

Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies

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Blurring the Edges

Ricœur and Rothko on Metaphorically Figuring the Non-Figural

B. Keith Putt

Samford University

Abstract:

This essay examines Ricœur's mimetic and transfigurative perspective on non-objective art and adopts it as an idiom for examining Mark Rothko's artistic intention in the multiform canvases of his "classical" period from 1949 until his death in 1970. Rothko unequivocally denied being an abstractionist, a colorist, or a formalist, insisting, on the contrary, that he desired to communicate discrete dimensions of experience and emotions to his viewers, specifically, experiences of the sacred and the spiritual. His large canvases, with their blurred edges, force the spectator into an intimacy of experience that opens the potentiality of heterogeneous interpretations. In other words, one might consider his paintings to be metaphors of dense meanings that imitate reality, not through facile representation, but through a Kierkegaardian repetition of worlds that track Ricœur's own ideas of prefiguration, configuration, and re-figuration. I contend in this essay that Rothko's "abstract expressionism" adequately illustrates Ricœur's contention that non-figurative art succeeds far better than representational art in refiguring new worlds of meaning.

Keywords: Metaphor, Mimesis, Abstract Art, Mystery.

Résumé:

Cet essai examine la perspective mimétique et transfigurative de Ricœur concernant l'art non objectif et l'adopte comme un idiome pour examiner l'intention artistique de Mark Rothko dans les toiles multiformes de sa période "classique" de 1949 jusqu'à sa mort en 1970. Rothko a nié catégoriquement être un peintre abstrait, un coloriste ou un formaliste, insistant, au contraire sur le fait qu'il voulait communiquer des dimensions distinctes de l'expérience et des émotions à ses spectateurs, en particulier, les expériences du sacré et du spirituel. Ses grandes toiles, avec leurs contours flous, forcent le spectateur à entrer dans une intimité d'expérience qui ouvre la possibilité d'interprétations hétérogènes. En d'autres termes, on pourrait considérer ses tableaux comme des métaphores de significations denses qui imitent la réalité, non pas à travers une représentation facile, mais à travers une répétition kierkegaardienne de mondes qui suivent les notions ricœuriennes de préfiguration, de configuration et de re-figuration. Je soutiens dans cet essai que "l'expressionnisme abstrait" de Rothko illustre adéquatement l'affirmation de Ricœur selon laquelle l'art non figuratif réussit bien mieux que l'art représentatif à refigurer de nouveaux mondes de sens.

Mots-clés: Métaphore, mimesis, art abstrait, mystère.

Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies, Vol 7, No 2 (2016), pp. 94-110

ISSN 2156-7808 (online) DOI 10.5195/errs.2016.353

<http://ricoeur.pitt.edu>



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B. Keith Putt

Samford University

Domenico Jervolino contends that one could map the itinerary of Paul Ricœur's "hermeneutic journey" as a three-stage development from symbol through text to translation. Although he admits that the third paradigm is "less explicit than the first two," he, nevertheless, insists that the idea of translation remains "secretly at work as a sort of third stage in Ricœur's hermeneutics." Indeed, he considers translation to be the "exemplary value" that characterizes Ricœur's last philosophical phase, specifically because it overtly addresses the significance of human diversity and plurality with reference to languages, religions, beliefs, and cultures, along with the accompanying concerns of ethics and justice that such human dissimilarities evoke.¹ Furthermore, he contends that the concept of translation also expresses Ricœur's commitment to linguistic humility, that is, to the affirmation that language can never boast of articulating an exhaustive explanation of existence. In other words, one might say that what Ricœur intended over four decades ago in his bifurcation between a "philosophy of absolute knowledge and the hermeneutics of testimony" may well, a decade ago, have been intralinguistically translated into the idea of the untranslatable.² Jervolino notes that the issue of translation always communicates the tension between "an incessant work of translation" and the ubiquity of the untranslatable.³ He claims, therefore, that one should not be surprised that Ricœur concludes *Memory, History, Forgetting* with the word "Inachievement," "Incompletion," nor that Ricœur "distinguishes his hermeneutics from Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons' [by emphasizing] the 'receding of horizons'."⁴

Eileen Brennan certainly appears to confirm Jervolino's conclusions when she maintains that Ricœur identifies two valid access points for prosecuting the problem of translation: (1) "the test of the foreign" and (2) "language's work on itself."⁵ She insists that, although he inclines primarily toward the former, Ricœur, nevertheless, appreciates the provocative implications of the latter, especially as it relates to the systemic linguistic inevitability of the enigmatic or the non-communicative. The compulsion to affirm the potentiality of "secret" or "mystery" in discourse induces Ricœur to distance himself from his preferred practical polarity of "faithfulness/betrayal" in translation theory and return to the more theoretical binary of "translatable/untranslatable," as, for example, when translating Paul Celan's poetry.⁶ In other words, one cannot dismiss *tout court* either that no equivalence may be found among languages for every attempt at "saying" or that there may not be an ineffable "said" that no language can possibly signify. For Brennan, the above disjunction *vis-à-vis* the difficulty of translation implies that in every context, the wager of translation cannot avoid scuffling with the apophatic implications of the enigmatic limits *to* and limits *of* communication.

Both Jervolino and Brennan directly relate Ricœur's philosophy of translation and the ancillary inevitability of the ineffable to both the interlingual and intralingual types of translation. Of course, anyone familiar with translation studies should recognize these two distinctions as

deriving from Roman Jakobson's threefold taxonomy of translation typology: interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic, which he also terms transmutation.⁷ These references to Jacobson broach a fascinating prospect for developing protean perspectives on prosecuting the enigmatic and ambiguous qualities of human existence. Attempts to comprehend the potential mystery that persistently characterizes human being-in-the-world may include non-linguistic forms of expression; however, they cannot avoid semiotics, since without signs there can be no intentionality or interpretation. Consequently, the translation of the meaningfulness of certain human experiences of transcendence or absence often eclipse the purely logical or quantifiable and appropriate various non-linguistic media. In other words – a good intralingual translational phrase (!) – does one go about figuring out the existential implications of the apophatic secrets of life, secrets that never fully escape the non-figural, only through the figurative languages of philosophers, theologians, or poets? If so, then one necessarily narrows one's focus only to figures of speech in order to configure functional interpretations of ambiguity. On the other hand, could one not also find a way of figuring the non-figural through non-linguistic artistic media, such as music and painting? If so, then one expands the translational possibilities available to the prosecution of "incompletion" and "receding horizons," thereby establishing a possible rapprochement between discursive and non-discursive means for comprehending and communicating the polysemic perplexities of human experience. Yet, such a rapprochement necessarily evokes the possibility of intersemiotic translation, a translation, or transmutation, into an alternative non-verbal semiotic system.

Ricœur, himself, would not find such an intersemiotic translation invalid. He clearly admits that a basic "mark of language" is the fundamental "lack" that words cannot fulfill. This systemic vulnerability of language provokes Ricœur to adopt the polarity, referenced by Brennan above, of "faithfulness/betrayal" with reference to translation, since he contends that the translator must remain faithful to language's "capacity for safeguarding the secret contrary to its proclivity to betray it."⁸ In point of fact, Ricœur declares that "language's struggle with the secret, the hidden, the mystery, the inexpressible is above all else the most entrenched incommunicable, initial untranslatable."⁹ He testifies, however, that art also struggles with this "lack," with what may be called "the ineffable, the formless, which is only partially exhausted by the forms."¹⁰ Additionally, he attests that the "ineffable has a character of incohesiveness, of a lack of differentiation, which is precisely surmounted by the work of art." The work of art, in other words, offers an alternative structure to that of language, an expressing otherwise that may offer an alternative naming of the inexhaustibly unnamable mystery that provokes all saying.¹¹ Strictly speaking, "[s]omething demands to be figured, composed, structured," and one may attempt to name that something by translating it metamorphically into the work of art itself.¹² This metamorphic, or transmutational, translation is, indeed, an intersemiotic translation.

Negotiating an Abstract Intersemiosis of the Non-Figural

I briefly broach the issues of the ineffable and of intersemiotic translation precisely because my own experiences of reflecting on the flux of existence, on the uncertainties of inventing/discovering meaning, and on the invigorating risks of being human have been profoundly affected philosophically by Paul Ricœur and aesthetically by Mark Rothko. Constantly seeking a rapprochement between these two diverse interpreters of reality, I find

myself perpetually negotiating between the discursive creativity of Ricœur's philosophical hermeneutics and the aesthetic creativity of Rothko's expressionistic art, tenaciously hoping to find a strategy whereby one might catch a glimpse of something more below the reflective surface of the natural attitude. Jacques Derrida punctuates the etymological denotation of "negotiation" as "un-leisure," as the productive dissatisfaction between two theories or theorists that disallows one from ever coming to rest in the stasis of some stationary definable position. It remains kinetic, a "shuttling" reciprocally between alternative interpretations, which means "no thesis, no position, no theme, no station, no substance, no stability, a perpetual suspension, a suspension without rest."¹³

In my restless commute between Ricœur and Rothko, however, I conclude that, notwithstanding the non-thetic and non-thematic essence of negotiation, one may well establish a certain "thesis" or "theme" concerning an intersemiotic translation of how one might re-figure the un-figurable linguistically through figures of speech and visually through abstract figures of color and form. This essay, therefore, is one such shuttle mission of negotiating between Ricœur and Rothko in order, perhaps, to distinguish another way of saying and seeing the ineffable and the invisible, of noting yet again the polysemy and ambiguity of the human condition.

Of course, I recognize that Paul Ricœur typically avoids giving extensive attention to interpreting the plastic arts or developing an aesthetic theory of the visual. He concentrates his hermeneutics almost exclusively in the areas of language and action, prosecuting various topics, such as self-knowledge, imagination, religion, justice, forgiveness, ethics, and translation – just to name a few – by limiting his examinations to the semantics of discourse theory and the pragmatics of human capability. The glaring "elephant in the room" that discloses its presence by its very absence is the compelling contributions that the arts, particularly the visual arts, make to comprehending the specific issues that Ricœur considers to be so essential for philosophical investigation. Certainly, there are notable exceptions to that lacuna. For example, as will be referenced below, he does address the visual arts in *Interpretation Theory* and "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality"; however, the primary motivation for a Ricœur/Rothko intersemiosis emerges from the final chapter on aesthetic experience in *Critique & Conviction*, where he responds overtly to the inquiry as to why art is "singularly lacking" in his work. Although he does not name Rothko in that response, he does specifically mention several abstract artists and identifies the existential and hermeneutical significance of that genre of painting.

Correlatively, Mark Rothko might be suspicious of any attempt at an intersemiotic translation between the verbal and the visual. He has a decidedly ambivalent attitude toward any ekphrastic attempt to confine the meaning of a painting within the conceptual constraints of a linguistic commentary. He was a visual artist, one who trafficked in colors, shapes, and textures, not a poet or a playwright who created with words and phonemes. Indeed, he insists that a communicative *chorismos* so categorically separates artistic and verbal expressions that one idiom cannot be translated into the other; to do so, in Ricœur's words, would be a betrayal of the integrity of both the artist and the art. He states with little ambiguity that one could never "duplicate the sense of a picture by the sense of words or sounds [...] [or] *translate* [emphasis added] the truth of words by means of pictorial delineations."¹⁴ Ironically, however, we only know of Rothko's rupturing of the visual and the verbal because we can read his opinions in a posthumously-published manuscript that he wrote! In a manner somewhat reminiscent of Plato's

performative contradiction with reference to writing as a *pharmakon*, Rothko obviously cannot remain silent regarding his artistic *vouloir dire*. Granted, he rarely, if ever, comments on the meaning of individual canvases; however, he never ceases communicating, either orally or textually, what he intended to accomplish in the lives of those who encounter his paintings. Although he basically stopped publishing his thoughts after 1950, he still continued afterwards to write letters and give interviews through which he passionately argues a quite specific philosophy of art, one influenced by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, by mythology and metaphysics, and by the sacred and the mystical.¹⁵

Given the above openings to the possibility of a Ricœur/Rothko intersemiosis, I do not feel uneasy at attempting such an intertextual reading of their respective approaches to figuring the non-figural. I propose, therefore, to compare the artistic intention of Mark Rothko expressed in the canvases of his “classical” period from 1949 until his death in 1970 to Ricœur’s mimetic and refigurative perspectives on non-objective art. I will particularly focus on the referential implications of Ricœur’s theories of metaphor and fiction as they relate to creating and describing reality. In other words, I shall seek to confirm that Rothko’s “abstract expressionism” adequately illustrates Ricœur’s contention that non-figurative art succeeds far better than representational art in refiguring new worlds of meaning.

Reiterating Transcendence

Notwithstanding his reluctance to translate the pictorial into the propositional, Mark Rothko does classify both non-verbal and verbal forms as “languages.” He asserts that painting functions analogously to singing or speaking as “a method of making a visible record of our experience, visual or imaginative, colored by our own feelings and reactions [...]”¹⁶ As a result, successful paintings, that is, meaningful paintings, can never be isolated from existential circumstances.¹⁷ They are always contextualized within the structures of a community; consequently, art exists as a “form of *social* action,” specifically, a form of interpersonal communication.¹⁸ The artist intends to transmit through the work some particular subject matter, a subject matter that reveals something of the artist’s personal interpretation of reality. For precisely this reason, Rothko contends that the poet and the philosopher contribute the primary languages for interpreting the existential implications of art, since both address “the verities of time and space, life and death, and the heights of exaltation as well as the depths of despair” and, in doing so, create “the community of objectives in which the artist participates.”¹⁹

As with his attitude toward commentary, so, too, here with reference to the communicative dynamic of art, Rothko takes something of a contradictory position. He claims that human beings have a biological need for self-expression and that art supplies a means for satisfying that need.²⁰ Obviously, one could conclude that art as self-expression requires no spectator to engage the work and offers no constative testimony about the world. On the contrary, however, Rothko also writes that he has “never thought that painting a picture has anything to do with self-expression. It is a communication about the world to someone else.”²¹ Perhaps the key to mitigating this apparent contradiction is to recognize that the issue of artistic self-expression does not become problematic for Rothko unless one sets it in opposition to any sense of referentiality. Painting cannot be merely the plastic analogue of an individual’s

emotional perspective articulated as some visual interjection. Instead, he requires that paintings be somewhat “semantic” in Ricœur’s sense of discourse, that is, that a canvas communicate “something about something.”²² In other words, rejecting any adherence to a traditional *l’art pour l’art* mentality, Rothko asserts that any painting should be generalized as a “representation of the artist’s notion of reality”; consequently, even a non-representational painting retains a referential function toward the world.²³

Remaining consistent with his beliefs that art should communicate reality, Rothko adamantly refuses to reduce his paintings to strictly formalistic categories. He declares that a painting “is not its color, its form, or its anecdote, but an intent entity idea, where implications transcend any of these parts.”²⁴ As a matter of fact, he confesses that he typically does not enjoy talking with other painters, precisely because they tend only to emphasize “design, color, etc. Not pure human reactions.”²⁵ He goes so far as to reject being classified along with the other “Irrascibles” as an Abstract Expressionist.²⁶ In lieu of considering himself an abstractionist, a colorist, or a formalist, he prefers to bear the label “anti-expressionist.” In a 1956 interview with Selden Rodman, Rothko does use the verb “expression” but only as a synonym for “communication.” He asserts that he only wants to communicate human emotions in such a manner that those who view his canvases will actually experience the same reality in viewing the paintings as he did in creating them. He notes that “people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.”²⁷ For him, such an experience is not exclusively narcissistic, since it references a reality that transcends the singular individual. As a result, it is a reality that can be shared in a genuinely objective fashion and that can transform both the individual and the community. He concludes, therefore, that in accomplishing this aesthetic realism, art should never avoid truth or morality.²⁸ Indeed, Rothko explains his move toward abstractionism as a significant attempt to realize the truth of human experience as a transformative adequation to reality. He argues that he constantly adheres “to the material reality of the world and the substance of these things. I merely enlarge the extent of this reality [...] [and] insist upon the equal existence of the world engendered in the mind and the world engendered by God outside it.”²⁹

Eventually, Rothko’s preferred method for “enlarging the extent of reality” is transformed into a non-figural communication centered in the limited vocabulary of color and shape. He replaces the hard distinctions established by definitive lines with multiple layers of colors in different intensities and combinations bleeding into each other through blurred edges that never establish clean transitions. The edges appear kinetic as if they are vibrating, always dissatisfied with any identifiable stasis that appeals to the foveal vision of the spectator. In a manner similar to Hans Hoffman’s “push-pull” color dynamic of surface and depth, Rothko’s rectangles of various chroma recede and advance, simultaneously or serially attracting and repelling the individual examining the canvas, leaving her with the uneasiness of an uncertainty as to what exactly she is viewing. Only in such an “abstract” peristaltic manner does Rothko believe that he can evoke a person’s emotional, as well as rational, response, a response that intimates hidden dimensions of experience asymptotically revealing themselves through the polysemy of conflicting interpretations.

All of the above characteristics of Rothko’s figuring the non-figural may be noted in one of the canvases that mark the transition between his “multi-form” paintings and the familiar

rectangles that define his classical period. In *Untitled, 1949* (<http://www.mark-rothko.org/untitled-1949.jsp>), one quite easily recognizes the blurring of edges that preempts his shapes from establishing themselves decidedly in some absolute definitive space. Colors and shapes fuse in such a manner as to leave the spectator in a certain state of mystery, almost an uncanniness that is not so much disorienting as vocative and provocative. The canvas seems to call or beckon the viewer to enter its un/defined environment in order to empower a receptivity for revelation. Immediately one is struck by the tension between the translucent light of the various yellows composing the perimeter and the deep opacity of the ebony void that forms the chasm separating the purple above and the green below. Yet, none of these colors is homogeneous, merely a singularized expression of a pure monochrome. On the contrary, a longer and more careful examination of the painting reveals multiple dimensions of color, a lamination of varied hues of the same chroma or actually an amalgamation of different pigments, such as the ochre color that peeps through the bottom green suggesting an esoteric depth that cannot be comprehended.

Furthermore, one can note the “push-pull” impulse that animates the canvas. At times the dark void appears to advance toward the spectator, threatening to vacate the canvas and join the external reality. At other times, it recedes into its own negative space and, in doing so, seduces the viewer to enter the abyss without ever revealing whether it is an abyss of something insidious or of something so glorious as to remain undefined. That tension finds enhancement in the razor thin striation of white that peeks out from over the raw umber strip above the red separating the yellow from its purple complement. That almost insignificant edge of white suggests that something lies behind the “non-black” black, something lighter and enlightening, something waiting to be revealed behind the obfuscating emptiness of the dark center space. One then must struggle with the indecision as to whether the canvas hides an empty nothingness that remains absurd or suppresses a saturated fullness always on the interstices of manifestation. Consequently, the spectator of the painting must adjust to the vertiginous feelings of traversing the unstable edges that do and do not separate the colors; she must join the dance of the kinetic colors with its fluctuating movements of advance and retreat; and she must never tire of entering the painting’s space again and again always anticipating a new revelation of something, an incorrigible *je ne sais pas*, or, in other words, being consistently vulnerable to the surprise of the “for once, then something.”

As Glenn Phillips contends, Rothko’s non-figural re-figuring of recondite dimensions of reality “tends to lead the viewer to scan and rescan the canvas in the attempt to reconcile the conflicting, asynchronous details with the simply-seeming composition.”³⁰ John Cage certainly concurs with Phillips, insisting that Rothko intentionally creates “discordant [and] uneasy effects,”³¹ which, in turn, according to Robert Rosenblum, lead spectators to an experience with the Sublime as they allow themselves to be “absorbed into their radiant depths” through what passes as “an act of faith.” In other words, Rothko’s canvases succeed only as they preserve the constant tension between visual pertinence and impertinence, which constantly feeds the dynamic of emotional assimilation. Brian O’Doherty confirms this tension between knowledge and faith or pertinence and impertinence through his polar rubric “the tragic and the transcendental,” a rubric that concentrates on how Rothko manipulates the enigmatic by manipulating color and value and by playing with the tensions established by edges. He states that Rothko blurs his edges in order to establish a certain “environmental ambition and [an]

ambition of sentiment.”³² By diffusing the atmosphere surrounding the canvas, Rothko seeks to create an environment within which the spectator can “feel” the reality of the painting. Yet, this reality cannot be quantified or exhaustively identified; it always remains a “something else” because of the friction between the positive and the negative. O’Doherty declares that what Rothko’s “art contains or elicits is too positive to be a void [but] too negative to be a substance.” He postulates that it should be called a “mystery.”³³ As a result, any attempt at a phenomenology of mystery predicated upon our consciousness of Rothko’s work will necessitate the paradoxical embrace of both the tragic and the transcendental.³⁴

Christopher Rothko concurs with much of what we conclude above about his father’s work. He certainly concedes that in attempting to figure the non-figural, his father succeeds in repeatedly establishing the reality of the enigmatic, offering only intimations of the Infinite, and creating transient emotional connections between himself and his viewers. In a beautiful summary of Rothko’s visually metaphorical paintings, Christopher interprets his father’s work as “[o]pen vistas of the intangible, forbidding because they seem to contain so little. Colors so immediate and yet evocative of the infinite. Deeply saturated surfaces that remain diaphanous and fragile.”³⁵ “Diaphanous and fragile” – two characteristics that suggest Rothko strives to catch a glimpse of something that “encourages a quest for meaning, a larger understanding of our world, our lives, our purpose, our humanity,”³⁶ a “something” that remains a riddle and relatively apophatic. Rothko’s art is, to be sure, fragile, but with a fragility akin to the ambiguity that always exists between signifier and signified, a diaphaneity that never loses the translucence of finitude, of making familiar what tenaciously resists full revelation.³⁷ One may well extrapolate as applicable to all of Rothko’s classical paintings what his son claims about those in the Rothko Chapel: they “exist at the intersection of everything and nothing. They are silence and a full shout. They are concrete and yet hardly there [...] In short, they live in the realm of the paradoxical, of the mutually exclusive.”³⁸

For Rothko, the above interpretations would simply explain his desire to “make the spectator see the world our way – not his way.”³⁹ He firmly believes that he has discerned a new world and, of necessity, has invented a new visual language through which to communicate it and have it re-experienced by those who view his paintings.⁴⁰ His classic non-figural paintings give “material existence to many unseen worlds and tempi.” They basically serve as expressions of an “anecdote of the spirit.”⁴¹ As such, according to several of his interpreters, including Jeffrey Weiss,⁴² Briony Fer,⁴³ Bradford Collins,⁴⁴ and Max Kozloff,⁴⁵ Rothko’s classic works operate as metaphorical transformations of human experience in order to configure new modes of being-in-the-world, perhaps even to configure non-figuratively dimensions of transcendence and the sacred that can imaginatively re-figure human experience to the point that moral metamorphosis of character may ensue. As Rothko perennially remarked, if one does not investigate these implications of his art but myopically restricts one’s hermeneutic to the formalistic criteria of color, shape, and texture, then one has impeded the genuine communicative stimulus of his paintings. Such a misinterpretation of his canvases results in a failure to appropriate existentially his genuinely creative transfigurations of the facticity of life and his visual facilitation of a potential transcendence that intimates a mystery that invokes a certain faith.

Mimesis, Fiction, and Abstract Re-Figuration

Julia Davis notes that, given the various theoretical influences on Rothko's art and the over determination of ambiguity and affect found in his classical works, one may take several perspectives when seeking to interpret his philosophy of art. She contends that one can identify a Phenomenological Rothko, a Nietzschean Rothko, a Heideggerian Rothko, and a Medieval Mystical Rothko, among several others.⁴⁶ I wish to augment her list of "Rothkos" and add the possibility of investigating a Ricœurian Rothko, specifically by exploring the applicability to Rothko's art of Ricœur's idea that poetics may achieve a split-reference regarding how reality discloses itself beyond the constraints of the literal. Ricœur, himself, allows for such an application when, in his rare passages on painting, he expounds upon the ontological dynamics at work in the visual arts, especially in connection with abstract art. Of course, as mentioned above, nowhere that I know of does Ricœur directly reference Mark Rothko; however, he does mention individual abstractionists, such as Kandinsky, Soulages, and Pollock.

The latter two artists actually have rather direct connections with Rothko. Jackson Pollock joined Rothko as a member of the "Irascibles," that New York school of Abstract Expressionists that also included Clyfford Still, Willem de Kooning, Ad Reinhardt, and Hans Hoffman.⁴⁷ Additionally, both Pollock and Rothko were represented at one time by the Betty Parsons Gallery and were actively supported by the art connoisseur Peggy Guggenheim. The French abstractionist Pierre Soulages painted canvases most closely analogous to Rothko's work, especially in his later *outré noir* period that is somewhat suggestive of Rothko's later dark paintings, such as those in the Rothko Chapel. Indeed, Soulages actually befriended Rothko and once honored him with a studio party in Paris.⁴⁸ Under the circumstances, therefore, when Ricœur expressly connects his conception of the ontologically disclosive power of *mimesis* to Soulages's abstract style, I do not think it too much of a stretch to apply those same hermeneutical theories to interpreting Rothko's preoccupation with reiterating and creating certain existential world structures through the medium of non-objective visual signifiers.

Obviously, a fundamental question presents itself: what is it about abstract or non-figural art that attracts Ricœur and, by his own admission, relates so intrinsically well to his reflections on how discourse connects with reality? The simple answer to this question is that abstract art exemplifies and intensifies Ricœur's extended hermeneutical consolidation of the tensive theory of metaphor, the transformative implications of the three-fold mimesis, the "paradox of fiction," the schematizing dynamic of the productive imagination, and the supplementing of truth as adequation with truth as manifestation. Employing "metaphor" metaphorically, Ricœur contends that non-figural art betrays the multi-dimensionality of meaning that characterizes his theory of metaphor as the predicative assimilation of semantic impertinence.⁴⁹ Metaphor does not address the cosmetic use of language as mere decoration but, instead, reveals that meaning can be discovered and invented through the tension of conflicting categories. Such impertinence provokes the imagination to maintain the tension between competing fields, while simultaneously deciphering new perspectives and insights into reality.⁵⁰ The blurring of the edges among the various dimensions of meaning does not result in a blindness that fails to engage the world but actually establishes a "seeing-as" that stimulates ontological explorations that can genuinely transform individuals and situations. Ricœur considers these existential

experiments to be mimetic, not in the homogeneous sense of replicating a *status quo ante*, but in the metamorphic sense of re-configuring new ways of being-in-the-world.⁵¹

For Ricœur, the mimetic motility inherent in the poetic process of shuttling between semantic pertinence and impertinence that characterizes the existential creativity of metaphor may also be noted in the resolution of the tension between temporal concordance and discordance that one discovers operative in the function of narrative in shaping new forms of being-in-the-world. Through the structuring of emplotment, narrative texts establish a certain logic that creates a coherence of relationship among the various episodes of life, among the multiplicity of actions and characters that determine historical reality, and between the flux of existence and the sense of an ending, something of a teleological “grasping together” of experience.⁵² In other words, narrative texts correlate the discordance of temporal existence through the concordance of a narrative logic, that is, a plot, which lends a structure or order to historical reality analogous to the semantic pertinence of metaphor that overcomes the apparent illogical impertinence of the metaphorical statement taken literally. In both cases, the imaginative creation of symmetry depends upon a mimetic process, mimetic not in the conventional sense of simple imitation but in the Aristotelian sense of a creative repetition, that is, imitation as innovation.⁵³

Ricœur actually delineates a threefold mimesis regarding how narrative, both fictional and historical, can creatively configure human experience. The “figurative” dynamic at work in the narrative logic of emplotment addresses all three ecstases of temporality – the past, the present, and the future. In the present, the metamorphic dynamic of configuration occurs through the innovative poetic process of what Ricœur calls *mimesis₂*, a creative imitation that re-shapes existence imaginatively, in the schematizing sense of Kant’s productive imagination. In *mimesis₂*, the imagination forges a second order reference to the lived experience of time. In doing so, it creates what Ricœur calls the “world of the text,” which generates, out of the prolific dynamism of semantic innovations, new models *of* and *for* comprehending human reality through the shaping of a concordant “synthesis of the heterogeneous.”⁵⁴ The imitation of human action through narrative and various figures of speech, such as metaphor, generates the “world of the text” as a potentially new ontology, developing alternative interpretations of experience in order to formulate novel world structures or imaginative variations of reality. Indeed, *mimesis₂* is, therefore, a poetic attempt to *con-figure* human experience, to form together a new network or paradigm for giving meaning to human being by formulating an alternative *Lebenswelt*.

Yet, since *mimesis₂* depends upon the imaginative momentum of innovation, it necessarily affiliates with tradition, which Ricœur claims manifests its own symmetry between innovation and sedimentation.⁵⁵ But tradition equates with the past, which, in turn, concerns *mimesis₁*, what Ricœur calls the *pre-figuration* of time through previously articulated symbols and structures. Human action can be innovatively configured and re-configured precisely because it has formerly been “symbolically mediated,” that is, preconfigured.⁵⁶ In other words, *mimesis₁*, as referencing past imaginative structures of the world, expresses Ricœur’s notion of thrownness, the idea that no discovery or invention of meaning occurs *in vacuo*, but always precipitates out of a reality previously interpreted and from antecedent texts already composed. All neoteric attempts at poetically configuring new interpretations of being-in-the-world,

therefore, erupt out of “a pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character.”⁵⁷

The *con*-figurations of the *pre*-figurations of mimesis₁ into new existential potentialities accomplished through mimesis₂ awaits their ultimate fulfillment in the act of reading, whereby the narrative time of the text re-connects with existential time as the reader imaginatively engages the textual world and utilizes that world as a paradigm for transforming her/his lived time. Ricœur calls this intersection of the text with the reader’s experience “mimesis₃” and associates it with Gadamer’s notion of hermeneutical application, that is, the practical alteration of human existence through the transfiguring implications of interpretation. In other words, mimesis₃ “marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader.”⁵⁸ In doing so, Ricœur contends that the existential encounter with the text inherent in mimesis₃ actualizes a “transcendence immanent in the text” that can directly affect the development of the reader’s experience of self and world. Mimesis₃, consequently, names the revelatory and transformative competency of narrativity that can evoke both a present realization of clarity in comprehending a transfigured reality and also a future hope and expectation for a persistent transformation of experience that could be considered as religiously redemptive.⁵⁹ In addition, since the productive imagination impels this mimetic process, Ricœur considers this redemption to be the renovating efficacy of “the grace of imagination.”⁶⁰

Of course, Ricœur’s reflections on metaphor and the mimetic process remain distinctively affiliated with linguistic philosophy, but that affiliation should not preempt us from engaging in intersemiotic translation and “reading” Rothko’s canvases from a Ricœurian perspective. Such a “reading” certainly appears valid given Ricœur’s explicit claim that a work of art may have a semiotic density akin to the multi-dimensionality of metaphor. He goes so far as to admit that a work of art may well establish an opportunity “for discovering aspects of language that are ordinarily concealed by its usual practice.”⁶¹ In point of fact, he unequivocally connects his ideas of mimesis to the semiotic and “semantic” potentialities within painting, specifically abstract painting. Precisely because abstract art is not representational or literally figurative, it functions as a purer form of mimesis by disclosing dimensions of experience that could not otherwise be expressed – the creative imitation of that which has, heretofore, been hidden.⁶² This mimetic and metaphoric dynamic of plastic art conspicuously illustrates what Ricœur terms “the twofold nature of the sign: retreat from and transfer back into the world.”⁶³ This semiotic peristalsis between the sign’s expansion away from reality and its contraction back into the world achieves a unique “biting power” in abstract art, since the expansion away from objectivity energizes an even stronger contraction back into the experience of the spectator in order to re-figure or transfigure reality in a revelatory and redemptive manner. By distancing itself from common empirical references, abstract painting empowers a new referentiality predicated upon an intra-semiosis that produces an “infinite availability for incongruous associations.”⁶⁴ Yet, this incongruity grounds the existential possibility of a transfigured being-in-the-world.

In his provocative, albeit brief, article entitled “Paul Ricœur’s Hermeneutics of Painting,” Mario Valdés certainly accepts the intersemiotic translation of Ricœur’s theories of metaphor and narrative into the visual vocabulary of color, form, and texture that communicates through abstract art. In particular, he accentuates the intimacy in Ricœur between the polysemy of linguistic meanings and the strategies of the mimetic process of pre-, con-, and re-figuration

manifested through the media of canvas and color. Valdés insists that the artist and the spectator share a pre-figured world (mimesis₁), which then finds itself re-interpreted and re-conceptualized through the specific creative work of the artist (mimesis₂).⁶⁵ As a result, the spectator must contend with the work's plasticity, with what Ricœur would call its capacity "to restructure the world [...] [by] unsettling, challenging, remodeling the [spectator's] expectations."⁶⁶ Valdés declares that the work's re-structuring capacity mediates something from the experience of the artist to something of the experience of the spectator. Specifically, the work mediates meaning between the artist and the viewer, a meaning that can be communicated to a certain extent but that resists genuine translation between the two existences. What the artist embodies in the work and what the perceiver interprets can never be homogeneous and can never be totalized. The work establishes a certain chain reaction, therefore, in which one metaphor leads to another, one interpretation suggests a second, and the spectator finds it impossible to escape a functionally infinite series of potential experiences whereby both the self and the world of the self remain open to the incarnation of a plurality of meanings (mimesis₃).⁶⁷ Indeed, Valdés goes so far as to characterize Ricœur's aesthetic connection between artist and observer as analogous to a "religious vision."⁶⁸

For Ricœur, the over-determination of the symbolic efficacy of painting explicitly augments the referential possibilities of the ontological intimations inherent in the work. The painting brackets the literal reality of empirical forms in order to advance the lateral reality of new cognitive and affective moments of existential import. The work instigates imaginative variations of both the ego and the environment. It accomplishes this through what Ricœur terms "iconic augmentation," a phrase he borrows from François Dagobert that allows him to transplant his perspectives on poetic discourse over into the visual arts.⁶⁹ Image can now be both discursive and visual, which indicates that painting can act metaphorically, mimetically, and referentially to reconstruct reality in new and imaginative ways. Ricœur insists that abstract art may accomplish this uniquely and more emphatically because it distances itself from representation of the empirical and seeks to embody, through color, form, and texture, aspects of existence that always remain non-figural. The function of abstract art, therefore, "is not to help us to recognize objects but to discover dimensions of experience that did not exist prior to the work."⁷⁰ In other words, abstract paintings reinforce the paradox of fiction, whereby the very fact that a certain "unreality" has been established enjoins the creative re-configurations of reality inspired by the artist.

Ricœur consolidates the paradox of fiction with the "paradox of iconic augmentation," by which he denotes the dynamic whereby the imagination more closely approaches the "heart of the reality which is no longer the world of manipulatable objects, but the world into which we have been thrown by birth and within which we try to orient ourselves by projecting our innermost possibilities upon it [...]."⁷¹ This is the world within which we "dwell," a world that depends upon our productively imaginative aptitude to "see-as," to augment and remake reality poetically. Yet, he insists that this poetic refiguring of reality occurs only as the imagination deviates from what ordinary language or first-order reference calls "reality." This deviation comes to a unique expression in the very act of abstraction; that is, because abstract art such as Rothko's conspicuously distances itself from mundane imagery, it is capable of successfully engaging in imaginative variations of the world and of reinterpreting human existence.

Conclusion

Ricœur clearly includes in the imaginative variations of abstract art the power to incite new architectures of meaning as well as new affective responses to those meanings. He claims that art not only communicates new models for understanding the self and the world but also the appropriate moods necessary in order to engage those new re-configurations of reality. Through the singularity of the work, the artist may communicate universal feelings that connect the humanity of spectator to that of the artist or that actually create new sensitivities to re-imagined structures of existence. Yet, such emphases on moods, worlds, communication, transformation, imagination, and referentiality directly tie Ricœur's philosophy to Rothko's aesthetic theory and to his classical works of abstraction. Both insist that non-figural art can place factual reality in an *epoché* that then supplies the emotional and cognitive space within which the spectator can "dwell" and endeavor to experience moods and insights that can eventually remodel factual reality into new and significant horizons of being. For example, one can easily correlate Rothko's stated purpose for creating large canvases as a means whereby the spectator becomes enveloped in the visceral dynamics of the painting with Ricœur's contention that abstract art can manifest a world that assimilates the spectator into "a trail of fire issuing from itself, reaching [us] and reaching beyond [us] to the universality of humanity."⁷²

I believe that Rothko and Ricœur agree that abstract art can communicate, renovate, and appropriate both new feelings and new realities. Such art reveals a truth function of a second-order that deepens both the mystery and the wonder of existence. Neither would accept that art is merely decorative or auto-telic. Instead, art blurs the edges among the various interpretations of potential meaning and, in doing so, sharpens the contrast inherent in polysemy. That, in turn, results in clarifying the redemptive implications of imaginative redescriptions of the world, redescriptions that ensue from the grace of the imagination. Such refigurations of existence cannot, however, avoid revealing that lacunae remain, that one persistently confronts fissures in existence that can never be filled either intellectually or artistically. Both Rothko and Ricœur confess the constancy of secrets, those ambiguities of existence that do not arise because of the over-determination of polysemy but because of systemic enigmas that never allow full disclosure. Consequently, both certify that the non-figural resists re-figuration through poetic language or through artistic forms or through intellectual commentary that attempts to figure them out. Rothko and Ricœur, therefore, would consent to Wallace Stevens' poetic critique of rationalists for wearing square hats, thinking in square rooms, and confining themselves to "right-angled triangles."⁷³ That is just too much linearity, too many hard edges that claim to define and confine interpretations of reality within nice and neat categories. Human being-in-the-world is not so distinctly delineated for Rothko and Ricœur, who testify that the edges remain blurred and indistinct at points, signaling that, in the midst of a profusion of conceptual and poetic languages or an abundance of artistic media, something always remains apophatic and aniconic. In other words, the non-figural may only be re-figured through metaphorical discourse or abstract design that leaves something unsaid and something unexpressed.

Through the second naiveté of poetic discourse and the plastic intensifications of abstract canvases, one may discover re-descriptions of what transcends description, come to appreciate the intentionality of a consciousness that never fixates on a thing-in-itself or deludes itself into believing that it has attained Cartesian certainty regarding the final meaning of existence. Rothko

and Ricoeur do not deny that there is something meaningful, or, at least, potentially meaningful, something true or, at least, potentially true. They simply concede that one can never know exactly what that something is. But for once, then, something; and again, for once, then, something; and again, and again, in an ongoing iteration of the tension between what can be said and shown but remains silent and hidden – a tension that never sharply focuses the blurring of the edges.⁷⁴

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- ³ Jervolino, "Rethinking Ricœur," Location 3482.
- ⁴ Jervolino, "Rethinking Ricœur," Location 3424.
- ⁵ Eileen Brennan, "Introduction" *Études Ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies* 6:1 (2015), 1.
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- ⁹ Ricœur, *On Translation*, 33.
- ¹⁰ Paul Ricœur, "Arts, Language and Hermeneutical Aesthetics: Interview with Paul Ricœur (1913-2005)," trans. R. D. Sweeney *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36 (2010), 945.
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- ¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 12.
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- ¹⁷ Rothko, *The Artist's Reality*, 15.
- ¹⁸ Rothko, *The Artist's Reality*, 10.
- ¹⁹ Rothko, *The Artist's Reality*, 21.
- ²⁰ Rothko, *The Artist's Reality*, 14.
- ²¹ Rothko, *Writings on Art*, 125.

- ²² Paul Ricœur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 112.
- ²³ Rothko, *The Artist's Reality*, 25.
- ²⁴ Rothko, *Writings on Art*, 34.
- ²⁵ Rothko, *Writings on Art*, 78.
- ²⁶ Rothko, *Writings on Art*, 128.
- ²⁷ Rothko, *Writings on Art*, 119-20.
- ²⁸ Rothko, *Writings on Art*, 90.
- ²⁹ Rothko, *Writings on Art*, 45.
- ³⁰ Glenn Phillips, "Introduction: Irreconcilable Rothko," 3.
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- ⁵² Paul Ricœur, "The Human Experience of Time and Narrative," in *A Ricœur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 110; Paul Ricœur, "Narrative Time," *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 166-67, 174.
- ⁵³ Ricœur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur*, 146-7.
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- ⁵⁶ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 57.
- ⁵⁷ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 54.
- ⁵⁸ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 70-1.
- ⁵⁹ Ricœur, "Narrated Time," 338.
- ⁶⁰ Ricœur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur*, 237.
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- ⁶² Ricœur, *Critique & Conviction*, 173-4.
- ⁶³ Ricœur, *Critique & Conviction*, 175.
- ⁶⁴ Ricœur, *Critique & Conviction*, 176.

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- ⁶⁶ Ricœur, *Critique & Conviction*, 173.
- ⁶⁷ Valdés, "Paul Ricœur's Hermeneutics of Painting," 474.
- ⁶⁸ Valdés, "Paul Ricœur's Hermeneutics of Painting," 473.
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- ⁷¹ Ricœur, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality," 133.
- ⁷² Ricœur, *Critique & Conviction*, 180.
- ⁷³ Wallace Stevens, "Six Significant Landscapes," VI.
- ⁷⁴ An earlier version of this essay was presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Ricœur Studies in 2015. I wish to thank all of the participants who asked questions and contributed comments during the discussion period. Their perspectives helped to shape this article into a much clearer and more substantial investigation.