

CONCEALING AND REVEALING: VISIONS OF TRANSCENDENCE IN

JAN VAN EYCK AND MARK ROTHKO

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The seed of the idea for this thesis came to me while in France, touring the Romanesque and Gothic Cathedrals around Paris as part of a graduate class. I told Professor John Calabrese – who also is my advisor on this thesis and to whom I am infinitely grateful – that I much preferred Romanesque churches because the more austere ornamentation allowed me to experience the peace of spiritual meditation. Subsequent research for papers in other classes led me to this comparison of the transcendences of Jan Van Eyck and Mark Rothko, two painters whom I admire greatly because I could never paint like either of them. My human spirit, I discovered, needed space to be able to contemplate the spiritual domain, which is something these two painters discovered in their search to create transcendent experiences for their viewers. Space – its depiction and the perception of it – was key to providing that meditative space for transcendence.

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## ABSTRACT

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### CONCEALING AND REVEALING: VISIONS OF TRANSCENDENCE IN JAN VAN EYCK AND MARK ROTHKO

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Jan Van Eyck in *The Ghent Altarpiece* and Mark Rothko in his late abstractions sought to bridge the gap between the visible, palpable earthly world and the invisible, unknowable spiritual world to create an experience of transcendence for their viewers. Researching the critical and analytical data documenting these artists revealed that the two artists differ in the type of transcendence they intended to produce. Van Eyck sought religious transcendence, while Rothko sought a secular transcendence.

The interpretation of the works of these artists demonstrate that while both use symbolism, color, space, and light to convey their intentions, Van Eyck directly connects his religious imagery to Catholic dogma, seeking to provide his viewers with the comfort of God's salvation. Rothko, using abstraction to convey existential and global considerations, uses a secular approach that eliminates a connection to a specific religion, taking his viewers inward to find universal significance.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION  
**Problem Statement**

The Northern Renaissance master Jan Van Eyck and the Twentieth Century Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko have little in common upon first inspection. Jan Van Eyck is an intensely detailed painter in the vein of observed naturalism, while Rothko's mature abstract works are devoid of any recognizable subject matter except color. Closer inspection reveals these two artists have one fundamental characteristic in common: a search for transcendence. The subjects these painters depicted in their works are foundations for more elevated, more revealing and more meaningful content: something apart from and beyond the material universe. These questions arise: What is transcendence, and what does it mean to the viewer? How is it that these two artists are able to achieve a similar transcendent theme using such different means? And in differentiating the two artists, what is the difference between the traditional religious transcendence of Van Eyck and the more secular modern transcendence sought by Rothko? Most importantly, how do the works of these two artists create the experience of transcendence through their works and in their viewers? Familiarity with the time periods in which these two artists work, the cultural underpinnings of their styles, and their philosophies of art are instrumental in understanding how transcendence operates in their works. This thesis will address the concept of transcendence in selected works by the artists Van Eyck and Rothko, and the ways that concept drives the artists' conceptualization and formation.

## **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this thesis is to define, analyze and then expand on the idea of transcendence in selected works by the artists Jan Van Eyck and Mark Rothko. To achieve this end, definitions of both religious and secular transcendence will be examined and analyzed to define ways that the artists' ideas of transcendence work in the paintings. The works examined in detail will be the *Mystic Lamb*, *Christ the King* and *Annunciation* panels from the *Ghent Altarpiece* by Jan Van Eyck and four mature abstractions by Mark Rothko: *Untitled*, 1948; *Yellow and Blue*, 1955; *Orange, Red and Red*, 1962; *The Rothko Chapel*, 1971. Other works will be referenced as needed in order to expand the philosophical and cultural information conveyed.

## **Statement of Significance**

Even though the means of achieving transcendent themes vary radically, the ability of Van Eyck and Rothko to transport the viewers to a place beyond the visual world creates a significance in the works that endures the test of time. This thesis will explore a clearer understanding of the enduring qualities of these works and how the artists convey the concept of transcendence through exploration and manipulation of form and content. A critical component of this thesis is the means that these artists reflect the respective art-historical values and styles: Van Eyck using Northern Renaissance realism to achieve religious transcendence, and Rothko using Abstract Expressionism to achieve secular transcendence. How their works reflect philosophical and cultural understandings of the respective art historical worlds and personal philosophical mind-sets figure significantly in their respective modes of transcendence.

## Review of Literature

The lack of primary sources on the concept of transcendence in the work of Van Eyck and Rothko's reluctance to speak directly about his works inhibit any conclusive line of reasoning about the incorporation of transcendence found in each artist's depictions. This thesis begins with an examination of the concept of transcendence, differentiating the traditional view as delineated by Josef Pieper in *Leisure the Basis of Culture* and consequently as it relates to certain panels in Van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece*. To bring the idea of transcendence into contemporary view, a modern secular view of transcendence as posited by Jean-Luc Nancy in *Re-treating Religion* will be explored as it relates to selected images of Mark Rothko's late abstractions.

Van Eyck, in his effort to represent divine dogma of the Catholic Church, depicts the convergence of the divine with the material world by meticulously depicting the world as it appears and then using that visible world as an analogy for that which cannot be seen. Van Eyck's images do not represent the divine world per se, but rather present the divine world using the terms and images that are accessible to mankind: the visible, tactile, audible world of sensory perception. According to Harbison, these descriptive images illustrated "not earthly existence but what he considered supernatural truth" (589). Van Eyck "went to extraordinary lengths to portray" his content in natural terms, "to conceive of an imaginary but eternal reality in perfectly understandable ways" (Harbison 589). Thus, Van Eyck does not separate the divine from the human sphere, but intermingles realism and symbolism (Harbison 590). He enunciates his belief that Christian doctrine is made evident to man by the intermingling of secular and sacred worlds using reality and symbol: "the visible world is

employed in order to transcend itself' (Harbison 590). Belief in the sacred realm is key to understanding and appreciating earthly, secular reality. Van Eyck's personal understanding of the visible world which is evident in the subjective truth of his imagery becomes the objective truth which is, in the case of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, Christian dogma.

Van Eyck's philosophy of art according to Craig Harbison is concerned not only with portraying the natural world with accuracy (as were his contemporaries in Italy) but also with portraying his truths "in natural terms, to conceive of an imaginary but eternal reality in perfectly understandable ways" (590). This becomes the source of the concept of disguised symbolism in Northern Renaissance art.

In contrast, the modern, secular concept of transcendence as evidenced by Rothko's late abstractions can be better understood using the contemporary perspective of the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in *Re-treating Religion*. Nancy's concepts and the critical analyses spurred as a result of his work, point not to the presence of God, but to his absence – that man has created God in his own likeness, since God (the One, the Infinite) has no discernible form (8). God has absented himself and emptied himself into the creation of the world (Alexandrova, et.al. 282). This line of reasoning differentiates religious versus secular ideas of transcendence and creates the possibility of a critical dialogue about transcendence between the works of the two artists Van Eyck and Rothko. Van Eyck uses depiction of the visible Renaissance Flemish world to access an invisible and inaccessible God; in that sense the images portrayed in Van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* are determined by God's indivisibility from the world in man's attempt to understand his presence. Rothko, on the other hand, opposed the immediacy of the visible world and portrays what is "absented from presence,

pure and simple” (Alexandrova, et. al. 282) through the use of floating, expansive and indeterminate color. Exploring Van Eyck and Rothko’s differing styles reflects divergent cultural understanding of the spiritual or transcendent in their respective cultural and art-historical worlds. This revelation becomes apparent in looking at their works through Nancy’s deconstructivist ideas.

Biographies of Rothko’s life, specifically by James E.B. Breslin and Dore Ashton, place Rothko’s life in the context of his search for spiritual significance. His training as an artist, his political involvement, his Jewish heritage, and his natural inclination to intellectual insight combined with his interest in tragic themes are transmitted powerfully into his monumental paintings, which he described as a “passport to a more luminous world” (Ashton 71). In his biography of Rothko, Breslin portrays Rothko as a man beset with conflicts: as with most artists, Rothko’s personal life and his artistic works are inseparable. Rather than turn away from these conflicts, Rothko used art to investigate and resolve his personal, spiritual and intellectual disputes by investigating form and content of transcendence, particularly in the employment of color and its emotional complexities.

Anna Chave presents Rothko’s abstractions as an enigma of absence and presence, categorized as religious; Rothko found a way "to describe the brink or border between being and non-being, presence and absence, by eliminating crisp borders and making them shadowy, soft and transitional” (184). This attribute of “absence and presence” makes the analogy to Van Eyck’s Annunciation Panels all the more tenable.

Further support for Rothko’s intimation of mortality and “the nothingness of the beyond” that is masked in his work is evidenced by Natalie Kosoi in “Nothingness Made

Visible: The Case of Rothko's Paintings." For example, Natalie Kosoi explores the concept that everything exists in relation to what it is not by analyzing nothingness in the Heideggerian sense of "nothing" as being something. Kosoi explains that, according to Heidegger, "because any being is finite, nothingness forms beings and as such is a prerequisite for everything that is" (21). Rothko thus rejects recognizable subject matter as a point of reference in his works and embraces in its place the indeterminateness of floating veils of color to depict transcendence, leaving it to the viewer to determine what lies behind and beyond color. In his attempt to depict that which exists apart from the material universe, he paints the fear of the nothingness which threatens his own existence. This nothingness becomes a transcendent something because it depicts the "representational value" of the transcendent as pure and simple color: Rothko's abstract canvasses have no recognizable model but instead present themselves as a means of access - through color - to see the invisible openings to the presence of the infinite (Alexandrova 283).

Van Eyck, in contrast, "combines the qualities of tangible icons with the transfigured reality produced by hidden symbolism" according to John Ward in his article on Flemish symbolism (209). In his use of recognizable subject matter to present his content of an inaccessible and invisible God, Van Eyck presents God as of and in the world in contrast to Nancy's absent God and Rothko's "nothingness". While Van Eyck's compositional arrangement emphasizes that the movement of this world is toward God and the transcendent world, cyclical and inseparable and indivisible, Rothko's floating colors mask the indeterminate, infinite nothingness that threatens his existence. Van Eyck's

transcendence opens up the possibilities of the transcendent world; Rothko's works provide access to transcendence, but leaves its goal to the viewer to discern.

This thesis will demonstrate that despite the differences in time period, style, subject matter and spiritual orientation, both Van Eyck and Rothko are attempting the same monumental endeavor: that of intimating that which is separate from or beyond the material universe in their works, thereby making a connection to transcendence. This transcendence is the object of man's desire, according to Josef Pieper and therefore guides the artistic enquiry of these artists as they move through respective visible worlds of objects and of color (116).

### **Methodology**

The methodology utilized in this study will include research of scholarly writings such as articles, monographs and other texts, catalogues and essays about each artist's works as well as primary sources by the artist Mark Rothko found in lectures and diaries. This research serves as a springboard for building the case for religious and secular transcendence as the primary intention of each of these two artists in the works.

### **Limitations**

1. This thesis will focus on analysis of three sections of Jan Van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece*: the *Annunciation Panels*, the image of *Christ the King* and *The Mystic Lamb*; and four particular works by Mark Rothko: *Untitled*, 1948; *Yellow and Blue*, 1955; *Orange, Red and Red*, 1962; and *The Rothko Chapel*, 1971.

2. The concept of "transcendence" – that of being above and beyond the limits of experience – is explored in religious and secular contexts as applied to the works of two

artists, using two differing contemporary philosophical views to analyze its engagement with the works and cultural contexts.

### **Definition of Terms**

Transcendence: existing apart from the universe; beyond the limits of possible experience.

Christian atheism: Nancy's concept of the emptying of God's presence into His creation.

Disguised Symbolism: Symbolism that is portrayed through the representation of meticulously depicted objects.

Abstract Expressionism: Post- World War II movement in painting characterized by emphasis on the artist's spontaneous and self-expressive application of paint in creating a non-representational composition.

Religious or traditional transcendence: God and the theology of the church as they exist apart from the universe and beyond the limits of human experience

Secular transcendence: beyond the material universe and the bounds of human knowledge

## CHAPTER II

### THE SEARCH FOR TRANSCENDENCE

A work of art that takes the viewer to a place above and beyond the limitations of the here-and-now defines a transcendent experience. Such depiction of transcendence is evident in the art of the Early Northern Renaissance artist Jan Van Eyck and the twentieth century Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko. Even though these two artists vary greatly in style and content, both searched for something more elevated, more revealing, more meaningful in their works than the physical, tangible world in which they created; each artist sought to go beyond the ordinary limits of knowledge and everyday concerns to achieve transcendence. Yet juxtaposing these two artists reveals an even deeper truth about the transcendent in art, that more than one kind of transcendence exists: religious and secular. Such a differentiation is discerned upon examining the purposes for creating their works and what each artist reveals about the artistic, philosophic and aesthetic contexts in which they worked.

Initiating the exploration of this juxtaposition of Renaissance and twentieth century art requires a clearer understanding of how transcendence operates in works of art. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* describes transcendence as coming from the Latin word *transcendere*, which means “to climb over or to go beyond,” implying a rift or discontinuity between the known and the unknown, and that the “means of passing from one to the other is either in reality or in knowledge;” in this case, the means for accessing the transcendent involve the tools of artistic expression. The *Dictionary of World Philosophy* further develops this

transcendent concept as being metaphysical or theological, correlating transcendence with the epistemological conception of God or the Absolute as “transintelligible” or “beyond all comprehension.” The artist who seeks to portray transcendence, then, must make this unknowable entity – this entity that is transintelligible or beyond comprehension – and make it perceivable and known through the application of his chosen artistic medium. This work of art, imbued by the artist with a body of organized meanings which have significance, can be at times baffling for the viewer. As these meanings are deeper and wider than the obvious, it requires an act of imagination on the part of the viewer to perceive those meanings. This in turn challenges the thought process, making the experience of the work of art not merely an aesthetic encounter but an intellectual experience. Art, then, grounded in the visual, acts as a springboard to contemplation of the unknowable or transintelligible concepts that the artist has inscribed into his visual representation. This process is the working and the achievement of transcendence in art.

Art historian and critic Clement Greenberg believed that art’s gift is that it takes us to a place away from the everyday world; one way in which this can be achieved is through the contemplation of the work of art. The artist can create an experience of transcendence using thoughtful arrangement of visual elements, such as through the use of color, space, and abstraction, even highly realistic imagery. The judicious positioning of these elements initiates an aesthetic vision for the artist and his viewer and the subsequent emotional response in turn inspires thoughts and feelings beyond present concerns. According to Josef Pieper in *Leisure the Basis of Culture*, “Those who are struck by the deeper aspect of things find the immediate aims of life vanishing before them – even though only for so long as their

vision of the face of the world moves them to wonder” (97). This wonder of Pieper’s and Greenberg’s aesthetic distancing lifts the viewer away from quotidian concerns, carrying him beyond the everyday with transcendent anticipation. To be really human, according to Pieper, one must be able to “see the world above and beyond our immediate environment” (90); this does not mean to leave this world or turn away from it (95) but to “preserve our apprehension of the universality of things in the midst of the habits of daily life” (90). Our lives are played out against the background of eternal and unknowable universals, and we perceive this transcendent world not by turning away from things of this world but by embracing them. For the artist and his viewer, somewhere between distancing and participating, understanding and consciousness, imagination and cognition, being and nothingness, lies this human experience of transcendence that begins in the aesthetic perception of a work of art.

The history of transcendence in art began with early cultures formulating connections unique to their culture: the Greeks to nature and its divinity; the Romans to a sense of history and common cultural goals; the Christian to beatific vision of God in the afterlife. Modern and contemporary man from the Industrial Revolution to the present, however, must deal with a more complex existence with a longer and more intricate history; in addition the twentieth century provides more options in a global consciousness. The artist can look to the past for guidance, as Rothko and his contemporaries did initially, but the answer to man’s search for meaning does not lie there. This modern secular attitude arose with the ascendance of science and its subsequent substitution for religion and spiritual significance. In the words of Ananda Coomaraswamy, the “rationalization of religion leads

to the secularization of art” (“The Christian and Oriental” 71). The art historian Donald Kuspit in his on-line essay “Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art” stated that there is little in this modern world of art that has the capacity to invoke the deeper, inner life that is so necessary for a transcendent experience; even Pieper sees the awakening of the inner life as requisite for the experience of wonder that takes man out of the workaday world. Rothko and his contemporaries looked back to the ancient world to find a way to reawaken that inner life in their art, to inspire awe and to achieve transcendence.

As indicated earlier, juxtaposing the two artists Jan Van Eyck from the fifteenth century Early Northern Renaissance and Mark Rothko from twentieth century modernist Abstract Expressionism reveals two kinds of transcendence: religious and secular. Religious transcendence addresses believers who have faith in an all-encompassing power and focuses on expanding boundaries of experience to perceive the unknowable through religious truths and Christian dogma, ultimately to inspire devotion to the Church. Rather than looking to religious experience, secular transcendence focuses inward to the depths of the unknown self to find meaning and universal significance. Both artists began in the aesthetic experience, enticing the viewer with vivid color, exquisite detail, and symbolic use of light to achieve an expansiveness of vision that reaches beyond mere visual appeal. But here, the two artists diverge in their purpose: for Van Eyck who represents believers, art was a means to a higher end of Christian belief, salvation and life beyond death; for secular artists like Rothko the work of art became the end itself, the means for which was anchored in aesthetic experience without referring to religion.

The most readily available experience of transcendence is found in Jan Van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece. The religious intent of this work is grounded in the aesthetic and symbolic depiction of the known world in order to elucidate Christian dogma for churchgoers in St. Bavo's Church in Ghent. In his essay on transcendence, David Jasper indicates that for medieval man an ambiguous concept of God existed, that He was everywhere and at the same time nowhere to be found. This ambiguity emanated from a popular twelfth century saying that "God is the sphere of which the centre is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere" (Jasper 4). Essentially for the medieval artist, God's presence could be found everywhere and is thus depicted in the world He created, for as Jasper explains, "God reveals himself at every point in the universe" (4). At the same time, Jasper goes on, this saying means that even though God is everywhere, he is at the same time nowhere, an absence, not perceivable and not available for literal artistic representation (although readily present through religious ritual and sacraments). Thus it became Van Eyck's intention to make God's presence comprehensible to the medieval churchgoer through a visual presentation of Christian religious dogma, embedded in contemporaneous imagery, in the *Ghent Altarpiece*. In this work, a manifestation of the wisdom of God is exemplified in the landscape of Ghent, peopled with heavenly beings cloaked in Northern Renaissance reality. Examination of Dvorak's text on idealism and symbolism in Gothic art reveals Van Eyck's theology to be a theological consequence of medieval artistic representation (19-27). Instead of attempting to represent the transcendental world imaginatively as Medievalists did by reworking reality, Van Eyck looked to elevate man to a higher, spiritual consciousness of the world by means of the realistic depiction of the transitory world to awaken spiritual sentiments. In other

words, instead of working from the top-down (artistic representation directly reflecting the transcendental world) Van Eyck operates from the bottom-up, beginning with the known world to awaken higher transcendent sensibilities.

Van Eyck was able to see the potential in depicting a religious event, in this case the Mystical Lamb, in a contemporary setting, and inspire others to marvel at the miracle of salvation. He achieved this because, as Pieper indicates in his analysis of the experience of wonder, “the deeper aspects of reality are apprehended in the ordinary things of everyday life and not in a sphere cut off and segregated from it” (96). Pieper further explains that “it is in the things we come across in the experience of everyday life that the unusual emerges and we no longer take them for granted” and inspire the viewer to wonder and marvel (96). Van Eyck achieves this through the use of the essences of daily life in the early Northern Renaissance to reflect and symbolize the truths of Catholic doctrine, to make it more meaningful and understandable to the viewer. The perfection of his skill alone is enough to incite wonder and coupled with the forms of his content provides endless avenues for contemplation of divine truth and religious dogma.

But it is not merely the perfection of Van Eyck’s skill that incites the viewer’s wonder; as Coomaraswamy indicates, he sees by virtue of analogy, to perceive the Beyond by nature of the symbols depicted in the visual panorama he has depicted for his audience (“The Christian and Oriental” 74). Spiritual understanding and the capacity for spiritual knowledge, says Pieper, “has always been understood to mean the power of establishing relations with the whole of reality, with all things existing” (82). By “climbing over” existing reality to transcendence, we establish a relationship with the spiritual world and transcend

the boundaries of our immediate environment, creating a link to the wholeness of being. By participating in the experience of the *Ghent Altarpiece* in all its reality and Christian truths depicted, one “lets Christianity become real in him, and thus makes the truths of God’s salvation his own not by knowledge alone” (Pieper 128), but through a visceral experience of the causes of the world. Thus, for Van Eyck, reality was full of meaning, and his gifts as an artist coupled with his vision created a relationship between man, art, and the spiritual world.

The erosion of this omni-presence of God began with the rise of rational thought and science: God is not so necessary to guarantee existence if scientists can explain it rationally. As stated earlier Ananda Coomaraswamy maintains that rationalization of religion leads to the secularization of art (“The Christian and the Oriental” 71). This decadence of art corresponds to the decadence of the intellect and to the focus on sentimental interests, or pure aesthetics in art (71). Prior to the Enlightenment, art performed a function, and that function was born of a purposeful intent and contemplation on the part of the artist (63). Meaning was embedded in the forms created by the artist deliberately as the means to an end (63). Iconography determines the form of the work of art, and is key to understanding of its meaning (67). The shifting forms of iconography through the ages reflects the context in which it was created. For example, contemporary exhibitionist art – art in which the artist exploits himself on display - becomes merely an aesthetic activity rather than an intellectual engagement because it may appear lacking in meaning and universal significance. As Coomaraswamy indicates, “The man incapable of contemplation cannot be an artist, but only a skillful workman; it is demanded of the artist to be both a contemplative and a good workman” (65), and this is evident in Van Eyck’s work. The spirit of the work must derive

from the inspiration and aspiration of the artist. Contemplation on the part of the artist leads to the idea, to vision, to transcendence. And the spirit of religion – the awareness of something beyond – is key to the experience of something significant or transcendent.

Eventually, the great malady of twentieth century humanity becomes loss of spirituality, or at least the kind of spirituality that has genuineness and depth and resists the simplistic explanation that was found in the earlier age of Christianity before the rise of science according to Donald Kuspit. This loss of spirituality is reflected in a lost sense of meaning in life as exemplified by existentialist writers such as Sartre and Camus, a lost sense of connectedness and belonging.

Anticipation of this awareness of this loss of spirituality in art was addressed even earlier in the early twentieth century by Wassily Kandinsky in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Donald Kuspit re-evaluated Kandinsky's ideas: Can art offer the same kind of spiritual transcendence that it once did? And, even more importantly to the twentieth century and beyond, can the spiritual be represented without traditional iconography? The problem of art, maintains Kuspit, is to ignite the inner life. But the problem of accessing that inner life arises because the lack of religion in today's society negates a traditional iconography to represent the spiritual. Kandinsky, however, felt color sensation could approximate the spiritual. This idea was grounded in his experience of visiting churches with colored images and realizing that the sensory experience that remained after the experience of a church interior was not the images depicted, but their colors. The employment of color by the artist thus takes on a sensuous (or sensory) form and becomes a spontaneous embodiment of invisible, introspective feeling. Now, this feeling is not the emotional, everyday kind of

emotion, but a “higher” kind of feeling, not associated with “natural existence” as is commonly experienced. It is instead a mood, a spiritual atmosphere - Kandinsky called it “stimmung” (Kuspit). One has to look at the work with “spiritual eyes, eyes that could intuit inner necessity – not eyes that could see only physical material or outer necessity” (Kuspit). In other words, one has to look at the work with the intellect engaged. Thus, as early as 1925 Kandinsky advocated a movement toward the concealed that is revealed through material, recognizable appearances - just as Van Eyck had in the Early Northern Renaissance. The transcendent moment that begins in sensory perception awakens the inner spiritual longing and ends with spiritual enlightenment. Five hundred years after Van Eyck, Kandinsky found this experience in the use of abstraction – instead of realism - and color.

This line of thought brings us to Rothko, who depicted color in his abstractions as a means to travel beyond the boundaries of worldly experience. Rothko’s color, not limited by a recognizable object, creates boundless measurement and indefinable space; yet, at the same time it is materialistic and sensory. For Rothko’s biographer James Breslin these abstractions operate as “doorways between the physical and transcendent worlds” (245). Like Van Eyck and Kandinsky, Rothko begins his works in the sensible world, but instead of depicting it with excruciating detail, he “crush(es) it into tiny particles...pulverizing the familiar identity of things” into abstract colored spaces to produce “a public stage on which the human and the transcendent can be rejoined” (Breslin 245). This destruction of recognizable subject matter left behind luminous color and indeterminate space to “liberate the rigidly bounded self” that was constrained by reality. This perspective provides an understanding of Greenberg’s concept of “aesthetic distance”; the perception of color awakens emotions,

forcing the viewer to step back and evaluate while subsequently stimulating the “spiritual eye” of the viewer to awaken his inner life responding to the color presented to him. The transcendent experience – for Pieper it is the philosophical act – and the exercise of the intellect transports man from the weariness of the world of work into the respite of that which is found in the heart of the universe, the transcendent: this is what Rothko sought. Being open to wonder, whether a philosopher or an artist, to being curious enough to delve into the heart of the aesthetic experience and to see one’s role against the background of being: This is the emotional experience that Pieper encouraged, Rothko sought and that Van Eyck engaged.

But Rothko was a product of his existential and science-based culture. Seeking the transcendent experience without the crutch of religion, he turned away from his Jewish heritage in an effort to depict secular transcendence in his art. If he is not looking to the Beyond to find transcendence, then what is he attempting to depict? According to Ananda Coomaraswamy the first question one should ask when looking at a work of art is, “What is the artist’s purpose?” And the process of looking at the work of art – if it indeed has truth embedded into its iconography - should provide the answer as well as demonstrate how the artist achieved that purpose.

Rothko’s own writings about art are vague and theoretical and provide few clues as to his purpose, so to achieve an understanding of Rothko’s intent, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, who comments on the deconstruction of Christianity, provides some insight into the culture driving Rothko’s art. Nancy’s response to that question of purpose is, according to Alena Alexandrova in her essay “Distinct Art” from *Re-Treating Religion*:

*Deconstructing Christianity with Jean-Luc Nancy*, that the demand of the work of art is an invitation to see “not beyond the visible, nor inside, nor outside, but right at it, on the threshold, like its very oil, its weave, or its pigment” (288). Instead, the image itself is the transcendence, the Beyond. Alexandrova succinctly states, “Nancy would add the enigma of colored blotch does not stand for anything transcendent; it is the representation of its own materiality” (288). Thus, Rothko’s colors and his spaces represent exactly that: floating color planes. It is the effect of those floating panes of color that create a presence for the viewer. He eliminated all recognizable subject matter except color to draw attention to the fact of what it is. Alexandrova further elucidates Nancy’s view that a religious painting “is found not in its representational or narrative aspect...but, in the way it highlights the materiality of its own presence, presents itself to the beholder, addresses itself by intensifying his or her presence” (Alexandrova 288). The work of art, then, does not illustrate the transcendent world, it *is* its own version of transcendence because it intensifies the experience for the viewer: “The event of the painting exceeds its narrative aspect...Any image can convey a story, but the more pious it becomes as narrative, the more it becomes crushed by its subject matter” (288). Rothko intentionally eliminated all recognizable subject matter by crushing it out from his art and relied solely on elements and principles of color and proportion and space to convey his intent of secular transcendence. Not focusing on the religious concept of an afterlife as did Van Eyck, Rothko’s use of color and space directs man inward, so that the salvation and hope of eternal life implied in Christian art becomes rather a “chasm into which life plunges” (Nancy 5) without hope. Art that does not represent the eternal Beyond

is its own meaning; because it is itself created, does not illustrate the sacred but is *itself* sacred, which is Rothko's intent: in other words, Rothko's art is its own salvation.

How can this be, especially when juxtaposed with the religiosity of Van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* which narrates the concept of God's salvation through vivid analogy? Further exploration of Nancy's treatise on deconstructing Christianity elucidates the problem with the secularization of modern man. Nancy rationalizes – remembering that twentieth century man is in an age of scientific rationalization, which precludes the need for God and religion stated earlier in this Chapter – that God, in the act of creating the world as Christian theology would have it, emptied himself into his creation (which is “in his image”), eliminating the separation of creator and creature. God, in emptying himself into his creation, is therefore *absent* (Alexandrova 282). Because he *is* his creation, he cannot be perceived as *separate* from that creation. Any image that claims to represent the divine, thus, is not a depiction of the invisibility of God, but his “*indivisibility* from the world” (Alexandrova 283) that he created. The transcendence achieved by Rothko would not, according to Alexandrova commenting on Nancy, “figure a transcendent, invisible, an inaccessible beyond, but would signify the coincidence of the invisible with the world” (280). Simply stated, the work of religious art “present[s] the *nihil* of creation by representing the world as it is.... For this reason, art cannot be placed in a position of figuring, illustrating or representing the divine. If it claims to be religious, art is exposed to an impossible task or at least a paradox” (280). As Descartes created a logical fallacy of separation of mind and matter, so, too, Christianity created a logical fallacy of separating the Divine from His creation. The implications of this explain Rothko's secular transcendence: transcendence

cannot be separated from the work of art as an imperceptible Beyond as defined by religion, but is centered in man's experience of the work of art itself. Art "is a presentation of open absence;" it does not "illustrate an invisible truth" (Alexandrova 244); rather it is a "presentation of the thing that appears, a presentation of itself...an address or a visitation" (245). Art does not and cannot represent the eternal beyond; it is, as stated before, its own meaning. This is modern man's secular transcendence as depicted in the mature abstractions of Rothko.

The balance of this thesis will explore the two types of transcendences found in the designated artworks of the artists Van Eyck and Rothko while evaluating the significance of their achievements. Specific works by each artist will be scrutinized for manifestation of transcendence. For Van Eyck, panels from the *Ghent* Altarpiece including the Annunciation panels from the outside closed altarpiece will be examined for symbolism and use of space; the Mystic Lamb and Christ the King panels from inside the opened altarpiece will be analyzed for compositional significance, as well as imagery, symbolism, and space. The achievement of spiritual transcendence becomes evident through Van Eyck's intense, complex and multi-layered presentation of Christian dogma. The exploration of Rothko's works include *Untitled* 1948, *Yellow and Blue* 1955, *Orange, Red and Red* 1962 and *The Rothko Chapel*, analyzing features such as composition, space, color, perspective, and abstraction. This scrutiny focuses on the effectiveness of Rothko's achievement of transcendence of a secular nature through looking inward rather than beyond.

This monumental intellectual, philosophical, theological and primarily artistic endeavor to intimate that which is beyond the material universe guides the artistic enquiry of

these artists as they construct their respective visible worlds of reality and of color which, according to philosophers and art historians such as Pieper, Kuspit and Coomaraswamy, are the objects of desire that give significance to human existence. Ultimately the question becomes: Can transcendence be achieved without the culture of the spiritual world?

CHAPTER III  
RELIGIOUS TRANSCENDENCE AND *THE GHENT ALTARPIECE*  
OF JAN VAN EYCK

Jan Van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* presents a view of transfigured reality in rich colors, believable space, meticulously crafted objects, and light-drenched settings. The environments that comprise each of the twenty-four panels are carefully constructed from details of the visible world of Ghent during the early fifteenth century Northern Renaissance. Each object has a realism that hovers on the border between verism and idealism as only Van Eyck could depict. Van Eyck painted during the Late Gothic period, a time of transition toward increased naturalism. Overlapping this period was the Early Renaissance in Italy with its humanism and observed naturalism. These two movements come together in the *Ghent Altarpiece* to enhance its spiritual transcendent effects and to achieve Van Eyck's artistic, religious, and political intentions.

Van Eyck's spiritual transcendence is achieved through an intense, complex and multi-layered vision of reality evoked through a complex interplay of disguised symbolism, believable space, axial composition and, most importantly, light. The mortar that binds these structural elements is laced with ambiguity and layers of symbolic meaning. Van Eyck used his early training as a miniaturist to condense the symbolism and meaning of every detail. Each element is depicted and compositionally arranged with several levels of meaning and significance. This technique, known as disguised symbolism, uses various sources of light to

delineate form and suggest the symbolism. Like a well-orchestrated and structured symphony, even the smallest detail supports the conceptual meaning and visual iconography.

In addition, the placement of the altarpiece dictated the complexity of its design and concept. Rising monumentally behind an altar, the altarpiece reminded the congregation of the dogmas and the Bible stories that are reenacted during every Mass on the altar. During every liturgical rite in St. Bavo's Cathedral, the faithful would meditate upon the imagery of the altarpiece, each time discovering a new layer of concealed, symbolic meaning. Van Eyck strove to create a compelling wealth of meaning, forcing the viewer to participate in the drama of Church doctrine and history over and over again, lifting him up above the concerns of daily life and into spiritual transcendence.

To make this invisible spiritual transcendence possible, Van Eyck created a bridge from the real world into the spiritual world. Van Eyck "reconstructed" reality, as Craig Harbison puts it in his article on "Realism and Symbolism in Early Flemish Painting." Or, more specifically, Harbison calls it an "Eyckian reconstructed reality" (598). The artist, according to Harbison, was not concerned with portraying the natural world with accuracy, as his contemporaries in Italy were, but with portraying his truths in natural terms to conceive of "an imaginary but eternal reality in perfectly understandable ways" (590). The visible world of Ghent in its day-to-day activities and landscapes became a setting for important spiritual events in Van Eyck's paintings. This deviated markedly from the Medieval Gothic presentation in which portrayals of the sacred realm were stylized to demonstrate their other-worldliness. In the altarpiece, the "image of heavenly beatitude is

not presented in an abstract or stylized way that separates heavenly and secular spheres,” but instead Van Eyck employed the Renaissance innovations of naturalism to embed “clear and complex symbolism in apparent portrayals of reality” (Harbison 591), bringing the two realms together. Essentially, Van Eyck narrowed the gap between the physical and spiritual realms by situating the religious in terms of the palpable world of middle-class Ghent.

The first glimpse of this complex interplay of Van Eyck’s artistic vision is the Annunciation panels of the closed altarpiece (Figure 1). The top tier panels are an intensely symbolic narration of the heavenly visitation when an angel announced to Mary she was being called to be the mother of Christ. The sequence begins on the left with the appearance of the Angel Gabriel, spans across two seemingly empty panels, and ends with the receptive Virgin Mary on the far right. These four panels raise a host of ambiguities and complexities that form Harbison’s “Van Eyckian reconstructed reality.” A first glance of Gabriel and Mary does not evoke vivid reality; the neutral coloring and rather stylized postures of the figures are more like sculpted marble than flesh-and-blood beings. Van Eyck seems to be purposely coordinating these figures with the painted sculptural forms in niches above these four panels. Artistically and visually, this creates a unified exterior presentation that will contrast with the rich and resplendent interior of the opened altarpiece. The colorlessness and stark solidity of these figures serves another liturgical purpose. These exterior panels of the closed altarpiece are visible during the seasons of Advent and Lent. These two important seasons of the church’s liturgical calendar anticipate Christ’s coming to earth at Christmas and his triumphant return to his place in heaven at Easter. The seasons of Advent and Lent are times of contemplation of the absence of God’s saving presence on earth. Thus, the

closed altarpiece signifies a world bereft, yet anticipating the physical presence of Christ. The sacrifice of the Mass, which will be performed on the altar before the altarpiece, reenacts the appearance and subsequent departure of Christ. The closed altarpiece then signifies man's yearning for the salvation brought by the Christ, but which has not yet arrived. This yearning reaches joyous fulfillment with the interior panels which open to reveal the Mystic Lamb, the hope of salvation, and God's ultimate return.

Peering in on the stage-like scene of the Annunciation as if through panes of glass, the viewer perceives a setting not of ancient biblical or Roman times, but a contemporary room in a home in Ghent, a sight that the viewer might encounter every day. The far left panel depicts a box-like room that is filled completely all the way to the raftered ceiling by the angel Gabriel. His colorful wings span wall-to-wall, contrasting with the neutrally colored folds of his gown and emphasizing his massive presence. He holds at an angle the lily, symbol of Mary's purity, which leans to the right as if to direct attention across the central panels to Mary, the object of his visit. His other hand points upward, indicating that he has come from heaven. Instead of the traditional halo, he wears a small yet elaborate crown that bears an orb and cross, symbolic of Christianity's domination over the world. His robes are secured around him with an elaborate broach, yet another source of color. These small but significant splashes of color emanating from the jeweled crown and broach are real aspects of wealthy fifteenth century society. They ornament the other-worldly presence of this heavenly being, uniting the earthly and heavenly realms. Gabriel's words, "Ave gracia plena d[omi]n[u]s tecu[um]" ("Hail who are full of grace the Lord is with you"), spread across the central panels in gold move toward Mary and bring her the news of her role as bearer of the

Son of God. Behind Gabriel to his left (the viewer's right) is an open, tri-lobed window that might be found in a church in Ghent. It is early morning with the sun rising, illuminating the landscape with the dawn of salvation and the coming New Jerusalem. This tri-lobed Gothic window mimics the tracery in the niches in the panels below, possibly referencing the three persons in one God of the Trinity. Thus, Van Eyck has constructed a realm delineated from the earthly by a wall with significantly shaped openings. The interplay of interior elements – wings, lily, crown, windows, words – visually and symbolically establish that the angel Gabriel has appeared for the sacred purpose of announcing the dawn of salvation if Mary, who is two panels away, accepts her calling. The symbolic significance of the two intervening panels is intensified by their emptiness, which emphasizes the gulf between Eve's "No" and Mary's anticipated "Yes," or on another level, the void that exists between heavenly and earthly transcendence in the absence of the much anticipated salvation to come.

The drama unfolds quietly as the lily and the angel's words direct the viewer to Mary's panel on the far right. But before one's gaze reaches Mary's panel, it must traverse the two seemingly empty panels in the middle. This transition adds visual and narrative movement, involving the viewer further as "the emptiness also increases the visual leap required to read the scene, and the greater movement of the eye imparts a kind of dynamism to the event" (Ward 211). Instead of blank, the middle panels are exceptionally detailed with the intense realism that characterizes Van Eyck's skill and points to the complex symbolic meaning of the scene. Van Eyck continues in his creation of a "super-essential order by the manipulation of [ordinary] realistic objects to form religious symbols" (Harbison 592). The floor of both middle panels are tiles meticulously arranged using linear perspective to

indicate the vastness of eternal space, even though this is interior space. The orthogonals of the tiles could extend below the frame or above it. In either case, they sustain the “experience of several modes of interpenetrating reality,” according to John Ward, in “Hidden Symbolism in Jan Van Eyck’s Annunciations” (214). The very genuine reality of the town of Ghent, the painted reality of the artist’s vision, and the numerical (perspectival) reality of the tiles on the floor all point to a symbolized infinity. Van Eyck’s deftness depicting endless space inside a cramped interior contributes to the wonderment and awe in the presence of eternity while simultaneously indicating the anticipation of Mary’s acquiescence and the final achievement of heavenly transcendence.

By layering the symbolism and crafting these panels with superior control, Van Eyck draws the viewer’s gaze to this momentous bridging of the real into other-worldliness. The two central panels are a combination of Romanesque and Gothic styling that respectively symbolize Old Testament and New Covenant. For example, the left center panel seems to be empty except for the double-arched window looking out onto a Flemish town. According to Ward, the double column that looks like a single column in the center of the two arches suggests “Christ lying dormant within” the God of the Old Testament, hinting at the New Covenant of the corresponding tri-lobed window in the niche of the next panel (215). This tri-lobed window “suggests the Triune God whose persons are revealed in the New Testament” (Ward 215). The double column is repeated in the niche opening behind the Virgin in the far right-hand panel, suggesting the Incarnation of God as Jesus in her womb. Additionally, the columns are black to “contrast(s) with the light of the rising sun” (Ward 216). In this way the black columns can refer to the sinfulness of man, which required the

making of the tablets of the Ten Commandments, implied by the double-arched shape of the opening. The darkness of these columns merges and dissolves into shadow “as if in response to the light that enters the room and falls on the side wall” (Ward 217). The negative form of the Tablet of Moses suggested by the window reminds the viewer of the Old Testament law that will reach fulfillment in the New Testament. These windows open onto a Flemish cityscape at dawn and a rising sun beyond the horizon, possibly signifying the New Jerusalem of Christ’s Second Coming (Ward 212). The rising sunlight also suggests the dawning of the New Covenant (Ward 213) as well as Divine Grace. All of these elements – both real and transcendent – are needed to illuminate the scene for the viewer in all its complexity and layers of significance. In essence, this left center panel represents the Old Testament world waiting for the coming event of salvation.

The right central panel, depicted with Gothic-styled details, represents the completion of the prophecies of the Old Testament symbolized in the previous panel to its left with its Romanesque styling. The tri-lobed window in this panel is set in a Gothic quatrefoil frame in a Gothic niche, again reminding the viewer of the three-person Triune God. The suspended bronze “vessel made holy” (*The Jerusalem Bible*, Timothy 2:22) represents the Christ, while the brass laver and hanging towel complement the Biblical “Well of Living Waters” and refer to the “image of Christ’s sacrifice which would wash his church clean of sin” following Mary’s acquiescence to the angel’s proclamation (Ward 218). Additionally, the still-life arrangement of vessel, laver and towel is a nod to the ritual of the priest who washes his hands after the Offertory of the Mass. The carefully arranged and depicted real objects engage the faithful along two dimensions; first, visually and

intellectually through their exquisite detailing and symbolism, and second, spiritually and emotionally as they construct the bridge from physical reality to the transcendent experience.

If these central panels seem to be visually empty, they are in fact packed with suspense of anticipation and intense symbolism. Something is happening here, but it cannot be seen except with the help of faith, religion and the hope of salvation. The source of the dawning light is beyond the horizon, behind the cityscape, indicating the beginning and the hope of something new. The rooms are vacant yet significantly pregnant with symbolism and nothing is happening to create an aura of anticipation. All is a moment frozen in time, awaiting Mary's acceptance of her fate. This heightened sense of anticipation leads the viewer to the image of the Virgin in the panel on the far right, completing the horizontal axis of the drama.

The effect of staged drama is completed in the image of the Virgin, for like Gabriel in the far left panel, she fills her niche-like room with voluminous drapery. Following the concave curve of the wings of the angel, her image bends as if to capture the Angel Gabriel's words while simultaneously sending her great acceptance in the words, "Ecce Ancilla Dom[ini]" ("Behold the handmaiden of the Lord"), which appear upside down for God above to read. She gazes heavenward in ecstatic contemplation of the Dove of the Holy Spirit, the bringer of God's gift of salvation. Mary's hands are folded reverently on her breast indicating her piety. The Holy Spirit hovers above the Virgin's head, motionless, seeming more like a marble sculpture than a realistic depiction of the third aspect of the Triune God.

Appearing both otherworldly and physical, the angel and Virgin contribute to the effect of being outside the viewer's time and space (Ward 210).

Van Eyck's intent was to depict the event of the Annunciation not as a realistic event but as a vision that takes the viewer beyond reality. According to Michael Schwartz, he painted the "prophetic anticipation of the event" rather than the actual event (27). He achieves this prophetic anticipation through dramatic staging, symbolic representation, and carefully calculated space. The cumulated effects of the neutral colors renders the figures sculptural rather than realistic. The heavenly contemplative facial expressions on their faces and stilted - practically frozen- poses, and the placement of anachronistic observers in the arched panels above the Annunciation panels - the Old Testament prophets of Micah and Zachariah as well as the Erythrean and Cumean Sybils – all of these contribute to the distance the viewer feels from the scene and add to the prophetic effect in the drama of this event in salvation history. The viewer, viscerally, aesthetically and intellectually engaged, perceives that he is witness to a spiritually significant event.

Below the Annunciation panels are paintings of four evenly spaced and identical Gothic niches. The two center niches contain marble statues of the two St. Johns (the Baptist and the Evangelist). The outer niches show two colorful images of Van Eyck's patrons and sponsors of the altarpiece, Jodocus Vyd on the far left and Isabel Borluut on the far right. The figures in each of these panels are at the eye level so the viewer would look down at their feet and upwards at their heads. The deep space behind each figure in its niche logically supports the prophetic vision shown in the panels above. The symmetrically

balanced arrangement of the bottom panels and sense of depth inside each niche makes this bottom layer a solid base of reality for the prophetic biblical scene above it. As well, these foundational panels are a clear connection to the secular, earthly domain, in anticipation of the sacred to come as the viewer ascends to the panels above. The effect is to distance even further the drama from outside historical time, and make it a timeless representation of Church doctrine (Ward 211), functioning as a transition and preparation for the drama of salvation that lies behind the closed panels of the altarpiece.

While symbolism, placement and space might be enough to make the leap from reality to transcendence in these exterior panels, Van Eyck's subtle yet profound use of light in the Annunciation panels further transports the viewer. The conflicting and ambiguous sources of light leave the viewer a bit uneasy, but, at the same time, firmly grounded in reality. Light illuminates the scene from two sources: one, from the windows inside the scene and streaming toward the viewer; and second, the light outside the scene for it illuminates the figures in the panels from behind the viewer, pulling him into the drama. The light emanating from the window behind Gabriel on the left travels across the niche-like windows in the center and finally reach Mary's panel on the right where it passes through a carafe of water, a traditional medieval symbol of the Incarnation. On the other hand, the light from behind the viewer casts shadows on the interior floor from the wood frame of the altarpiece and propelling the viewer into this highly charged spiritual scene. The ambiguous sources of these two lights represents for the artist "the dynamic character of the rising glory of the Lord; the eternal nature of his illumination, the drama of the Incarnation, and the perpetual promise of Redemption that it brings" (Ward 214). The multiple layers of

meanings implied by the light, at once contradictory and ambiguous, deepen the significance of the iconography and draws the viewer into deeper intellectual involvement. Light may have little physical substance but here it contains inherently substantial symbolic implications. The interior light coming from behind Gabriel implies the Divine Light from the Rising Sun/Son that will soon inhabit the world. This divine light collides with the earthly exterior light seemingly streaming through the chapel windows behind the viewer. This exterior light illuminates the interior of the scene and casts shadows that extend into the image where heavenly and earthly light meet on sacred ground. This perspective invites the viewer to bear witness to this important event and to joyfully anticipate God's salvation.

Opening these closed panels of the *Ghent Altarpiece* reveals the result of the fulfillment of salvation only announced on the exterior panels (Figure 2). The interior panels contrast sharply with the neutral colors of the exterior. Resplendent in gold, jewel-toned colors, brocade and velvety landscapes, the composition of the panels and the scale of the figures denote the heavenly realm. The focal point of the lower tier of panels is the Mystic Lamb set in a steeply rising and rapidly receding Flemish landscape. The lamb is surrounded by the *chori beatorum*, the throngs of the blessed bereaved. The row of panels above depict monumentally proportioned figures of God, Mary and St. John, the musical angels and, anchored at either end, soberly realistic images of Adam and Eve.

Placed before the sacrificial Lamb in the center of the lower tier of panels is a life-giving fountain, one of the oldest symbols of salvation. In the upper tier of panels above the fountain and the lamb is the throne of God as described in the Book of Revelation 22:1. The

fountain had come to be associated with a meeting place of all the faithful, and thus acts as a boundary between Old and New Testament, heaven and earth. The vertical axis of God, dove, lamb and fountain divide the central panels as a logical convergence for supercharged mystical elements, all infused with color, symbolism and light to transport the viewer into transcendence.

In the lower central panel, the central altar with the Lamb is situated in a flowery meadow and surrounded by two semicircles of angels that define the sacred sacrificial space. Eight angels are praying, four carrying instruments of the passion, and two incensing. They set a tone of reverence for the Lamb and the sacrifice of Christ. As well, they provide a barrier from the earthly throng converging upon the Lamb from all directions. The Lamb, with its blood spurting from a wound on its breast into a chalice, clearly connects with the miracle of Transubstantiation that occurs before the altarpiece on the altar where the sacrifice of the Mass is celebrated. Similar to the Annunciation panels on the exterior, there hovers above the Mystical Lamb another sculpted image of a dove representing the Holy Spirit. But here the dove appears like the sun, emanating thin golden rays and symbolizing the love of God the Father manifested in His Son, the Lamb. The foreground of this panel is a bird's-eye-view with receding and rising elements that draw the viewer into the scene, making him a participant. The meadow behind the altar recedes easily while the altar itself is shown in a believable foreshortened perspective, spilling forward toward the viewer in a wide-angle perspective. The effect is to include the viewer in the community of saints as throngs of believers converge on the altar of the Mystic Lamb from the four corners of the world (Panofsky 212).

To the left of the fountain on the sacred meadow are “those who believed in Christ even before He came” (Panofsky 209). Among this large Old Testament group closest to the viewer are the Minor Prophets, the Patriarchs, and Gentiles who are “Christians by desire” (209). The white-robed figure in the center is Virgil, who was “the greatest pagan witness to Christ’s Divinity” (209). Further left, in the next panels are the Knights and Judges. These are not included on the sacred meadow, but instead trod on hard ground, which would “seem to express the rough ways on which mankind must travel” (226). Even so, they ride prancing horses as if to indicate their elevated status. Approaching the fountain from the right are those who experienced Christ. First are his twelve Apostles, seven of whom are kneeling, and clad in white robes. Behind them in red chasubles is a group of Martyrs, including St. Stephen, the first martyr, and St. Livin, one of the special patron saints of the city of Ghent. These throngs of believers continue to converge from the two panels on the far right. Here, the Hermits and Pilgrims tread a rocky road with no steeds to carry them, indicating their humble status. Approaching the viewer above and behind the sacrificial altar on either side are the Holy Virgins on the right and the Confessors on the left to complete the cardinal points of the earth converging on “the green pastures of salvation” to venerate the Lamb (226). In addition, the placement of the figures in the foreground with their backs to the viewer in Giottoesque fashion, invites the viewer to join the throngs approaching the Mystic Lamb of Salvation, to participate in the saving grace of God.

The sacred meadow continues into the middle distance rising behind the Mystic Lamb and the Communion of Saints with green rolling hills, exotic trees, and further in the distance townscapes piercing a luminous sky. A golden semi-circular disk at the top center of

the panel contains the dove of the Holy Spirit showering the community below with thin golden rays of divine light. This orb is not, however, the source of earthly illumination for the scene. Rather the illumination seems to again emanate from two distinct sources, from the right foreground behind the viewer and somewhere beyond the horizon in the distance. Here, then, is a clear bifurcation of light into Divine Light that brings salvation and earthly light that reveals physical forms. Van Eyck defies the laws of nature to show the supernatural character of the light that comes from God, and carnal or earthly nature of the light of the natural world. Panofsky calls this a “curious conflict” that emphasizes not the birth of Christ announced on the exterior panels, but instead signifies the rebirth of Christ in His Second Coming. Theologically speaking, the viewer is confronted “not with a contrast between heaven and earth, but with a duality of heavens,” the first peopled with the blessed above and the second reaching down to include the Church on earth (Panofsky 212).

Overarching this scene is the looming presence of the divine figures above the Mystic Lamb panel. If the bottom panels blur the boundary between heaven and earth, the panels above make a clear distinction between the two. By their sheer size and visual weight, as well as their dogmatic significance, the images of Mary, St. John, and the Supreme Deity practically overwhelm the confluence of the earthly and mystical below them. As Erwin Panofsky points out, these three middle panels in the top tier contrast significantly with those below in their “very flavor of oldness and solemnity” (221). These three figures seem almost unaware of the scene below. They are engrossed in their own world and are a throwback to the medieval “sense of the hieratic and the archaic which is characteristic of Eyckian art” (221). They certainly do not represent a *Deesis* or intercession that is so

common in Byzantine and Romanesque art. Rather than interceding in the real world below them, a solemn remoteness separates their absolute realm from the scene below, preventing direct contact (220). Historical speculation proposes that these upper panels originally had another purpose, possibly as a separate altarpiece. In any event, their present compositional and proportional arrangement in the *Ghent* Altarpiece provide a visual and symbolic contrast between Christian dogma above and human spiritual aspiration below.

In these panels, the scale of the God, Mary and St. John figures are “as colossal as that in the lower ones is small,” as if contrasting this world and the next (210). Furthermore, they echo the self-absorption and aloofness of the Annunciation panels on the exterior panels of the altarpiece. Observing the Mystical Lamb in the sacred meadow, the viewer would “expect to be transported into an Empyrean realm above the clouds” (210). Instead, Van Eyck offers a solidly realistic view of the Heavenly Realm, one with tiled floors, elegantly carved niches, and deep folds of richly detailed robes. Here is a world larger but still reminiscent of human life, at the same time remote and uninvolved with earthly matters.

Rather than being put off by the remoteness of the figures in these panels, the viewer is invited to look more closely, enticed by Van Eyck’s exquisite detail and skill in depicting the ornaments of this world in terms of the Heavenly domain. Ananda Coomaraswamy writes of the importance of such ornamentation in art in his article, “Why Exhibit Works of Art?”: “The beauty of anything unadorned is not increased by ornament but made more effective by it. Ornament is characterization; ornaments are attributes” (6). The ornaments of the Supreme Being as depicted here have metaphysical value, intended to transform the

anthropomorphic image of God to give it spiritual function. The ornamentation of hammered and embroidered gold, glittering jewels, encrusted crown and scepter, papal tiara, and rich velvets and brocades are metaphorical attributes of a transcendent Being, rendered in terms of the limits of human understanding.

Van Eyck has spatially arranged the images of the Triune God to form a central vertical axis around which figures converge. In the lower panels the Mystic Lamb, fountain of life and image of the Holy Ghost form the base of the vertical axis that divides the lower panels. Above this sits the ambiguous figure of God the Father – or perhaps the Resurrected Jesus enthroned – which completes the axis on the upper panels. According to Panofsky, this axial arrangement can be read two ways, vertically or horizontally. Read horizontally, the central figure of God, the embodiment of all three divine persons in one God, the Almighty One and King of Heaven and Earth, is seated between the images of Mary, His earthly mother, and St. John, His evangelist. Read vertically from the top down, the central figure is God the Father with the Crown of Glory at his feet. He is blessing the achievement of His Son on earth below, including the Mystical Lamb, dove and fountain in the lower panel. This spatial placement along a central axis is no accident, for it explains in visual form the mystery of the Christian Triune God. The viewer is able to understand the concept of three Persons in One God – the Trinity - in clear visual terms.

Erwin Panofsky asserts that Van Eyck's depiction of the Communion of Saints and God flanked by Mary and St. John coincides with a revival of Augustinianism that generated a new style of "All Saints" pictures. The central figure of God as a man in the prime of life

and as an enthroned papal figure was derived from a French translation of St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*. The cloth of honor behind Him depicts the "Christological symbol of the Pelican in Her Piety, ensconced in grapevines and the inscription 'IHESUS XPS'" (213), which means "Jesus, the Christ." The pearl embroidery of the skirt of His mantle spells out "Rex Regum, Dominans dominantium" ("King of Kings, Lord of Lords") which does not name the Father, Son or Holy Ghost, but implies all three in One, further enhancing the mystery of the Triune Deity. The Virgin Mary and St. John are given prominence because they are leaders of the Community of Saints, although here they do not appear to be leading the saints, but are instead remote and uninvolved (213). The ambiguity surrounding the ornate depiction of the central Deity and the remoteness of the saints on either side accentuate the unfathomable mysteries of Church dogma and how these are manifested in the earthly realm below, leading to deeper intellectual involvement on the part of the viewer.

In the arched panels on either side of the Mary-God-St. John panels are the musical angels, perhaps the only wingless angels ever depicted in fifteenth century art (Panofsky 214). These heavenly beings have a realism and individuality that only Van Eyck could depict. They strain to sing and play instruments. Their elaborate brocade robes against an infinite open sky contrast sharply with the box-like niches of the three Blessed Beings in the center panels and the darkened niches for Adam and Eve on either end. Again, disparity in scale adds incongruity to the entirety of the altarpiece. This incongruity in itself is significant because the disparity between large and small figures "brings out an antithesis between divinity and humanity, Heaven and earth" and supports the notion that the large scale is reserved for figures of supernatural greatness, while smaller size is relegated to the blessed

on earth (Panofsky 211). Swartz indicates that this disparity contributes to his innovative reading of the altarpiece, as each panel is intended to be read on its own merits, while the variety in size and shape of the panels represents the “interrelated staging of the parts” of the drama of Salvation (Swartz 28). In this sense, the *Ghent Altarpiece* can be compared to a modern video that conveys the story of Salvation in all its complexity by presenting the primary dramatic as well as ancillary events.

Taken as a whole, all of these scenes and events and concepts contribute to a more complete understanding of Church doctrine. If he were a contemporary video producer and director, Van Eyck would begin with an aesthetic experience, guiding the viewer into the contemplation of theology and dogma of a spiritual nature. His intent would be to forge “a wisdom to be applied to everyday matters” (Coomaraswamy, “Why Exhibit,” 7). This is Van Eyck’s bridge to transcendence in this altarpiece, for he uses his art not to imitate the appearance of everyday things, but to show clearly the *symbolically rich nature* of those things and elevate the experience of viewers to religious transcendence. Van Eyck strives to make the heavenly world concrete and tangible, uplifting human vision into a vision of the divine. Sensory aesthetics is not the point of the altarpiece’s iconography. Rather, it is an education in dogma and theology with a clear intent to engage and affect the viewer in a fundamental and metaphysical way. Coomaraswamy indicates that “the human value of anything made by a man is determined by the coincidence in it of beauty and utility, significance and aptitude” (8). Van Eyck the artist entices and engages the viewer’s imagination visually and aesthetically with the intention of deeper intellectual and spiritual involvement, lifting the viewer’s gaze above and beyond earthly quotidian concerns to the path of salvation.

## CHAPTER IV

### SECULAR TRANSCENDENCE IN SELECTED WORKS OF MARK ROTHKO

As does Jan Van Eyck in the *Ghent Altarpiece*, Rothko uses color, space, symbolism, light and size in his late abstractions to cross the bridge from reality into transcendence. For both artists these physical properties engage the viewer's intellect in a meaningful encounter with what lies in and beyond the painted image. It is here, too, where the two artists diverge in what constitutes transcendence. The Christian tradition drives the vision of Van Eyck; Rothko, on the other hand, rejects all religious tradition - including his Jewish tradition - and seeks to access something that, to him, is more fundamental, more meaningful to man's confrontation with the infinite. By divorcing the search for transcendence from religion, Rothko secularizes the spiritual experience, forcing the viewer inward – not heavenward – to find transcendence. Rothko's search for transcendence parallels modern man's encounter with existentialism, which emphasizes a world bereft of religious significance and forces the viewer to find his own individual meaning. This contributes to the tragic quality of Rothko's mature abstractions in contrast to Van Eyck's triumph in the joyous salvation of man while accessing transcendence.

Neither Van Eyck nor Rothko wrote about their works, which makes their paintings all the more mysterious. Rothko's son Christopher, in his introduction to his father's compilation of philosophical writings, writes that if Rothko "could have expressed the truth – the essence of these works – in words he probably would not have bothered to paint them" (xiii). Even Rothko said of himself that he is a painter of ideas. But what are the

ideas, the baffled viewer might ask, in a Rothko abstraction? Van Eyck, in contrast, expressed his ideas explicitly with familiar objects and scenes of life in Ghent. He made the spiritual world palpable and understandable. Rothko's abstract vision, on the other hand, contained no recognizable object or scene with which the viewer might find a clue to its significance, other than vague window-like shapes of floating color that open onto a void. Without anything concrete on which to hook meaning, the frustrated viewer is compelled to construct his own version of meaning in the works. This search to find meaning may be deeper and wider than might be accessible in a more representational work of art, however, because an act of imagination on the part of the viewer is required. This act of creative thinking, in turn, becomes a challenge to the thought process, making the exploration of Rothko's works an intellectual experience. Freed from religious and representational constraints, Rothko's abstractions are open-ended adventures of discovery, leading to revelations and, ultimately, to transcendent experiences, albeit of a secular and personal nature. One might call it an existential experience.

Early on, Rothko delved into transcendence in search of spiritual significance through figural representation but later moved to abstraction in the course of his life's work. His early figural works were informed by myth, Greek tragedy and the spirituality of ancient art that he and other Abstract Expressionists of the 1940s felt modern man had abandoned. James Breslin's biography of Rothko's life and work speaks to the artist's search to connect the past with the present when he states that, according to Rothko, "modern man has rejected the religious and social myths that once sustained collective life" culminating in a painting style that "represents a rootless solitude, a painful imprisonment which is the cost

of modernity” (106). Rothko and his fellow Abstract Expressionists eventually had to reject myth and its imagery as inadequate to explain the evils that evolved from World War II. As myth had become inadequate, the Abstract Expressionists of Rothko’s circle moved toward a more complete abstraction, while retaining hints of the figural grounding from whence they came. This abstraction opened onto deeper meanings as well as broader interpretations that would not have been possible with a more representational style. Without figures or monsters, or gods, Rothko would “invent a modern art...which could enact his inner drama” (Breslin 176). This inner drama is his search for art that would convey spiritual significance in a fundamental and personal way, pointing to a modern existentialist approach to replace the traditional religious one.

The ambiguity of meaning that arises out of a lack of any representational figuration leaves his art open to interpretation by critics and viewers. Rothko’s intention was that his “open, empty canvases invite – in fact they rely upon – a kind of associative freedom on the part of the viewer” because he did not want to “paralyze viewers with preconceived notions” (308, 309). By encouraging his viewers’ mental engagement, he expands the potential for personal involvement with his works. Anna Chave indicates in her introduction to *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* that his “guarding of the indeterminacy of his images might well be taken as an indication that an abstract mode of expression appealed to him...because of the very elusiveness or nonliteralness of its reference and the multiplicity of meanings it could therefore enfold” (32). Rothko made it clear that abstract painting encompassed the *zeitgeist* of his time, because the real unifying element of his time was belief “that all phenomena can submit to generalization” (Rothko xxxvii; Breslin 27). What this means is

that abstraction essentially reasserts the reality of the unknown as a positive element of existence, just as the ancients before Christianity encountered their fear of the unknown and the void of eternity in their art and drama. Rather than mere commentary on the state of existence, Rothko's abstractions speak to the "essentially human in us" not tied to any particular theology, that "can be found only within the unknown space of the private self" (Rothko xxvii; Breslin 242). Accessing the "essentially human" without the context of religious significance secularizes transcendent experience because the viewer is forced inward to find and construct meaning, rather than looking to a comforting theological structure.

An example of Rothko's early movement toward complete abstraction of forms is found in *Untitled 1948* (Figure 3). Organic vivid hues of red, blue, green, yellow and black blend, hover, and melt into a neutral background of beige, white and grays, as if one were looking through an out-of-focus lens. The viewer might feel that if only he could sharpen and focus that lens, then all would be revealed. The beige background seems to swirl forward in the top left like a fog, feathering around black and red and yellow cloudy, amorphous and indeterminate shapes. The stratified composition floats and drifts like strands of seaweed in an aquarium; the viewer feels that if he were to shut his eyes and open them after a few seconds, the scene would be quite different. This effect disorients the viewer, creating emotional tension and anxiety, but ultimately engaging rational thought about what is going on. Emotion enters in when there is a breach between perception and understanding: subject and viewer are conflated. What is the subject? And where does the viewer stand in relation to the subject? This creates a sense of immediacy as well as frustration in that the viewer becomes an active, questioning participant in the work. The

chameleon-like “content” of this painting could just as easily shift in meaning depending upon what the viewer – or critic – brings to it in terms of meaning and significance.

Rothko cultivates the emotional power of color in his pulsing, shifting forms in *Untitled 1948*. The abstract nature of the imagery coupled with color associations multiplied by the expansiveness of colored space brings to bear the power of suggestion: that Rothko’s work intimates figure, architecture, nature, past, present, future, entombment, subconscious and emotion, leaving it to the viewer to enter and expand beyond what the work suggests. The floating shapes found in *Untitled 1948* are not mere fields of color but substitutes for figures, not clouds or spaces or voids, but active, shifting, changing performers in ethereal space (Chave 184). Rothko had conceived a way “to describe the brink or border between being and non-being, presence and absence, by eliminating crisp borders and making them shadowy, soft and transitional. This, in essence, was his subject” (Chave 184). Rather than symbolic use of color, it is spatial ambiguity that intimates landscape and figure, each enveloping the other, and ultimately the viewer.

Anna Chave indicates that these untitled paintings of Rothko’s transitional period of the late 1940s have “an undirected searching quality – with their amorphous, often splotchy, puffy or wispy shapes drifting almost aimlessly about” indicating the artist’s struggle to separate himself from figural representations of his earlier works (71). And even though works such as this are decidedly abstract, viewers can tentatively recognize “indistinct or fragmentary images” in them (73). In the case of *Untitled 1948*, one might see a reclining figure, a hovering bird, or even a street scene. These ambiguous shapes are not so much

muted backgrounds or backdrops but rather “performers” as Rothko himself calls them, similar to after-images once the figurative has been eliminated, after-images that perform on the stage of his canvas (*Writings on Art* 58).

In 1949, as Rothko hovered on the verge of his 1950s abstractions he prophetically wrote that his purpose was to move toward “clarity; toward the elimination of all obstacles between painter and idea” (*Writings on Art* 65). According to Stephen Polcari’s article “Nothingness Made Visible: The Case of Rothko’s Paintings,” the same happens to the viewer of his works: “The viewer is engulfed in a mature Rothko painting just as Rothko’s earlier figures were engulfed by their environments” (58). This absorption of the individual by his environment becomes the theme of Rothko’s works, because according to Polcari, “he always wanted his work to move out into space and envelop the viewer within his own cultural and emotional tradition” (60). Enveloping the viewer creates, then, an immediate emotional experience for the viewer without the distraction of a specific figure or object. The effect of engulfment is enhanced also by the scale of Rothko’s paintings, which were large and mural-sized on crisply edged rectangular canvases. These clearly defined borders play off the fuzzy-edged floating rectangles of color in the compositions. Rothko admitted that he painted large pictures because he wanted “to be intimate and human. However you paint the larger picture you are in it. It isn’t something you command” (*Writings on Art* 71). Thus he creates an effect of intimacy and involvement in engulfment as well as expansiveness and infinity. Understanding the nature and the boundaries of the expansiveness become a problem for the viewer in that he is forced to reflect on his own definitions of where and what he is, as he has no point or object for reference . He must

confront an opening suggesting a door or window in the abstraction to look inward to reflect on himself in relation to the space created for him by the canvas.

The ambiguities, dichotomies and contradictions make a simple classification of Rothko's art difficult, but Anna Chave points to them as "simple icons of complex thought" (113). Deceptive simplicity points to an even more complex web of meaning. Rothko adapts "a landscape schema to constitute an abstract figure" creating an "exceptionally pregnant image-sign" (132). The figure-ground relation is at once ground-consuming figure and figure-consuming ground, "a way of imagining the relation between a human being and his or her environment" (133). Figure and ground devour each other so that neither constitutes subject. And even though Rothko was not a man of nature, the landscape is invoked in the expansiveness of his forms. Paul Kane makes a case for the use of Rothko's landscape-like imagery in his "Inner Landscapes as Sacred Landscapes." In this article Kane invokes the romantic poet Wordsworth, for "when the outward eye is made quiet" by a view of Rothko-esque expansiveness of color "insight is made possible through an inward eye" (211). That is, something inside us responds to what is outside us, which in this case is the Rothko abstraction. The viewer experiences self-transcendence in which "one's horizon of being expands without bounds" (212). Kane resolves the fact that Rothko is not an artist of nature by explaining that the "inner landscape...constitutes visionary fields, where there is a spatial sense of inwardness that is like a landscape but without necessarily calling one forth" (214). It is as if Rothko goes so far with abstraction in creating ethereal borders that the viewer is simultaneously "outside looking in and inside looking beyond" (222). This experience is made sacred because the viewer has to come out again "into a landscape of such visionary

desolation that one felt that it is to have been made sacred by despair” (222). What lay beyond was either nothing or all, “but there was no mistaking the motivation that drove the painting; the confrontation with death,” the ultimatum of eternity (222). This existentialist concept of confrontation with death points to the artist’s purpose of transcendence, in which the viewer is transported via an encounter with a veiled depiction of the void that lies beyond the reality in front of him. In such a setting he is forced to confront his own beliefs about the meaning in the void.

Figure 4, *Yellow and Blue*, 1955, demonstrates the color-filled landscape effect that Rothko utilized in his early abstractions featuring floating horizontal rectangles and squares. It is natural for the human mind to look for something recognizable in an abstract work; an instinctive reaction might suggest a deep blue sea, bright yellow sky, either at sunset or sunrise, floating in orange atmosphere. The blurred edges suggest shifting and changing atmosphere; just as the mind has set its sights on the content of the paint, it shifts as surely as the atmosphere will shift during sunrise or sunset. Limited space hovers, expands and begins to envelop the viewer. There is something beyond that yellow sky, as the yellow veils the orange behind it. The sense of space expands with the blue abyss opening up below. That sea becomes an ominous opening, waiting to engulf. As the yellow expands, the blue contracts. How far beyond the orange can it go? As there is no figure or object more for the viewer’s vision to latch onto – to keep from visually entering the space created by the floating veils of color – the mind then is free to wander into a transcendent, floating, mystical space of color. The joyous yellow counters the abysmal blue that lies beneath all existence. The viewer becomes anxious about the unknown, yet is inevitably drawn to it.

Rothko puts the darker color below here, although in later works he will put the dark color above to demonstrate that emptiness and dread hover above life's joys.

In spite of the tension he creates in his works, Rothko consoles the viewer with a vision of transcendent beauty as his canvases surround the viewer with pulsing, colorful voids while he constructs a stage of unlimited space on which “the human and the transcendent can be rejoined” (Breslin 286, 245). He creates the tension of a drama by combining unresolved oppositions such as undefined boundaries, advancing and receding space, construction and destruction of imagery, while the floating panes of color simultaneously act out hopelessness and aspiration. Breslin explains that Rothko’s process of “pulverizing reality . . . delivers the viewer from the solidities and divisions of ordinary physical and social realities” as the “advancing movements” of his floating panes of color “can make them feel intrusive; their diffusion and brooding emptiness arouse uneasiness” (281). His abstractions confront the viewer with loss and the anxieties surrounded by the absence of defined boundaries, while at the same time the voids advance toward the viewer, surrounding and engulfing him. His works “offer[s] an unexpected and unprecedented resolution not of a painting problem or of a private conflict but ‘of an eternally familiar need’” that is acted out on his canvases (Breslin 245). These abstractions embody the clash of opposites, for while essentially a pessimist by nature in his personal life, Rothko’s canvases convey an uplifting unity of vision that offers consolation in their beauty and radiance, as if he were searching for something to believe in or something to hope for. Just as his veiled colors hover indistinctly above their canvases, so their significance lies in the transcendence of the human situation.

The more one explores Rothko's meanings, the more one seeks to define his forms. Research into the history and tradition that compelled Rothko to create his abstractions reveals this complex and interrelated web of meaning that defies clear-cut definition. Critics have explored a variety of influences that informed Rothko and carried him into his abstractions. Peter Fuller in his review of a Rothko retrospective at the Tate Gallery in London analyzes his works as incorporating Matisse's single-color room environments, the formless space of Roman wall paintings and the structural integrity of Greek temples (545). Figure 5, *Orange, Red and Red*, 1962, illustrates uniformity of hue, structural integrity and formless space. Deep red forms the background to a large rectangle of vivid orange suspended between a lower strip of deep red and an upper strip of even deeper red. The edges are blurred and rough, propelling the orange rectangle toward the viewer as if breaking free of the deep expanse suggested by the dark red background. The choice of orange gives the rectangle a power and a moving energy. The red rectangles below and above the orange appears to recede behind the engulfing mist of darker red behind, pulling them back away from the viewer. Rothko here uses analogous colors of orange and red rather than contrasting hues of his earlier abstractions. This unity and conformity of color, ground, and shape coalesce an expressive completeness that allows for the possibility of transcendence. Stephen Polcari further indicates that Rothko "took Clyfford Still's abstractions, translating them into light and dark values balanced equably in an all-over composition, and taking them a step further by incorporating figure, landscape and colored light" (50). Robert Rosenblum in *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* explores religious expression using untraditional iconography. In his chapter on Rothko, he writes that an

abstract pictorial language emerged in artists such as Rothko and Barnett Newman as they continued the romantic search for art that could convey a sense of overpowering mystery (215). This pictorial language had its roots in Romantic as well as in American traditions. Examples of how Americans view primal nature can be found in American artists such as Georgia O’Keeffe, Albert Pinkham Ryder, and Augustus Vincent Tack. Rothko’s art, he states, is “predicated upon the imagery of landscape” creating “luminous voids” and awe-inspiring symmetry” (Rosenblum 215). Rothko knits together past and present, predicated on the compelling human need to find what lies beyond the void of eternity.

Additionally, Surrealism influenced Rothko. The Surrealists wanted to make the subconscious and mysterious comprehensible, and Rothko and other Abstract Expressionists pursued the techniques of these artists but without the irrationality of dreams. Their focus was instead on their search to access the spiritual, and they achieved this by “courting ambiguity and creating an aura in their work that would take viewers away from the contemplation of a painting as an object and evoke the mystery of being” (Hobbs 302). They relied on the medium (oil and color) to convey meaning rather than the content of irrational dreams. Viewers find it easier to reject an irrational subject (Surrealism’s dream imagery) than to reject a suggestion or intimation of something more (Abstract Expressionists’ use of color, shape and space); thus abstraction is more compelling and more relevant to the twentieth century viewer. Ambiguity is a defining and integral feature of Abstract Expressionism, clearly separating it from Surrealism’s irrationality. Rothko sought a spiritual basis for art through abstraction, to reveal a spiritually transcendent state by concealing any recognizable object. He ambiguously stated that his art contained an object

and at the same time denied that the work was about the object. In this way he reveals the spiritual nature of his intent. His meaning thus points to the sacred space of the work itself which transports the viewer to transcendence.

Rothko's abstractions of the 1950s and 1960s demonstrate a movement from light to dark. Some critics have pointed out that this runs parallel with the artist's personal outlook on life, moving from optimistic to pessimistic. The works of this period contrast light and dark, and juxtapose light with dark hues, increasingly creating a subtle emanation of transient light. These veils of colored light continue the effect of forms "emerging, coalescing, receding and dissolving" that reveal a figural suggestion of a presence in the floating, veiled and shifting space (Chave 77). The transient light – as in a sunrise or sunset – that pervades the works "create the impression that the painting itself was the source from which light, or sometimes living darkness, emanated" (Fuller 545). This effect emulates the very act of transitioning through the cycles that pervade human existence, such as dusk into darkness, dawn into day, spring into summer, joy into melancholy, perception into realization, ambiguity into understanding, rejection into acceptance, life into death. Rothko's hovering forms suggest the "Symbolist brink that he discovered through Surrealism" (Chave 184). Rothko came to understand how to portray the hovering-on-the-edge state of irresolution or indecipherability, manipulating it by creating tension through suspension, using the psycho-automatonic techniques of the Surrealists but rejecting their classical reliance on figural representations (Chave 184).

Increasingly, Rothko sought to orchestrate the display of his works, going so far as to isolate them in their own setting so that his viewer could get the full transcendent experience of them. His ideal, according to John Golding, “would have been a series of environments peopled by his own canvases” (228). This type of environment would be the most effective way to achieve the transcendent experience for his viewers, who could not be distracted from the intended purpose of dialoguing with the works and turning transcendentally inward. In discussing the Harvard Murals, Breslin states that “Rothko imagined his mural rooms as creating a space which freed viewers from the pressures and distractions of modern life – *abstracted* them, in other words, from the burdens of their social, historical contexts” (448) In the famous anecdote about Rothko that begins his biography, Rothko withdrew his commission from the Seagram Mural project because a restaurant in the basement of a building was not the ideal situation for viewing his works and achieving his intent. However, one of the last projects of his artistic career availed him the opportunity to create an environment with his canvases: *The Rothko Chapel* of 1967 (Figure 6), commissioned by the de Menils of Houston, Texas. Here was Rothko’s chance to access through his canvases the spiritual transcendence that he had so desired throughout his life, even though the building was originally intended as a Catholic chapel – ultimately became an ecumenical chapel - and he was a fallen-away Jew. This commission came at the time of Rothko’s darkest color palette as well as a low point in his career and personal life. His increasingly obscure canvases from this time period reflect what most critics and biographers - especially Anna Chave and James Breslin - consider to be his inner darkness.

Rather than working in isolation on this chapel project, Rothko had to work with a team of architects, patrons, designers, university administrators, budgets, accountants, and others to realize the chapel project. After a series of setbacks, conflicts and finally collaborations, the formal design emerged that reflected the history and tradition of Christianity: an octagonal room of Christian Orthodoxy, fourteen paintings that could potentially reference Christ's fourteen Stations of the Cross, and triptychs that resonate the style of an altarpiece in their monumentality and three-part divisions. Additionally, the Crucifixion is invoked in one triptych's hierarchical arrangement of a central raised canvas flanked by two slightly down-shifted canvases. But here the iconography stops, because, as Anna Chave states, "absence had come to the fore" for in executing the canvases Rothko kept to his customary floating voids, "working with a structure of traces, constructing a play between presence and absence" (Chave, *Subjects in Abstraction*, 196). Rothko was determined to "dissolve the painting/room relationship, just as his paintings had dissolved the figure/ground relationship" (Breslin 449). Since he had complete control of the space, he created, according to Breslin "his most vacant, and least accessible, work" (467). Here Rothko could finally execute the type of canvases needed to create a sacred environment for a transcendent experience, free from distraction.

Through two painted black doors, the viewer enters a small foyer that leads into the Chapel proper. The glass doors from the foyer take the visitor into an octagonal room with a series of fourteen dark maroon canvases installed over gray stucco walls. The main wall contains an apse that is set back six feet with a triptych on its wall, giving it prominence, like the main altar in a Christian chapel. The other walls hold single canvases and another

exhibits another triptych. Overhead is a baffled skylight to deflect the brilliance of the sun, allowing for shifting nuances of illumination throughout the day. In the center are meditation benches. The canvases are a dense, dark floating maroon color, sharply contrasting with the colorful luminance of Rothko's earlier works and several brightly colored works on paper that he created after the Chapel. The canvases are among his largest and most engulfing, the largest being 15' by 11'.

Ironically, Rothko committed suicide a year before the construction of the Chapel was completed. Critics are prone to connect the darkness of the canvases with the darkness of Rothko's life leading up to his death. In an interview with NPR (National Public Radio) in 2011, Rothko's son Christopher stated that the experience of the Chapel is "really my father's gift, in a sense, to somebody who comes to the chapel. It's a place that will really not just invite, but also demand a kind of journey" (Dowell, "Meditation and Modern Art Meet," NPR). Even Christopher, following his first visit to the Chapel, said that he found the paintings did not communicate with him, and that they were at first "unnerving." However, after spending time with the canvases, he said, "The time just sort of stopped running. I can't even tell you where I went at that point. I just know it was a Rothko experience unlike one I've had before." This demonstrates that the transcendent experience needs time as well as color, space, and light for involvement on the part of the viewer and to create a point of reference for symbolic significance. Essentially, Rothko makes the nothingness he sees visible to his viewer through his choice of color and a depiction of space that imparts a luminescence to his canvas, drawing the viewer in over a period of meditative contemplation. He uses the tools of his reality – color, space, light, canvas and paint – to

symbolize his vision in order to access a transcendent experience and share it with the viewer.

In the Rothko Chapel, the artist turned away from the luminescence of his earlier abstractions, where color depicted with airy lightness and spatial ambiguity acted as the primary subject matter for the viewer to contemplate. Instead in the Chapel he turns the viewer's attention to dark, empty voids. The indeterminate, shadowy and vaporous layers of paint reveal a depth that obfuscates, mystifies and compels the viewer into an inward-seeking space outside of time and lacking substance. His canvases lack even the dependable – yet floating – rectangular bars that the viewer might visually hold onto. For the viewer this can be unnerving, unsettling and even hopeless. Essentially, looking into these canvases is like looking into nothingness or eternity. Breslin describes the large triptych on the apse-like wall as “resemble[ing] openings, immense and formidable triple gates, inviting entry into a cavernous space, filled with a suffocatingly dense, gray-black smoke” (477). By eliminating any association with color or object on the canvases, Rothko compels the viewer to contemplate the formal implications of their presences: shifting, ethereal space, containment, diffusion and the infinity – or abyss - beyond the surfaces. In the Rothko Chapel, he has created a communal space for solitary contemplation and ultimately an environment for a secular rather than spiritual transcendence. Is this a transcendence to salvation or damnation? Despair or hope? Eternity or nothingness? The artist leaves it to the viewer to turn inward to find his own meaning and not necessarily a formally spiritual or religious one.

It would be easy, and possibly documentable, to say that the Chapel walls represent Rothko's own personal darkness as he neared the end of his life. As thus they could be a personal culmination of his abysmal search for existential meaning in a culture bereft of spiritual consciousness and steeped in destructive violence. As Anna Chave commented, "absence had come to the fore" in the Rothko Chapel (*Subjects in Abstraction*, 196). If one looks at Rothko's works to find the expression of the artist – the hand or process or even the intent of the painter – one cannot find it definitively. Chave analyzes his works as having a "muted and self-effacing" aspect, the rectangles exhibiting "distinct qualities, positions and aspects to which viewers may (and often do) attach emotional significance" (*Subjects in Abstraction* 121) Rothko negated himself by creating nebulous, abstract forms so that the viewer is compelled to bring his own sense of aesthetics, theology, and experience to make sense of his works. Irving Sandler in *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism* maintains that knowledge of the aims and beliefs of Rothko and his fellow Abstract Expressionists are key to understanding their work (179). Although their style varied, they shared an enthusiasm for modern ideas and a Romantic outlook. They sought to infuse meaning into forms that related to the whole of human experience, since the old ideologies and styles had lost their relevance in the twentieth century. These artists radically broke away from older and traditional modes of representation (Sandler 179). Specifically, Rothko sought a spiritual basis for his art by, ironically, attempting to eliminate any religious associations with it.

The contradictory and negative notions that emanate from Rothko's works are drawn from existentialist thought. One example is the notion that everything exists in

relation to what it is not: Natalie Kosoi explores this concept in her 2005 analysis of Rothko's abstractions. She analyzes the existentialist's notions in the Heideggerian sense of "nothing" as something. It is more significant than mere "nothingness" because that "nothingness" signifies death, the absence of life, a very real source of fear for the artist as well as the rest of humanity. Rothko's abstract paintings, then, represent the nothingness of which death threatens. In this sense, he was able to paint the unknowable or the unpaintable as no one before him could. He felt that the ancients did the same thing. Kosoi explains that Heidegger argues that even though we cannot grasp or know nothingness in and of itself, we experience it in our anxiety about it. Again, when there is a break between perception and understanding, emotion enters in. Kosoi further explains that, according to Heidegger, "Because any being is finite, nothingness forms beings and as such is a prerequisite for everything that is" (21). Nothingness as subject in Rothko's works exists as veiled color, floating rectangles of transient hues which hover against a background of nothing (discounting, of course, the canvas on which the color sits). His lack of subject matter, his abstraction, is after all, a *thing*. And that is the subject of his painting.

These somber paintings veiling nothingness – particularly the canvases in the Rothko Chapel -do not produce a feeling of delight because the anxiety about nothingness and death suppresses the would-be delightful infusion of rich, deep color and glowing luminescence. Or, the viewer "doesn't get it" and turns away in frustration. Still, these works are no mere decoration or "couch paintings." His works have an arresting presence that is experiential. Anxiety is evoked because this nothingness – this notion of death or lack of readily apparent meaning – cannot be logically or experientially proven except by intimation which Rothko so

capably achieves. Thus the viewer experiences a “primeval vagueness, passing through time into oblivion,” a vagueness about his own existence that seems tenuous and fragile (Fuller 547). It seems, then, that Rothko’s art stems from the desire *not* to die. Rothko’s way of intimating mortality is to use no recognizable subject matter, for “the less that is depicted in a work of art, the less our attention is distracted from its bare presence, the stronger our realization that this work is, and the greater our realization that there could be *nothing* instead” (Kosoi 31). His ethereal, floating, indistinct veils of color and space undermine the viewer’s ability to perceive a recognizable object and take him to a “state in which we touch the deepest core of ourselves, the finitude that constitutes us” (Kosoi 27). With no recognizable subject matter to latch onto, the viewer is left with only the emotional impact of color and space enveloping him and forcing him to confront his fear of nothingness. The shifting veils of color hover above the nothingness that hide the content of his art (Kosoi 30). In his address to the Pratt Institute in 1958, Rothko describes his pictures as facades: “I open one door and one window or two doors and two windows. I do this only through shrewdness. There is more power in telling little than in telling all” (Rothko 126). He admits to using the power of suggestion, and then leaves it to the viewer to explore the thought. Not all viewers of Rothko’s works experience his pessimism; others such as Wessel Stoker in his article “The Rothko Chapel Paintings and the ‘Urgency of the Transcendent Experience’” say that looking at the Rothko Chapel paintings can be equated to looking into the Divine or experiencing eternity because these viewers will “interpret “variously in line with their religious tradition[s]” (100). Instead of walking away in despair, these viewers can take away a satisfaction of looking into the abyss, experiencing the transcendence of reality,

and coming to a new understanding that is by nature secular, existential, or religious but essentially personal. Rothko sought the directness of the universal religious experience, not the narrative of institutional religion, and using abstraction, color and spatial depth, viewers can experience his works in line with their own religious tradition and personal interpretation (Stoker 99).

Rothko believed that an artist's work reflected the period of time in which he lived, and that "his creations shape those understandings" (Rothko 22). In the middle of the twentieth century and particularly after World War II, Rothko as well as other artists of the time "sought freedom from historical constraints in the domain of an abstract art which expresses feelings independently of any social or natural origin for them" (Breslin 256). In searching for this artistic freedom and in the context of a religiously pluralistic society, Rothko felt that the "complex inner self now seemed to provide the only remaining space for personal (i.e., 'internal') freedom" and the place for transcending reality. Expressive abstraction "offered an alternative to social art" and "opened a vast expanse of new creative territory" heretofore unexplored or exploited (Breslin 256). His canvases, devoid of any explicit religious associations, represent an intense and personal search for spiritual transcendence against the background of a modern secular existential crisis.

CHAPTER V:  
COMPARISONS OF THE TRANSCENDENCES  
OF JAN VAN EYCK AND MARK ROTHKO

Both Jan Van Eyck and Mark Rothko took on the monumental task of depicting transcendence, transporting viewers to the Beyond through the visual means of their art. This artistic purpose was to reveal something fundamental about man's existence, by taking their respective viewers to a greater understanding of man's spiritual yearnings. These artists were able to achieve transcendence through their aesthetic, creative and intellectual visions which stimulated the emotions, imaginations and intellects of their viewers. Both artists employed the tools of their art - luminous oil paint and innovative iconography – to express their intentions with light, color, space and symbolism. Because of their achievements in their respective periods in art history, both have become iconic artists by incorporating into the canons of art history their own unique styles and significances that are both recognizable and ideologically profound.

Both artists developed compelling visions that explored the relationships among man, art and the spiritual world. Van Eyck saw new spiritual possibilities embodied and symbolized in the reality around him. This world presented him with the means of reinforcing and educating his viewers in the triumphant salvation that awaited man through faith and belief in the spiritual realm. Rothko, on the other hand, eschewed a realistic depiction of his culture because he believed it had explicitly rejected belief in the transcendent, religion and spirituality in favor of science and an existential mindset. Instead,

Rothko preferred a more universal type of transcendent experience, involving a secular, worldly and personal approach to finding meaning.

Both artists were painters of ideas about transcendence: Van Eyck painted salvation, while Rothko painted his perception of the vagueness of an unknown spiritual place. Both built visual structures that probed themes of absence and presence, of spirituality and its invisibility, as they sought to depict the unknown in terms of the knowable, to make concrete a vision of a concept that lay beyond intellectual comprehension. For Van Eyck, the presence of God and the concept of the salvation He offered to man was revealed through Christian dogma. The infinite could be revealed through analogies to the real world. In contrast, Rothko perceived an absence of spirituality in the real world, choosing to depict the infinite as concealed behind veils of color, evoking mystery, ambiguity and anxiety about what lies beyond.

In *The Artist's Reality*, Rothko said that “all art is an abstraction” (75). This insight links Jan Van Eyck and Mark Rothko in a fundamental way. The Early Northern Renaissance world of Van Eyck was a “reversion to Greek classicism but also a reaction to Christianity” (Rothko 32). Van Eyck imbued the essence of meaning and symbolism in his meticulously portrayed objects of reality in his attempt to use the world of appearances as a bridge to transcendence. Ironically Rothko denied that his work was abstract, insisting that he was depicting the intangible, spiritual reality without direct analogies to physical objects.

For Van Eyck, spiritual transcendence was a visceral experience as well as one of contemplation. Recognizing contemporary objects and settings comforts Van Eyck's viewers

as they meditate on the inaccessible concepts. But Van Eyck's realism can be and is deceptive. His recognizable objects are presented, but not in ordinary ways. Within the context of humanistic Neoplatonic thinking of his time period, this Northern Renaissance artist paints the particulars of his world to awaken the intellect to spiritually transcendent truths. As he focused on depicting eternal truths and not the mere appearance of reality, symbolism becomes the building block in his version of a spiritually transcendent experience.

In contrast to the triumphant spiritual vision that Van Eyck attempts stands the angst of absence and nothingness that writers such as Breslin and Chave perceived in Rothko's abstractions. Rothko's vision for these observers seems to reflect a world that has lost its sense of the spiritual. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy proposed that God is absent in the contemporary world because he has emptied himself into the world (Alexandrovna 282). Paradoxically this concept would mean that He is everywhere and nowhere at the same time, a hypothesis that medieval thinkers found comforting but twentieth century thinkers find disorienting. This paradox of absence and presence can evoke the fear of nothingness and existential angst that Breslin and others perceived (Breslin 281). Perhaps Rothko wanted to believe in a god, but as he found Him inaccessible, does this necessarily leave Rothko with only the hopelessness that his critics think his works seem to convey? Ridding his works of any recognizable object and presenting only abstract concepts of color and space allows Rothko's viewers to find their own, solitary path to transcendence, relying on visceral experience to stimulate intellectual engagement. The effect of Rothko's floating color planes provides a doorway into transcendence inside the viewer,

not necessarily a doorway into the work of art, because the viewer will not find any answers there. Unlike Van Eyck who was able to create believable analogies to the heavenly realm through Christian dogma, Rothko does not and cannot answer the question of what lies beyond. For Rothko, the work of art is the sacred space where the viewer is free to find possibilities of a secular transcendence unfettered by institutionalized religion. In that sense, Rothko's art is its own bridge to salvation and transcendence. It was not enough for him to find religion; he sought something more universally significant in his search for transcendence. This search for significance in Rothko's art represents perhaps not so much an inaccessible beyond but possibly the coincidence of the real and the spiritual worlds that ultimately is unexplainable and transintelligible.

Why did Rothko, a twentieth century modernist, turn away from spirituality and religious conviction? One factor was that he was essentially a spiritual person lacking the conviction of faith. And "to be a religious man without a doctrine is to be in a peculiarly modern position" (Chave 192). Rothko experienced a sense of loss through his rejection of his Jewish heritage. As his biographer Breslin explained, "Rothko emancipated himself from a religion with which he had been intensely involved and sank into melancholy" (175). This left Rothko floundering in a modern secular world that was "purely physical and material, longing angrily for transcendence" (175). His was a modern position because of modern secular society's rejection of the transcendent experience, as Rothko states in "The Romantics Were Prompted" (*Writings on Art*, 58). This tendency to reject the transcendent began with Romanticism. As Rosenblum points out, "from Friedrich and Turner through Kandinsky and Mondrian, the Northern artists...were all confronted with the same dilemma:

how to find, in a secular world, a convincing means of expressing those religious experiences that, before the Romantics, had been channeled into the traditional themes of Christian art” (195). The Romantics presented natural scenes such as ruins of churches and atmosphere to evoke the sublime experience of nature. Before settling into abstraction, Rothko and other modern artists of his time explored ancient art, which explains Rothko’s concern with myth and tragedy before he found abstraction.

Other modern conditions set the stage for a rejection of spirituality in the twentieth century. Society’s fragmentation and estrangement resulted from “religious structure[s] [that] had long since fallen into disarray” (Chave *Subjects in Abstraction* 187). As indicated earlier in this thesis, a society increasingly based on science since the time of the Enlightenment left little room for faith and religion. Thus, society’s rejection of established forms of religion in some circles made for a skeptical reception of Rothko’s style of art based on an abstract depiction of spirituality. Such fragmentation of society precluded art that was universally meaningful and significant. “To Rothko and some others of his generation,” such disarray “made the need for such signification still more urgent and the possibility of achieving it all the more momentous” (Chave, *Subjects in Abstraction* 187) Thus, if an artist of this period wanted to make art with signification and transcendent experiences, he was forced to invent new forms and iconography.

And that is exactly what Rothko did. He devised a form that was uniquely his own: “Real objects – finite, familiar, and thus affectless – feel dead to Rothko; he needs to get beyond them” (Breslin 242). The artist felt that the depiction of real objects detracted from

seeing the ultimate truth (Rothko 75). Thus his solitary paintings, “emptied of social and natural forms...embodies both his despair and his spiritual longings” (Breslin 321). Real-world objects worked for Renaissance painters such as Van Eyck, who were embarking on a new way of representing the visual and ultimately the invisible world. More than 500 years later, Rothko’s “objects” consisted of painted colors and scraped surfaces that destroyed recognizable matter and became instead spatial imagery, with an infinite recession toward an unknown horizon. Instead of lifting the veil to reveal transcendence, he provides a vision of obscurity that reveals and at the same time conceals a perceived abyss of nothingness beyond reality. In comparison to Van Eyck’s solidly spiritual vision, Rothko’s is a searching transcendence reflecting a society mentally and emotionally crippled by global wars, the logic of science and loss of spiritual meaning.

Any conclusions from juxtaposing these two artists will be complex and defy simplification. Nevertheless, one can conclude that Jan Van Eyck was a gifted artist who provided a spiritually transcendent vision of hope and salvation within the context of the dogma of Christian Catholicism. On the other hand, Mark Rothko was the gifted visionary whose secularly transcendent canvases forced the viewer’s mind inward to search for personal and existential meaning. Van Eyck’s vision in his art can lead his viewers to spiritual clarity by engaging the mind and imagination in a concrete way and creating transcendence by lifting the veil of nothingness to reveal the hope of a resplendent Second Coming as understood in Christianity. Conversely, Rothko’s vision is a façade that obscures as much as it reveals, potentially creating anxiety in a search for transcendent significance. One could say that Rothko’s abstractions lead spiritual clarity of a secular personal sort, rather than one

based on religious faith. In the sacred spaces of his canvases Rothko created an environment devoid of a religious context that ultimately compels viewers to find their own answers based on personal needs, background and beliefs. As such, the nondenominational Rothko Chapel, originally conceived as a Catholic Chapel, fulfills Rothko's ultimate desire to create a sacred environment for secular, non-biased transcendence. As Van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* embodies the spiritual climate and intellectual environment of the awakening period of the Renaissance, Rothko's mature abstractions reflect the existential mindset of the second half of the twentieth century.

Van Eyck's vision mirrors the intellectual excitement of the Renaissance with its humanistic and scientific awakenings of thought about the world and the hope of salvation. His art benefits from his own belief in universal truths and a foundation of unquestioned faith. Rothko, on the other hand, mirrors the final unravelling of Renaissance realism, breaking the tradition of recognizable representation in a world where science has replaced faith and casts doubts on the validity of religion. Rothko's abstractions befit the isolation of man in search of personal meaning against the background of an uncertain eternity.

The biggest intellectual and creative difference between these two artists is where those eternal truths that guide the transcendent experience are found. Van Eyck saw truths embedded in the world around him, while Rothko saw truths buried inside the viewer. Van Eyck's viewers were comforted in knowing their religion and faith could show them the way to salvation. Rothko's viewers, according to Breslin (281), begin to experience anxiety because he offers a vision of eternity as emptiness or nothingness, which one enters through

portals defined only by color and indeterminate edges, an eternity clouded by veils of floating color that force the viewer inward to examine his personal ideas against a background of cloudy infinity. Rothko was searching, both personally and spiritually, for the certainty of spiritual transcendence that Van Eyck depicted. By comparison, Rothko initially appears to flounder in an endless abyss of secular transcendence until his last major mural project, the Rothko Chapel. Here, Rothko was able to control every aspect of the environment to create an appropriate setting for his intention of personal secular transcendence that would enable a spiritual experience.

These works of Jan Van Eyck and Mark Rothko are examined here not so much for the knowledge they provide, or the insights into the world as it was when they were created; this has been explained by biographers, critics and viewers. Instead, what is explored here is the foundation for the truths underlying their vision, which is intended as an instrument for the experience of transcendence. For these two artists, art is a representation of the things that cannot be seen except by the intellect, for their art is not only for the eye, but the accompaniment of thought (Coomaraswamy 4) Their works are equally admired for the exquisiteness of their vision as well as the logic and insight of their concepts. For Van Eyck, a foundation of faith takes the viewer on a journey with God to find salvation; for Rothko, an initial experience of existential angst and ambiguity confronts the unknowable realm beyond existence, enticing the viewer on a solitary journey inside the self.

Ultimately, transcendence of both spiritual and secular natures begins in the aesthetic perception of a work of art. The inner life must be awakened to experience the transcendent.

While faith is needed to perceive the unknowable through Christian dogma in the spiritual transcendence of Van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece*, the secular transcendent experience of Mark Rothko's later abstractions focuses the mind inward to find universal significance unfettered by preconceived ways of thinking. Both artists demanded imagination on the part of the viewer to access the intellect, with the artists' personal visions acting as springboards to the contemplation of eternal truths. Viewers – believers and non-believers alike – do not look *at* the works of these artists' works so much as they look *through* them to see what lies beyond the façade of paint.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The gulf between this world and the transcendent beyond of the next world is what the two artists Jan Van Eyck and Mark Rothko sought to bridge. Their art is an attempt to make this unknowable and incomprehensible world visible and simultaneously transform the visual and visceral experience of their art into an intellectual experience. Their intent was not to turn away from this world but to preserve and embrace the universality of truth encountered in the midst of day-to-day activity because, obviously, that is what human beings know. This is readily perceived in the detailed depiction of recognizable objects in the art of Van Eyck, who sought spiritual transcendence. For Rothko, day-to-day activity is a suggestion buried in the transience of color and mutability of shapes as he pursued a secular version of transcendence.

Transcendence – being able to rise above or go beyond the physical world - implies a world beyond this one. This thesis suggests the question: Can transcendence be attained without religion? Doesn't the idea of a transcendent world beyond this palpable, sensible world of human experience demand the existence of some sort of spiritual guidance to make sense of it? Is secular transcendence even possible? For many of Van Eyck's contemporaries, living as they did in an age of new intellectual awakenings dominated by Christianity, the answer was yes; religion is necessary to reach the fulfillment of human existence in transcendent salvation. But for Rothko, living in a complex, globalizing culture in an age of

science and skepticism, the answer seemed not so obvious. He, along with the certain thinkers in the society in which he lived, rejected the constrictions of institutionalized religion in favor of a more universal understanding, freed of any one dogmatic interpretation. As suggested earlier, such an ecumenical goal found a solution in the Rothko Chapel.

One fact becomes clear from examining the works of both artists. Because man is driven to come to terms with what lies beyond the limits of the physical world, he finds some satisfaction in contemplating and transcending the boundaries of this world through visual arts which offers a bridge to an intellectual comprehension of the transcendent realm. These two artists show two versions of spiritual truth: one that gives the comfort of a spiritual knowledge based on religious teachings to perceive what lies beyond; and another based on a contemporary existential and global view that leaves an individual's conclusion open to individual interpretations derived from personal beliefs and triumphant possibilities.

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## APPENDIX

### Figures

Figure 1: Jan Van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece* (closed), 1435, St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent.

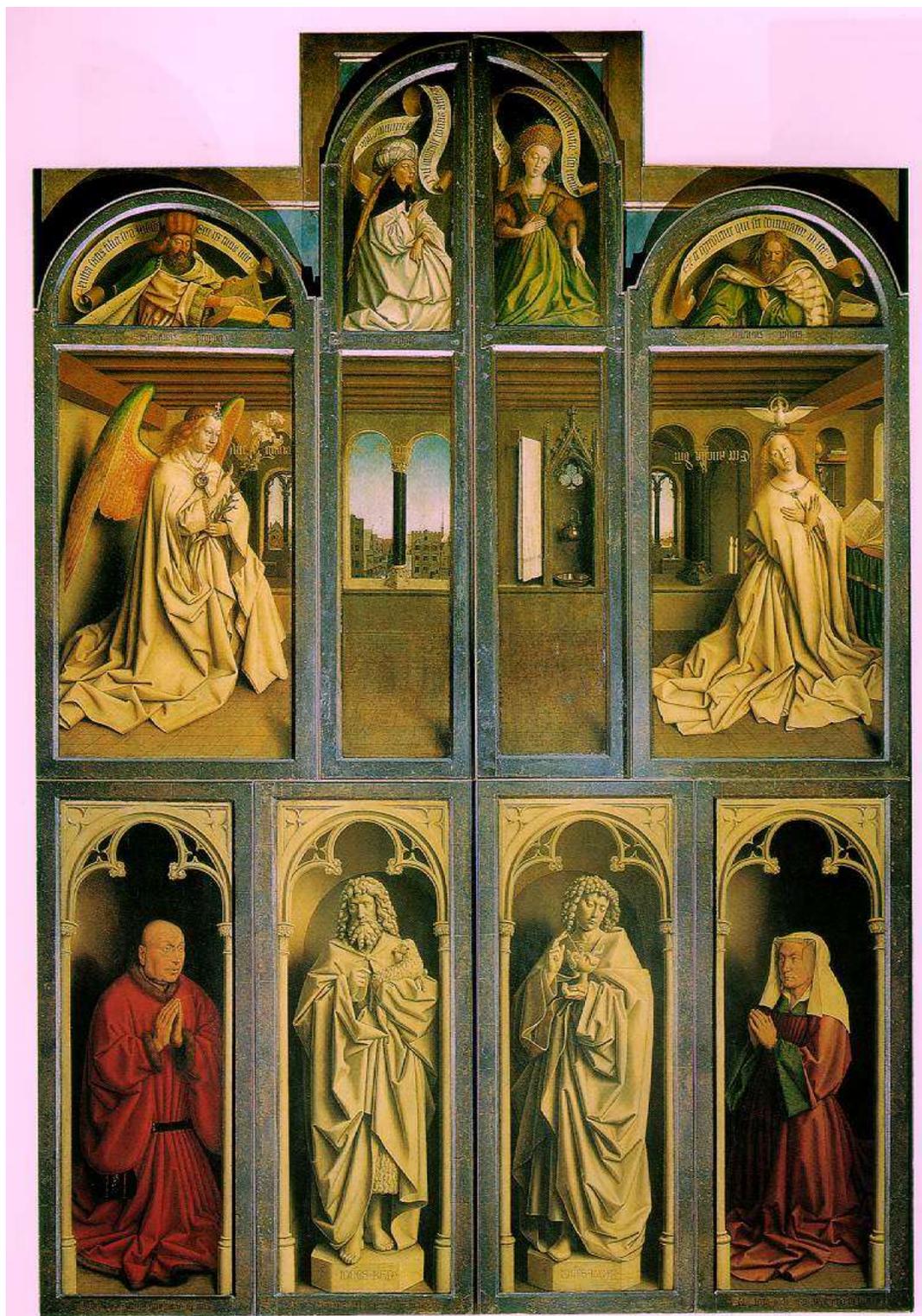


Figure 2: Jan Van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece* (open), 1435, St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent.



Figure 3: Mark Rothko, *Untitled 1948*. 126.4 x 111.8 cm (49 3/4 x 44 in.) Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc., National Gallery of Art. (Copyright © 1997 Christopher Rothko and Kate Rothko Prizel)



Figure 4: Mark Rothko, *Yellow and Blue*, 1955. Oil on Canvas, 102 1/4 x W: 66 11/16 inches (H: 260 x W: 169 cm), Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



Figure 5: Mark Rothko, *Orange, Red and Red*, 1962. Oil on Canvas, 93 1/8 x 80 1/8 in., Dallas Museum of Art.



Figure 6: Mark Rothko, *The Rothko Chapel*, 1967, The DeMenil Collection, Houston, Texas

