before the discussion comes to a close, it is worth pointing out that both Rothko and Nietzsche believe that art only has value when it helps in the practical task of living life, and they both place much faith in the self-transformative possibilities of art.

Revealing further compatibility, both Nietzsche and Rothko are against art for art's sake. Rothko often likened 'decorative' art to emptiness and persistently challenged the idea that his art should be used for decoration: "*since my pictures are large, colourful, and unframed, and since museum walls are usually immense and formidable, there is danger that the pictures relate themselves as decorative areas to the walls. This would be a distortion of their meaning, since the pictures are intimate and intense, and re the opposite of what is decorative.* (Letter to KUH, *Mark Rothko*, p.58).

With regards to our main question, it seems that there exists between Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and Rothko's Abstract Expressionist paintings a significant and interesting degree of compatibility between them. Rothko incorporates into his art many central tenets of Nietzsche's philosophy of art developed in *The Birth of Tragedy* – most notably - myth, tragedy, the Dionysian, and the transformative possibility of art. It must be noted that there exists between Rothko and Nietzsche an array of incongruous differences (for example, Nietzsche's contempt for modernity and thus the rise of modern art forms). Simply for lack of space (not ignorance or deliberate cunning) such differences, within the confines of this particular discussion, have been omitted. But these, undisclosed, differences must be taken into account when attempting to bring Nietzsche and Rothko together. For similar reasons Nietzsche's 'middle period' was not explored. Perhaps if we opened up the picture and explored Nietzsche's philosophy of art on a ~~smaller~~ larger scale we would uncover more parallels between himself and Rothko – for example the concept of the sublime and the very act of making oneself a form of art imply compatibility but were never addressed.

The value of such a discussion should now be apparent. Both Nietzsche and Rothko when brought together reveal the extent to which art is a powerful and necessary device through which the world and humanity finds, confronts, and saves itself.

*For Rothko, painting was a philosophical pursuit. It was a result of thinking and, in turn, inspired thought in the viewer....His own statements reveal the philosophical nature of his work and his consistency of his aesthetic beliefs. Whether he used human figures, ancient symbols, or abstract areas of colour, Rothko single-mindedly tries to discover the most direct and vivid way to communicate his thoughts on the condition of mankind. (B. Clearwater, *Mark Rothko*, p 68, 74)*

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