

After an End: Unsayng Painting

'... but what do you say about it?'—a remark overheard when going round 'The Late Series' exhibition. Quite possibly a remark, or at least a sentiment, a question, repeated many times in the five months of the exhibition. What do you say about it? And what do you say when you stand up to speak about it not as an art historian or critic, not as a Rothko specialist, but as a teacher of Christian theology?

What do you say about it? What does a Christian theologian have to say about it? Even allowing that there is anything to say about it at all (a question I'd like to leave open for now), isn't a Christian theologian doubly debarred from being the one to say it? Why? In the first place because of being a *Christian* theologian, when, despite a reference to Kierkegaard (but, quite specifically, to Kierkegaard's Abraham), Rothko's religious allusions might be better understood against the background of either Judaism or the twentieth century's fascination with pre-Christian classical and archaic mythology. And then, in the second place, because of being a *theologian*, since theologians are notoriously and inveterately garrulous beings, beings who talk far too much, mostly in a language that is far too arcane and over-complex, about what human beings can at best talk about only in fear and trembling, and then in a faltering, broken, and fragmentary way (meaning, of course, God). To their credit, I should add, the most thoughtful theologians have always understood this, and have spoken—though there's a paradox—of silence, unknowing, and learned ignorance as integral to what they do.

Yet I am here, as a teacher of Christian theology, to say something about Rothko. And, despite the reservations I have just expressed about the suitability of anyone in my position saying anything about painting such as this, I think that there are also reasons why Christian theology might have an interest in at least trying to say something. In the first place, the Christian theologian is a human being before being a theologian and has the same possibilities of a human response to Rothko's work as anyone else. And many theologians (though not all), like many others (though not all), find in their experience of Rothko's painting something that moves, draws, and even shakes them, something that they sense has a certain proximity to what they have also experienced in their own religious lives. Being theologians, they then want to talk about it, to find words to make the connections between these different areas of experience and find out what's going on. Does this sense of proximity indicate a convergence between our experiences of art and our religious experience? Many—both from the side of the arts and from the side of religion—have wanted to deny that, insisting on a clear line being drawn between religion and the secular business of art. On the other hand, many—especially in the wake of Romanticism—have wanted to speak for convergence to the point of identity: art, some want to say, is our modern and postmodern way of living religiously or, to use a word to which I shall return, of practicing spirituality. This, in turn, elicits a counter-response from those (also many) who sense that this is all too sloppy a drift not into religion but pseudo-religion, religion without content or challenge or perhaps even an alternative religion, 'the religion of art'. Even at the very human level of response, then,

it doesn't take the theologian long to find that whether or not these paintings are themselves asking such questions, they do provoke basic theological questions, questions as to just what the experiential element in religion is, what makes a certain experience or a certain kind of response to experience, or a certain kind of understanding of experience religious—and how is that to be evaluated in relation to the range of religious (and anti-religious) options facing someone living in this modern and postmodern world. All of this could be and has been said not only in relation to Rothko but also to the work of just about any artist or to any artefact (as, for example, in Martin Heidegger's meditation on the meaning of the ruined Greek Temple in his essay *On the Origin of the Work of Art*). But Rothko's painting seems to raise these issues in an especially sharp way, and it does so precisely because it is so hard to say anything about it—which brings me to the second reason why Christian theologians might want to give more than usual attention to these paintings in particular. As I already mentioned, the task of Christian theology is of a kind that ineluctably and repeatedly brings those who undertake it up against the limits of the sayable. The Bible itself already testifies to the problems that will face those who take it upon themselves to speak of or for God, and from the early centuries to the present each theological generation has had to confront the question as to its own limits, with such high points as the ancient text known as *The Mystical Theology of Saint Dionysius*, the medieval mystical tradition, especially in Meister Eckhart and some more popular texts such as the English *Cloud of Unknowing*, and the nineteenth century's preoccupation with the 'ineffable' quality of religious experience.

But the modern Christian theologian has a further reason for being drawn to the limits of the sayable. This has to do with the way in which modern culture itself has experienced a deep, wide-ranging, and, some might say, shattering experience of the unsayable. And not only the unsayable, the unrepresentable. Since the beginnings of the Romantic movement there has been an incremental expansion of the sense that our words, our images, and even our feelings are somehow incapable of engaging or reflecting or communicating reality. This phenomenon has its philosophical forms, from Kantian transcendentalism through to Derridean deconstruction, and it has its artistic or aesthetic forms, as manifested in the search for authenticity and originality in opposition to the constraints of academies and schools. But it is also wider than that. For our world itself has been growing. It has become older, vaster, and almost infinitely more complex than even nineteenth century human beings imagined it to be. Darwin's most vigorous early opponents were not in fact the theologians (many of whom were actually quite quick to embrace the theory of evolution), but geologists, who did not believe that the earth was old enough to allow for the time-scale projected by the upstart biologist. Nor is it so long since scientists confidently spoke of the 'atom' as the smallest unit of matter, whereas we now know that the atom contains within itself a seemingly infinite complexity whose 'secret' continues to elude those who research it. And, at the other end of the scale, the time and space of contemporary astro-physics seems utterly to beggar our human capacities for representation. If it was already possible for Pascal, writing in the mid-seventeenth century, to respond to the new scientific view of the

universe by confessing that 'the silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me', how much more might that be true for us?

But the inconceivability and unrepresentability of our new reality has not only to do with the expanding universe of scientific knowledge. It also has to do more directly with our common human experience. Where early nineteenth century religion and early nineteenth century humanism were both equally confident in their descriptions of the nature of human beings and in the values that they believed should be normative for human beings, the course of that century saw the unravelling of such confidence, not least under the impact of the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, who saw human self-images and human values as essentially fictions, masks with which to conceal and beautify the terrifying energy of the 'will to power' that each of us is—a vision to which Freud would give systematic, and he believed scientific, form. All of which was, of course, only a prelude to the 'unmasking' of the real nature of the European Empires in the series of catastrophes that began in the summer of 1914, and that culminated in the unspeakable and unrepresentable events of Nazi criminality—what the French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch called the 'Indicible'—and the Atom bombing of two Japanese cities. In Germany, 1945 would become known as Year Zero, but it wasn't only for Germany that a certain phase of history had come to an end. Religion and humanism alike seemed powerless to offer anything like an adequate explanation for these events and for what they showed us about ourselves. 'If God does not exist, then everything is permitted', Dostoevsky had written, and, in the wake of the catastrophe of

the twentieth century one is tempted to add, that since it is clear that everything is permitted, then neither God nor any of the systems of values that human beings contrive for themselves really exist. And if that is so, what are we to say about ourselves, our world, our beliefs?

I have been saying quite a lot about the unsayable, but I haven't yet said anything about Rothko. Nevertheless, I think it not coincidental that the period of Rothko's best-known work, which was also the period in which the defining responses to it were shaped, was in the two decades subsequent to the Second World War. If, then, we are to think about a theological response to Rothko, then it is appropriate to think about the religious situation of that period, and, more specifically, how Christian theology related to it, a period, we may say, 'after an end'.

Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1944) flagged a theme that would work powerfully on the imagination of the post-war period:

I said to my soul, be still, and
wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the
wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and
the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you
are not yet ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the
light, and the stillness the
dancing.

I do not know whether Tillich knew the *Four Quartets* (though it is likely), but he too was in any case taken by the figure of waiting, as we can read in his sermon 'Waiting'. There are several rather important things to say about this

sermon and its author before coming to what it actually says. The first is that it is from a collection, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, published in 1949 and going into many reprints on both sides of the Atlantic which established itself as one of the most influential Christian writings of the 1950s and early 1960s. The theme of waiting itself is found in several other significant and influential religious texts of that time, perhaps the best-known of which is the title given to a collection of writings by Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* and it entirely befits the work of a theologian who stressed the correlation of theological ideas with contemporary thought and experience that his chosen topic expressed a central and important current of the contemporary world.

The sermon also belongs to a particular moment in Tillich's own career. Most of the sermons in *The Shaking of the Foundations* were given in the chapel of the Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he was teaching—not very far, it has to be said, from where Rothko was painting at the same time. Tillich himself was a refugee from Nazi Germany (having had the distinction of being the first university professor to be dismissed from post in 1933), and a close associate of the Frankfurt School theorists who had also emigrated to New York, establishing the School for Social Research there. As an army padre in the First World War and a left-wing activist in the inter-war years, his thinking was deeply marked by the traumas of the historic events of those times. But also, and not least important for us, he was also a theologian extensively occupied with the religious meaning of art, since, he believed, art offered both an exceptionally sensitive revelation of the spiritual

state of society and, more fundamentally, was capable, under certain conditions, of providing something like a religious revelation. Although art is not mentioned in the sermon to which I now turn, there is no doubt that Tillich thought that what he was saying here would also find its correlate in the art of his time.

The sermon begins by noting that both Old and New Testaments emphasize the aspect of 'waiting' in human beings' relation to God. Tillich comments, 'The condition of man's relation to God is first of all one of *not* having, *not* seeing, *not* knowing, and *not* grasping. A religion in which that is forgotten, no matter how ecstatic or active or reasonable, replaces God by its own creation of an image of God'. Unfortunately, he continues, most Christians give the impression that they think they do possess God in one way or another. 'The prophets and apostles, however, did not possess God; they waited for Him.' Moreover, 'even in the most intimate communion among human beings, there is an element of not having and not knowing, and of waiting. Therefore, since God is infinitely hidden, free and incalculable, we must wait for Him in the most absolute and radical way. He is God for us just in so far as we do not possess Him ... We have God through not having Him'. All this is said as characterizing the human God-relationship in general, in all times and in all places. But the sermon concludes with making some comments about the contemporary age in particular. This, Tillich says, is very much an age marked in a special way by doubt and despair. This exposes us to the temptation to make a kind of 'boast' of not possessing God, as Tillich might have seen in Sartrean existentialism, then at the high-point of its

influence, with its resounding declaration that atheism and metaphysical despair are the foundation of all future philosophy. 'The divine answer to such an attempt,' Tillich says, 'is utter emptiness'. Waiting is not despair, but 'the acceptance of our not having'. So, he concludes, 'Our time is a time of waiting; waiting is its special destiny'—but then, he adds, 'every time is a time of waiting ... Time itself is waiting, waiting not for another time, but for that which is eternal'. Waiting is not despair, because waiting means looking for 'the eternal', for something, a 'ground of being' (to use another Tillichian formulation) that is incommensurable with time, that cannot ever be fully expressed in any historical form or cultural product or in any word or in any image. Yet when we accept our 'not having', our 'not possessing', when we just wait—then we may have the possibility of experiencing the power of that Being, filling our emptiness, and opening a way into a future of hope.

As an aside—and illustrating from another angle the 'timeliness' of Tillich's approach—we find a similar thought in Thomas Merton's talks on *Contemplative Prayer* for monks. Despite the confessional differences, Merton too drew on many of the writers of contemporary existentialist thought and literature and had an impact on Catholics in 1950s and 1960s America not dissimilar to that of Tillich in the Protestant world:

... the true contemplative is not the one who prepares his mind for a particular message that he wants or expects to hear, but who remains empty because he knows that he can never expect or anticipate the word that will transform his darkness into light. He does not

even anticipate a special kind of transformation. He does not demand light instead of darkness. He waits on the Word of God in silence, and when he is "answered," it is not so much by a word that bursts into his silence. It is by his silence itself suddenly, inexplicably revealing itself to him as a word of great power, full of the voice of God.

Is, this, then the religious context in which to begin making sense of Rothko's paintings as religious or spiritual? Are these large, brooding, uneventful canvasses a visual correlate of pure waiting, 'without thought', a gathering darkness that is not so much looking for light as for something—perhaps 'eternal'—beyond the duality of darkness and light, something that could just as well be expressed in darkness as in light? Painting—not as communication of a determinate content, a message, but as expression of a state, a mood, a way of being (or even, not being)?

Leaving these questions hanging, I should like to turn to another aspect of the question of 'saying' something about painting, and the particular difficulty of saying something about Rothko. This also connects with what it might mean to call a work of art, in this case a painting or series of paintings by Rothko, 'spiritual'.

'Spirit' is a basic word in the modern vocabulary, but it is a word with deep roots in the biblical tradition. It was the Spirit that breathed on the waters in the beginning of Creation, signifying the power of God, the energy that synthesised the cosmic chaos of primeval matter into an ordered world (incredible power therefore), but also the Spirit that inspired the prophets, driving them into

ecstatic frenzies, and, later, the soft, gentle spirit that came in the form of a dove, the spirit of love, the Spirit that came upon the Virgin in the sanctuary of her walled garden. It would also become a—arguably the—key term in the philosophy of Hegel, a philosophy that shaped and continues in its subterranean way to shape subsequent discussions of the relations between art, religion, society, and philosophy. For Hegel, art, religion, and philosophy are the three pre-eminent forms of 'Spirit'. But what is Spirit?

Hegel's conception of Spirit, it has to be said, is rather different from what might be associated with contemporary 'spirituality'. There isn't even a remote whiff of joss-sticks in anything Hegel says about Spirit and, in many ways, Hegelian Spirit is diametrically opposed to what is sought in New Age 'spirituality'. For, according to Hegel, 'Spirit' means self-conscious reason: reason that is conscious of its own power of intellectual and imaginative production and that is capable of expressing that consciousness in appropriate images and words. And, as I have said, he saw it as having three main forms: art, religion, and philosophy. Of these, art and religion expressed the interests of Spirit in forms that were still, as he would put it, 'encumbered' with sensuousness, as images, mythology, or 'picture-thinking'. Philosophy, on the other hand, was capable of thinking the true content of human spiritual activity in the absolutely precise language of systematic logic. Leaving philosophy to its 'pure thoughts', let us focus on what Hegel has to say about art. Here he depicts a hierarchical system of art and forms of art, which is determined by the balance within a particular form or style of the polarities of sensuousness and spirit. On this basis, the

hierarchy of the fine arts runs progressively from architecture, through sculpture, painting, and music to poetry, drama and other literary arts, before art transcends itself and, in 19th century realism, enters into the prose of everyday life.

We note two things. Firstly, painting is ranked 'lower' than any of the arts of language, and it is integral to Hegel's view of painting that painting doesn't speak. Yet, secondly, painting is also ranked higher than sculpture. Why? Because, Hegel thinks, its task is to depict the divine with regard to its subjectivity and inner meaning. In accordance with this task the two-dimensionality of painting is itself significant, since it calls for the interpretative activity of human consciousness in a way that sculpture does not. The sculpture is a real object in three-dimensional space, but the painting is not what it represents. It may show a landscape, a city, a battle, or a mother and child in the stable—but it does so in the confines of a surface that may be but a few inches square. To see this flat surface as a landscape or a battle, we the viewers have actively to imagine what we are seeing, even if we mostly do so in an entirely spontaneous and unreflective way. We have to participatively live ourselves into it, if we are to see what it is 'saying'.

Hegel doesn't quote Shakespeare's Prologue to *Henry V*, but it would have been to his purpose to have done so:

... let us, ciphers to this great
account, On your imaginary forces work.

Suppose within the girdle of these walls Are
now confined two mighty monarchies, Whose
high upreared and abutting fronts The

perilous narrow ocean parts asunder: Piece
out our imperfections with your thoughts; Into
a thousand parts divide one man, And make
imaginary puissance; Think when we talk of
horses, that you see them Printing their proud
hoofs i' the receiving earth; For 'tis your
thoughts that now must deck our kings, Carry
them here and there; jumping o'er times,
Turning the accomplishment of many years
Into an hour-glass ...

To see the painting as what it represents, we
have not merely to be passive recipients: we
have, in a way, to be co-creators: it is our
thoughts that give life to Kings, Madonnas,
mountains, and oceans. And it is this mental
activity, even if it does not yet find expression in
language that, for Hegel, marks painting out as
spiritually superior to sculpture. The 'event' of
painting does not happen 'out there', in physical
space, but 'in here', in mental space. As he puts
it in the introduction to his lectures on aesthetics,
even a child's drawing of a landscape has more
value than the landscape itself because of the
spiritual activity invested in it, because it is the
creative product of a thinking mind.

Painting does not speak, but we can perhaps
begin to see how, on a Hegelian view, the kind
of painting produced by Rothko might qualify as
'spiritual' in a way that more directly
representational painting would not. That is
because, in a consistent and unyielding way,
Rothko confronts us with the question: 'but what
do you say about it'. The painting 'tells' us
nothing: the burden of deciding how to see it is
thrown back on us, the viewers—as Rothko
explicitly says when he comments that he is
equally open to his work being seen in a sacred
or in a secular way. With regard to 'what' it

means, the painting does not offer any
determinate content or specific message. Instead,
it opens up a field of pure possibilities, a
'potential space' that invites the co-creativity of
the viewer. Thus, Rothko's own comments about
the physical relationship between viewer and
painting: the 'space' of the painting and the
'space' of the viewer are to blend into a common
space, and it is in and out of this common space
that the work of meaning creation is to occur—
but, in the first instance, as waiting: not as
waiting for a revelation of the meaning 'in' the
painting, but as a waiting that is an opening to
all that the painting potentially 'is'.

Let me go back a step. Painting, according to
Hegel, does not speak. Yet there is a sense in
which much painting, including the realist
painting of which Hegel himself was especially
fond, does speak. It tells us what it is. In
medieval art it often does this literally, in that
the saint depicted in the painting is explicitly
named, in writing, or is accompanied by a
biblical text that explains his or her significance
or role in salvation history. But even when such
conventions have been left behind, there is a
sense in which a painting of a naval battle, a
domestic interior, or a bowl of fruit still 'tells us'
what it is. Of course, we all know that 'ceci n'est
pas une pipe', and that the painting and what
the painting represents are two different things,
but it is perhaps no mere convention that
paintings are still today displayed with a title,
telling the viewer 'what' it is.

And the same is true of painting that attempts to
show things unseen, mystical and heavenly
truths or sublime ideas that do not have, as you
or I or Dutch houses or Italian landscapes have,
a bodily presence in the world. If we turn from

Rothko back to the great Victorian allegorical painter, G. F. Watts, we will encounter a painter who is very much concerned to tell us things, eager to instruct us in the mysteries of life, love, time, faith, progress, and death that provide the subject matter for so many of his canvases. This pale, almost sexless yet recognizably female figure, who looks scarcely able to take even a single step further up the rocky mountain path, and the strong, masculine angel, dark, yet tender show us what the relation of life and love is. The message seems suitably spelt out in a verse commentary by H. W. Shrewsbury:

So fair art thou, O Life, and yet
so frail,
Climbing the rocky stairs with
feet that bleed,
Drawn on by some divine,
imperious need
The heights of noble enterprise
to scale ...

But life need not fear

For love is near, thy faltering
steps to guide ...

And since love leads, O Life,
thou canst not fail

In a review of the 1987 Tate Gallery Rothko Exhibition, Peter Fuller attempted to draw a comparison between Watts and Rothko, commenting that 'Like Rothko, Watts wished to give expression to the great universal truths which lay behind the pagan and Christian myths'. And, he adds, 'like Rothko, he became increasingly uncomfortable with specific representations as the means to the realisation of such truths'. The work in which he sees this

approximation as most fully realized is one of Watts's last paintings, 'The Sower of the Systems'. Of this painting his widow, Mary Watts, wrote in her hagiographical *Annals of the Artist's Life* that 'It was an attempt made to paint an unpaintable subject. In a scheme of deepening blue colour, the vision is of a figure impelled rapidly forward, while stars, suns, and planets fly from hands that scatter them as seeds are scattered.' She continues with Watts's own comments on his search for transcendent meaning in painting, suggesting that they might apply more to this picture than to any other: 'My attempts at giving utterance and form to my ideas, are like the child's design, who, being asked by his little sister to draw God, made a great number of circular scribbles, and putting his paper on a soft surface, struck his pencil through the centre, making a great void. This was utterly absurd as a picture, but there was a greater idea in it than Michael Angelo's old man with a long beard'.

Quoting G. K. Chesterton, Fuller suggests that, far from being mere allegory, 'Watt's technique "does almost startlingly correspond to the structure of his spiritual sense"', and he sees 'The Sower of the Systems' as a work that goes 'beyond the brink of abstraction'.

I remain sceptical, and it seems to me that even here, Watts remains the great Victorian, eager to tell us the 'sound, important truths' he believes we need to hear. Far from taking us into the potential space, the space of empty waiting beyond all myths and doctrines, Watts's technique is closer to those in the twentieth century who would use large-scale public art for the propagation of new mythologies rather than to those, like (I think) Rothko, who leave us to

work out our own meanings for ourselves.

Let me take one more Watts painting, which, precisely by virtue of its distance from Rothko, also helps us to orientate ourselves towards what is unsayable in the work of the latter. It is perhaps his most famous painting, 'Hope'. Various commentators have listed the various features of this work that justify its title, although at first glance many contemporary viewers might presume that it was entitled 'Melancholy' or 'Loss' rather than 'Hope'. If I may quote myself, 'This is not 'hope' in the sense of Ernst Bloch's spirit of utopia, it is no forward-thrusting, irrepressible life-force. This is more the hope ... of the closing bars of Mahler's 9th Symphony, an eerily serene surrender of this-worldly life in favour of another, intangible and inexpressible order of being'—which, I may add, is by no means self-evidently the Christian heaven. In fact, if we look at it simply as a painting and not as an allegory, its mood might indeed be analogous to what we experience in looking at some of Rothko's late work, e.g., a painting from the series 'Brown on Gray'. Yet the difference is, after all, that the one is symbolic and representational, and is called 'Hope'. The other is without shape or form, entirely open to the movement of the viewer's creative spirit across its abyssal surface. And, if we are prepared to think in Hegelian terms, it is precisely for this reason that the epithet 'spiritual' might be better applied to Rothko than to Watts. Unlike the work of the great Victorian allegorist, it tells us nothing, but in telling us nothing it invites us to think about what we might have to say about it. That is, it invites us to spiritual activity.

But, to repeat, in the first instance, spiritual

activity that takes the form of waiting, not having, not hoping, without thought, in utter emptiness.

'Without thought'? 'In utter emptiness?' But how do these injunctions square with the suggestion that the spiritual value of these paintings (and, if we follow Hegel, of all painting) is precisely to stimulate our creative and interpretative activity?

The answer to that is, I think, twofold.

Firstly, we have already noted that the work of the imagination in mentally creating the picture that we see when we look at a painting is, on Hegel's own account, entirely spontaneous in the first instance: we look and we see the fruit, the mother and child, the battle, but we don't have to think about what we see. Before 'thought' happens, in the sense of thinking specific, definite thoughts, we are in a relation to what we experience and what we see that is not a mere blank: there is always a certain attentiveness, a certain intentionality, as modern philosophy puts it, that may reach far beyond what, in any given moment, we are capable of articulating. The thought may be sown in us or, as we look, may be being sown in us, but we are not yet thinking it. And we may never find the words to think the thoughts that most move us. But, secondly, and following on from this first point, *waiting* 'without thought' and in 'utter emptiness' is an event, an activity that stretches out beyond the simple spontaneity of 'I see it!' Waiting is holding ourselves open for what is to come and holding ourselves back from imagining that we have seen it or that we have grasped it or that we possess it already. As such, even waiting, 'without thought' and in 'utter

emptiness' is undoubtedly a form of intentional activity. Even if the one waiting cannot say of himself who he is or what he is waiting for, there is nevertheless a waiting going on, a concrete and particular event within the time-space continuum, a vortex in the flow of time in which time flows back on itself, circles round and disappears into itself. Waiting is not nothing. The possibility of waiting, even in an utterly relativistic universe, gives a certain coherence and continuity to the self, awakens us to possibilities of what we might become, and is, in this sense, a necessary first movement toward becoming spirit, which, as Kierkegaard once said, is a matter of becoming 'older than the moment', rising above the flux of time and becoming a definite someone, a someone who does not alter when he alteration finds.

Rothko *says* nothing, but in the way in which his work challenges us to say something, or to think of what we might say, it invites us to enter on a journey that we are entirely free to experience as a spiritual journey, but, as he says, a journey we are also free to construct in secular terms—though that too would, in Hegel's sense, also be, in its way, 'spiritual'.

I have emphasized the context of Rothko's work as that of an age that, in a very particular way, was an age of waiting, an age after an end, and an age in which, in the disillusionment following the failure of the great ideologies of the twentieth century (including some of the ideologies of artistic modernism), no new or obvious beginning had emerged. Since then, many new beginnings have emerged in culture, politics, and religion. But it can scarcely be said that any of them have as yet sunk deep roots in our collective psyche. If we do know for sure

that we are now entering an era of Asian rather than European dominance in the international order, there seems little clear view as to what this might mean with regard to art and religion. But is it so impossible to say anything at all about what we might be waiting for? Are there not, after all, certain universal human aspirations regarding the demand for justice, respect for persons, and access to the means of life that need to be expressed, that are proper objects not just of waiting but of hope?

I connected the theme of waiting with the experience of Year Zero; but where Rothko seems to have come closer than anyone to painting the 'utter emptiness' of his time, wasn't there, isn't there, also a value in the work of artists such as Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer whose work makes quite explicit connections with the trauma of their time and place yet who also work through to concrete expressions of hope? Are we really capable, for long, of pure waiting? And, if we're not, don't we need to be helped to find forms that can feed and nourish us while we wait, so that even abstraction needs from time to time to sink its roots into history, time, and nature if it is not to run dry—which is what, I think, we find in the American abstractionist Robert Natkin, the contemporary Danish painter Per Kirkeby, or Tapiès's distinctive way of drawing the materiality of the world into the painterly work?

Fuller concluded his review of the 1987 exhibition with reflections on the fact that Watts, so highly rated in his own time (Roger Fry compared him to Rubens and Titian), fell from critical favour almost immediately after his death in 1904 and is scarcely even a household name any more. And he seems to foresee a

similar fate awaiting Rothko. 'On leaving this exhibition,' he wrote, 'I became convinced that the claims currently made on his behalf may one day, quite soon, come to seem almost fanciful. Perhaps in the early twenty-first century, we will look back on Rothko's funereal tablets, and see only an attempt to "paint the unpaintable" [the phrase, recall, is that of Watts], a primeval vagueness, passing through time into oblivion ... nothing but motherhood, and the dead'. We are now in the early twenty-first century, so is all we see 'a primeval vagueness, passing through time into oblivion'?

As my previous comments suggest, I do not think Rothko is 'enough'? But whoever said that he was, or that we should think this kind of abstraction alone was all that art could or should be producing? But, equally, I am unpersuaded by Fuller's scepticism, and for three reasons. Firstly, Rothko, unlike Watts, did not try to paint the unpaintable. He painted the unsayable, but the unsayable, in at least one of its forms, is also eminently paintable. And, secondly, because he painted the unsayable, Rothko invites us into a space of waiting that is rich potential space for experiments in spiritual living, experiments in which, as we wait and as we struggle to say just what it is that's going on in our encounter with these works, we learn something about what would be required of us if we were to live with the depths of responsibility and self-commitment that would justify the use of the term 'spiritual'. And, thirdly, there is, after all, the encounter with the works themselves.

Something still happens when we stand in front of or in the midst of them and, as with all great art, that 'something' (even if in this case we can scarcely put it into words) is quite unique to just

these works.

None of this means that Rothko's 'unsayable' is the same as the 'unsayable' mystery of God with which Christian theology is concerned. But, equally, our struggle to say something about Rothko's unsayable paintings may lead us also to reflect on the unsayable depths of the human spirit in which 'deep cries to deep' and our waiting undergoes a shift in which it is no longer a waiting for this or that change in the cultural or social order but a waiting for God, the infinitely and utterly unsayable God, in whom and from whom and to whom all saying originates, proceeds, and ends—why not? But if it is true that the religious attitude of the 1950s and early 1960s can be described as a time of waiting, who's to say that we have now got what they were waiting for? Maybe we too are still waiting or maybe, even, not waiting, not yet waiting, since—perhaps—maybe we've forgotten what we might be waiting for and, if we don't know what we're waiting for, how can we be waiting? Who's to say?

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