

# WILLIAM CONGDON: ACTION PAINTING AND THE IMPOSSIBLE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE CHRISTIAN MYSTERY<sup>1</sup>

• Rodolfo Balzarotti •

“Even if the artist starts from a physical object, the goal is to reach something ontologically different, which is the *image*. . . . The operation of painting must bring to light—in the sense of revealing, but also of causing to be born—this image as a work.”



## 1. *A meeting that failed?*

In September of 1965, William Congdon was in New York after having been away from the city for many years. His gallery, the Betty Parsons Gallery, was organizing a traveling exhibition of his recent works, for the most part on religious, biblical, and liturgical subjects, to be shown throughout the United States at schools and religious institutions, both Catholic and Protestant. Congdon had converted to Catholicism in August 1959 in Assisi, where he then set up his residence in 1960. In that same year he abandoned the usual subjects of his art—views of cities and landscapes, painted in a gestural and expressionistic style close to the temperament of the school of Action Painting, to which he had been close in the late

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1940s—to paint biblical and gospel subjects connected with Catholic liturgy, to the great amazement and also perplexity of many in the New York art world.

During Congdon's stay in America in 1965, Bernard Reis, a famous lawyer in New York and a great collector who also handled the business affairs of some of the leading artists of that time, including Congdon and Mark Rothko, took the initiative of arranging a meeting between these two painters. Congdon and Rothko had met in New York around the end of the 1940s, when both of them were showing at the Betty Parsons Gallery, and a relationship of esteem and cordiality had grown up between them. However, their roads diverged in the course of the 1950s. Rothko had stayed in New York, like the majority of his Abstract Expressionist colleagues, but had changed galleries and slowly become one of the artists on the leading edge of the American scene, together with Pollock, Still, and just a few others.

Congdon had left the United States to live and work in Europe: in Venice, then in Paris, and later in other parts of Italy, living the expatriate life and slowly losing touch with New York art circles, except for fleeting visits in conjunction with his shows at Betty Parsons.

The two artists met again after many years in the fall of 1965. Their encounter took place in the new studio that Rothko had recently rented on 69<sup>th</sup> Street to work on his new cycle of canvases commissioned for the Houston Chapel. Rothko was right in the middle of his painting project for the chapel, which at that time, in the intentions of his patrons, was still intended for Catholic worship. Herein lies the probable reason why Reis wanted to set up the meeting: both artists, albeit with different motives, were engaged in painting sacred subjects in a fully modern language. One could have expected a very interesting encounter between them.

But their meeting—at which Reis was present, as was Paolo Mangini, Congdon's by now inseparable friend and collaborator ever since his conversion—did not work out as hoped. Let us hear about it from Congdon himself, who recounted the episode with deep sadness twenty-five years later in an interview with the art historian Peter Selz:

You know this moment with Rothko, my relationship with Rothko, I mention this because it was a great tragedy . . . it was when Paolo [Mangini] and I, in 1962 [actually 1965], we came

to New York and Bernard [Reis] arranged to have lunch with Rothko. Unfortunately, it was the moment of my hypocrisy—not genuine—it was the moment when I was still on the fringe of my confusion of not painting freely, but painting the religious subject. And I was so hypocritical, and so cruelly hypocritical to Rothko—it was a suffering—Paolo had never suffered so much as how I was that day, and dear Bernard never said anything, Rothko never wanted to see me again . . . he had the big sketches for the chapel in Texas, and he did not show them to me because he recognized that I did not share, I was no longer the real artist that he thought and saw in me in 1949, at the beginning. After this meeting with Rothko, I changed. I came out of that, as though I was in a fog, a moralistic fog, and I never had a chance to let him know that I was free again, because he would have loved me again, because he'd loved my painting when my painting was real, when it was really religious.<sup>2</sup>

It is staggering to hear, in addition to such a severe self-judgment, the particularly negative evaluation that Congdon, the “converted” painter, gives of his work on religious subjects in that period. It is a paradox to which we shall return later. Moreover, he gives us to understand that this encounter was for him a turning point. Five years after this meeting, in February 1970, Congdon noted in his diary, in words full of sadness and also a touch of remorse, the tragic death of his fellow artist.

A few months after this unhappy meeting, to be precise, in the spring of 1966, Barnett Newman, another leading Abstract Expressionist who, together with Rothko and Congdon had also shown at Betty Parsons in the very early 1950s, presented at the Guggenheim Museum's prestigious new home a group of canvases, begun in 1958 and just recently finished, to which he had given the title *Stations of the Cross*, astonishing and perhaps even scandalizing the New York art world.

The fact that in the same period three eminent proponents of Abstract Expressionism were working on painting cycles on a subject not generically “religious” but specifically Christian is truly unique, even more so given that they reached this common end following paths and motives that were absolutely different—and in any case completely independent of each other. But it is legitimate

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<sup>2</sup>Unpublished transcript of W. Congdon—P. Selz interview (William G. Congdon Foundation Archives, Buccinasco, Italy, 10 September 1989).

to ask whether, above and beyond the individual reasons each had, there may not have been deeper reasons, connected with the cultural and spiritual climate of those years. At the risk of being schematic, if we wanted to find a common denominator for these three cases, I would speak of “refuge in the church.”

At the end of the 1950s, the wave of Abstract Expressionism reached its peak, soon to enter into decline; this was a “heroic” generation that, in the span of a decade and against all expectations, made the United States, and New York in particular, the center of world art.

But in the next decade, a new generation of artists emerged on the American and world scene. Movements like Pop Art, Color Field Painting, or Minimal Art began to create a completely new cultural climate, totally antipathetic to the “old” Action Painters. Having been through one of the most tragic periods in Western history—between the years of the Great Depression and the horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima—the Abstract Expressionists were the bearers of a “high” conception of art and its tasks. This is the source of their profound moral and, in a certain sense, “religious” content. The artists of the 1960s, grappling with an opulent society and mass communication, felt less confident of the inner resources of human beings, whom they saw to be increasingly alienated, dehumanized, and one-dimensional. The result was an art on the one hand more “cool” and analytical, and on the other more inclined to irony and parody.

Rothko and Newman, more than other artists of their generation, tried to take up the challenge of the younger artists, but without giving up their own ethical and aesthetic foundations, indeed seeking instead to affirm them even more radically. And among these premises, the most important was the centrality in art of the “subject,” of the “content,” opposing any drift into formalism. From this premise derived the markedly “religious” imprint of much of Abstract Expressionist art, and certainly of the two artists in question.

The *Stations of the Cross* and the Houston Chapel are innovative works compared to the mature style of these two artists and seem to be greatly influenced by the new climate of the 1960s. But the choice of a context or a theme that is openly, almost provocatively religious, “confessional” even, has precisely the function of orienting how these works are received by reiterating in the most peremptory way their moral and religious, or better still,

metaphysical content. In this sense I have spoken of “refuge in the church.”

This term can be applied also, and perhaps with greater reason, to Congdon, even if in his case it inevitably takes on also an ironic sense: his production of religious subjects in the early 60s contributed significantly to compromising his career as an artist and to paving the way for the long eclipse that would last until the final years of his life. He is, furthermore, the only one who created images inspired by Catholic liturgy under the impetus of a personal religious conversion—only to repudiate them later, judging them to be a dual betrayal, as it were: betrayal of his art and of his faith.

Another parallel and another difference: in 1970, all three artists exited the scene. Rothko and Newman due to their untimely deaths when both were at the height of their careers. Congdon, after the failure of his last shows in America and in Europe, was by this point “dead” to the world of art, even if he continued to live and paint for almost thirty years. For him, a unique destiny of survival—as Fred Licht called it—was being prepared.

In reconstructing the cultural climate of that period, we cannot ignore the profound changes in the Catholic world that culminated with Vatican II. Already in the 1950s a new season had begun in the relationship between the contemporary Church and contemporary art, thanks to the pioneering work of Père Couturier, from the church in Assy to Matisse’s Chapelle du Rosaire and Le Corbusier’s chapel at Ronchamp.

In the United States, the same role was played in this period by the writings of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton and the French philosopher Jacques Maritain. Both were very interested in Congdon, to the point of writing the preface to the book *In My Disc of Gold*, published in 1961, in which the artist presented his recent paintings on a religious subject.<sup>3</sup> Maritain, in particular, in his text tried to clarify just this concept of “religious art,” in a short passage that merits quoting as an indispensable premise to the comparison we shall make among the three artists. He distinguishes clearly between three levels of “religious art”:

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<sup>3</sup>*Nel mio disco d'oro: itinerario a Cristo* (Assisi: Pro Civitate Christiana, 1961). Preface by J. Maritain, T. Merton, P. Bruzzichelli. Also published in English as *In My Disc of Gold: Itinerary to Christ* (Manhattan: Reynal and Co., 1962). Introduction by J. Maritain and Fr. M. C. D'Arcy, S.J.

1. contemplative painting, which has a religious or God-related significance quite independently of the subject or the theme treated.

2. the religious painting in the strict sense, or painting that deals with specifically religious themes (not necessarily related to any public use).

3. sacred painting, which, on the walls or in the windows of a church, is put at the service of public prayer.

Now, it seems inevitable that there will exist a sort of tension between these three levels that can also give rise to conflicts and contradictions which we shall see in the work of the three artists. We should observe, at any rate, that to the extent that modern painting tends to take on an explicitly religious value, it inevitably also involves the problem of *place*, of space—physical and spiritual at the same time—where the viewer is asked to position himself. The third level of the religious, in short, stands in the background as an ever-emerging problem that, in all probability, has not yet been solved.

## 2. Barnett (Baruch) Newman

Around the end of the 1920s, Barnett Newman added to his first name the name Baruch, which in Hebrew means “blessed.” I wanted to put this name in the title of this section because unquestionably, even though Newman was not an observant Jew, his culture and sensibility were profoundly imbued with the Jewish tradition. Without it, we could not understand a large part of his work, above all the series of the *Stations of the Cross*.

I note parenthetically that Congdon too, as we shall see, placed his life under the name of Benedict. But in his case, this was the founder of the monastic movement to which he was close from his conversion to the end of his life.

I note also that the only image that documents Congdon’s relation to the Abstract Expressionist artists is a photo from the early 1950s. Congdon is in the middle; on the left, slightly behind, are Ad Reinhart and Barnett Newman with his wife Annalee; on the right, leaning against the wall, is Betty Parsons. In the interview with Peter Selz we have already cited, Congdon also refers to his relationship with Newman:

Oh, Newman, I knew him but mostly through Betty, because Betty never could say enough in his favor. She said, "Newman is the greatest." She loved him, you know, believed so much in him, but perhaps I was not at that level of intelligence. I grew up very late in my life, and then I was not . . . now I could go back . . . if everything was put back I could go back to New York with them. I would go down to the "Club." I would do everything now, but then I was too young.<sup>4</sup>

Congdon showed great respect, almost reverence, for Newman, but he mentions his "intelligence" in particular. For a long time Newman's paintings remained in the shadows. Even among his fellow Abstract Expressionists, he had trouble being considered as an artist. His role from the end of the 1940s to the end of the 50s seemed to be above all that of theoretician. He was the artist who produced the greatest number of writings and statements of poetics or aesthetic reflections. And also the artist who most energetically and clearly declared that America had the opportunity and the moral task of creating something new and unprecedented in art.

This newness had to go beyond European Abstractionism—his "bête noire" was Mondrian—to create a new type of geometry and abstraction. But in order to do this, it had to overcome problems of form in order to concentrate on content. From this comes the pronouncedly intellectual, one might say "conceptual," nature of his work. His production of theory in the 1940s and 50s seems like an attempt to clear the path for this new abstraction that was supposed to arise not so much from a working out of form as from the progressive illumination of the artist's vision. It is true that for the most part his statements are first and foremost polemical, often paradoxical, and in some ways evasive. But it is as though his way of reasoning replicated the manner of negative theology, in which negations prevail over affirmations.

One point is quite clear, however: the new geometric abstraction that had to replace that of recent Western art would have something in common with the abstract geometries utilized in the art of primitive peoples. What matters here is never form in itself, but function. That is to say, what matters is its *ritual* character, the idea of art as an energy that is transmitted directly to the observer, that makes the observer a participant in an event.

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<sup>4</sup>Unpublished transcript of W. Congdon—P. Selz interview.

Few artists have insisted so much as he on eliminating from painting everything “artistic,” “painterly,” or “aesthetic” that tradition, even the modern tradition, has deposited in it. He even went so far as to change the language, saying that art should be no longer plastic, but *plasmic*. And yet, despite the fact that the stripped-down austerity of his works seems to foreshadow the inexpressiveness of Minimal Art, few artists have pursued as much as he a total involvement—physical, psychic-emotional, and mental—of the observer with the work.

Here the crucial problem of *titles* comes into play. Newman almost always used titles charged with mythological, theological, and mystic references to his works, but always denying that these gave a precise indication of the content of the single work, or that the work was the pictorial equivalent of its title. At the same time he always maintained their indispensable role for helping the observer assume the right attitude in front of the painting.

Harold Rosenberg has identified five categories of titles or recurring themes in Newman’s work:<sup>5</sup>

1. Acts or events of creation: *Be, The Beginning, Day One*, etc.
2. Acts of location and sacred places: *Cathedra, Chartres, Not There—Here, The Stations of the Cross, Here Sculptures*, etc.
3. Personages, fabulous or private—*Vir Heroicus Sublimis, Achilles, Abraham, Ulysses*, etc.
4. Light: *Anna’s Light, Black Fire, Horizontal Light, Shining Forth (To George)*.
5. States of being: *Concord, Covenant, The Moment I, Now, Onements, The Way, The Wild, Zim Zum I*.

It is my impression that names functioned for Newman like plastic elements—or rather, plasmic, as he would have it. They were literally meant to mold, to construct a context, a mental space for reception of the work, so as to change its reception also on the physical and psychic-emotional level. I have in mind his most famous title, *Onement*, which refers to his famous series, created in 1948, with which Newman announced he had finally found his “content.” The central stripe on a monochrome ground appears for the first time (it would later take the name of “zip”).

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<sup>5</sup>Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1978), 67.



But here I want to underline his recourse to an archaic term, *Onement*, in place of the more obvious *Oneness*. The substitution of the suffix forces us to make a conceptual *tour de force*: unity is not an essence, but rather something like an event. One-ment takes us back to Mo-ment: it transfers us from space to temporality, but a temporality that is, at the same time, instantaneousness and unending duration, intemporality.

It could be said that from this moment on, Newman reduces the surface of the painting. He preserves only two elements that are absolutely opposed to each other: the expanding undefined chromatic surface, on the one hand, and on the other the linear element, the band, the zip, as maximum concentration. It is impossible to establish a hierarchy, a priority between the two: whether the band cuts, opens up, the surface, or if it is the surface itself that is opening up in a thin slit. It cannot be determined if these lines divide, mark off, or if conversely they unite, join together, suture.

The contemporary presence of these two opposing elements brings to mind the movement of expansion and contraction, diastole and systole, that subtends the Cabbalistic doctrine of *tzimtzum*, which Newman cites on various occasions in the titles of his works and also in the plan for a synagogue made in the 1960s. This heterodox doctrine is very close to what in the Christian context is called kenosis, God's emptying out, relinquishment, which here is enacted essentially in the Word being made flesh, and above all in his sacrifice and his death. I emphasize this point because it introduces us to the meaning of the *Stations of the Cross*, but, as we shall see, also because it enables us to make an interesting parallel with the series of Crucifixes painted by Congdon in the 60s and 70s.

The doctrine of *tzimtzum* explains creation as the act by which God withdraws to "make room" for the other-than-he, for the creature, which can in this way affirm itself also as freedom, that is to say, as freedom from its Creator himself. This doctrine can in some ways anticipate the modern idea of the "death of God" and of human beings as "thrown" into the world without anything to hold onto, handed over entirely to their own freedom. It would allow us to give a theological meaning to the process of secularization as the "eclipse" of God and the divine from the world. And thus the eclipse of all traditional symbolism, in order to reach the only authentic symbol, that is to say the absolutely irreconcilable, impossible contemporary presence of opposites. As Barnett Newman writes: "For man is one, he is single, he is alone; and yet he belongs,

he is part of another. This conflict is the greatest of our tragedies.”<sup>6</sup> The symbol of modern art is the tragic *par excellence*, this simultaneity of opposites, man’s being “separate,” a separation that refers us back to what he separates himself from, even while denying it, canceling it out.

We can examine the *Stations of the Cross* from this perspective. In this, we follow the detailed analysis made by Thomas Hess in the collective volume entitled *The Subjects of the Artist*.

This series comes at the lowest point in Newman’s career. Toward the middle of the 1950s, Newman was essentially still an unknown and practically not exhibiting any more. This was probably also a moment of profound creative uncertainty. For two years, 1956 and 1957, he did not paint anything. On November 30, 1957, he suffered a serious heart attack. Recovery was very slow. Only in early 1958 did he manage to paint a canvas, to which he gave the meaningful title of *Outcry*. “A shout of despair? A call for help? A protest?”<sup>7</sup> Hess asks.

In February he made two paintings on unprepared canvases, using only black. “Black is what an artist uses . . . when he is trying to break into something new, when he is clearing the decks for experiment, when he wants to find a new way to his image,” Hess writes.<sup>8</sup> He also notes that here, compared to the earlier works, the subdivision of the areas follows a new system: Newman no longer works on halves, quarters, and eighths, but with thirds and duo-decimal procedures suggested by the thirds.

In 1960, Newman returned to the two 1958 canvases, adding two more, and only at this point did he intuit that this could become a series, to be exact a series of fourteen paintings that he now called “Stations of the Cross” (see Figures 1 and 2). Naturally the choice of this title can have a symbolic connection with Newman’s life: the fact of having gone through death, through extreme pain, to return then to life. Hess also offers strictly formal reasons: the triadic division of the canvases created a directional movement that could not be brought into balance with just two or four paintings. Therefore, “he decided to make a larger series, large enough to

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<sup>6</sup>Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York, 1990), 76.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas B. Hess, “Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross-Lema Sabachtani” in *American Art at Mid-Century. The Subjects of the Artist* (Washington, D.C., The National Gallery of Art, 1978), 195.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 195–96.

contain the flow of pictorial action, to modulate and inflect some so that other individual images could offer violent gestures, but all would be given coherence and definite impact as they became echoed and canceled and re-echoed across the sequence.”<sup>9</sup>

Newman thus needed a sequence that was fairly ample but not open, defined and concluded as a unitary whole. This then is the value of the *Stations*, an iconographical scheme fixed by tradition that gathers together into a sequence various episodes that, however, make up one sole event, the passion and death of Jesus Christ. As Newman himself wrote, “Each painting is total and complete by itself, yet only the fourteen together make clear the single event.”<sup>10</sup> It is the typical undecidable polarity of his art: every canvas is autonomous, unique, but its “content” extends throughout the entire series. Contraction and expansion, time and eternity, the instant and duration.

A rapid examination of the fourteen canvases shows us a certain uniformity of format, and also of the division of the various areas of the canvas, accompanied by continuous variations, that involve for the most part the zip or the zips on the right side of the painting. But, despite this regularity, there are also absolutely unpredictable elements: up to the eighth station the raw canvas background predominates, and the only color is black, in various nuances. At the seventh station, suddenly, the black is concentrated on the right side and the zip appears on the left, inverting the movement.

With the eighth station, the black edge returns, while on the right a band of more or less the same consistency appears. But, all of a sudden, in the next three stations, white zips take the place of black ones, and we are as it were flooded with light. But then, in the next two stations, the twelfth and thirteenth, black returns, and this time in a dominant position. Do we have to say that this happens completely by chance? That it does not have any relation to the traditional iconography that assigns to these two stations Christ’s death and deposition from the cross?

Finally, in a new surprising switch, the fourteenth station presents a large part of the surface covered with white paint, while the background of the canvas is reserved to the band on the left edge. What is most striking is that there is no more trace of the zip

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 203.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 205.

or the band on the right. Here too we can ask ourselves if this has some reference to Christ's burial.

These are, at any rate, narrative references that Newman has always rejected: he does not want to tell a story, but to render a unique event in a series of paintings. We can only note that the variations are more local up to the sixth or seventh station, and then they become more violent and conspicuous.

Newman's work no longer represents something, but rather creates a *spatial event* that using the means of painting can address the pure experience of the viewer in immediate terms. The confrontation with the viewer is no longer frontal or merely visual, but is physical and psychological, a driving force; it impacts his motility at the level of his body.

And indeed, Newman adds to the fourteen canvases of the *Stations* a fifteenth entitled *Be*. It can be read as the command God gave at the Creation: "Let there be," but also as an imperative addressed to man: "be." The presence of this work addresses the viewer directly, creating a void and springing into this void the sudden unsayable and unrepresentable demand of here and now, the cruciality of existing, of being here. *Now* and *Here* appear often as titles of numerous works: "The painting should give man a sense of place, that he knows he's there, so he's aware of himself."<sup>11</sup> Place, according to the Hebrew concept of *Makom*: place as event, as unity of space and time.

This is why "Newman did not predetermine a specific environmental situation . . . he was particularly proud of the fact that the *Stations* were not a commission . . . for these cosmopolitan Americans, modernism provided something in which to believe in the most profound way possible in the twentieth century. The museum was the place for the belief."<sup>12</sup> And again: "The Abstract Expressionism generation had a tremendous respect for museums as embodiments of history, even if the respect often was displayed as antagonism. One might almost say that these were the only walls they cared about, beyond those of the studio."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Quoted in David Sylvester, "The Ugly Duckling," in *Abstract Expressionism*, ed. Michael Auping (London: Thames and Judson, 1987), 144.

<sup>12</sup>Ann Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition" in *Barnett Newman*, ed. Ann Temkin (Philadelphia Museum of Art, Yale University Press, 2002), 61–64.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 41.

In essence, Newman adhered to the principle that the work does not require a specific space. It concerns place, it must determine a place, be itself a place. It does not *have a place*, but determines, creates, constitutes a place. It *takes place*, that is to say it happens, anywhere and in any case, in the experience of the individual viewer.

This is what he said about his *Via Crucis*: “The first pilgrims walked the Via Dolorosa to identify themselves with the original moment, not to reduce it to a pious legend; not even to worship the story of one man and his agony, but to stand witness to the story of each man’s agony; the agony that is single, constant, unrelenting, willed—world without end.”<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Rothko’s labyrinth or a theater of the self

If Newman was not particularly interested in the placement in space of his paintings, Rothko is a very different case. In effect, he was the only painter of his generation to have created a painting cycle inside a space, a space designed as a function of his canvases—and a space originally made for worship. There is an originary architectural vocation of his painting that has a close connection with the problem of the human figure or, to be more exact, with the human scale.

I would like to dwell for a moment on a painting that can be placed on the threshold of Rothko’s mature style, *Untitled*, of 1945–46. In a vaguely aquatic world, the arrangement of the painted surface suggests the scheme of a façade, with its architectural orders one on top of the other. But it also suggests the shape of a human figure. The markedly vertical format of the canvas accentuates both readings. This contamination between architectural form and human figure seems important to me, because it is a phenomenon that we shall find in some measure in Congdon as well. But it is also important for an understanding of Rothko’s mature style.

In the catalogue of the recent show of Rothko’s works in Rome, a sketch is reproduced: the lines rough out a composition that recalls his classic canvases, with the masses arranged vertically. Superimposed on it, however, is a schematic figure that curiously

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<sup>14</sup>Hess, “Barnett Newman,” 208.

recalls the position of Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian man. Even in his advanced evolution toward a radically abstract kind of painting, Rothko thus continues to maintain an implicit reference to the figure. Like Newman, he would never tire of stating that what interested him was above all the "human scale." His paintings are not meant simply to describe or express the human condition, but to enable the viewer, directly and without mediation, to experience his or her own "human stature."

There is a photo that shows Rothko lying on the ground in the center, together with his family and some friends, during a picnic among the temples at Paestum, during his trip to Italy in the summer of 1959. I am struck by the monumental columns in the background: they rise solemnly and majestically, but at the same time they appear to inflate and to float with a strong upwards thrust. And the spaces between one column and another also take on shape and plastic relevance. Deprived of any reference to a figure, these elements involve the viewer in a mirror relation: reflecting and magnifying his erect stance, they restore to him his dignity as a *homo erectus*, his tragic and solitary greatness. Characteristic of the canvases of Rothko's maturity are their rigorous frontality and symmetry, and the arrangement of the masses of color, which always expresses an ascensional dynamic. "I realized that I have painted Greek temples all my life without knowing it," Rothko himself would say.<sup>15</sup>

Much like Newman, with the monumental formats of his mature works Rothko pioneered an art that fundamentally reoriented pictorial dynamics in such a way that the painting turned outwards, directly addressing and implicating the viewer. For such an art, the space beyond and in front of the painting and the situation obtaining within that space were now part of the field of pictorial action. From this comes his abandonment of easel painting, the form of painting that corresponds to the culminating phase of modern art, the nineteenth century, in which the painting increasingly became considered a "portable," "self-contained" "object." This is the phase of the secularization of art, which is reduced to a market commodity. The large canvases of Abstract Expressionism are an implicit criticism of this secularization, an expression of a strong anti-worldly thrust. This is the source of the "Rothko Rooms" in

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<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Rothko, ed. O. Wick, *Exhibition Catalogue Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, 6 October 2007–6 January 2008*, 36.

some museums. The first and most famous example is in Washington, in the Phillips Gallery, installed in 1960.

Rothko's art was thus destined, so to speak, to an encounter with sacred architecture. But with what kind of architecture? During his travels in Italy, Rothko was impressed by many sacred buildings, first of all the basilica on Torcello and its mosaic cycle, besides naturally the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna. But what struck him most were the frescoes by Fra Angelico in the convent of San Marco in Florence, most of which are located inside the monks' cells, thus destined to the personal meditation of the individual religious. Rothko, in short, saw realized here the ideal of a form of monumental painting that at the same time was absolutely intimate and inner.

Coming now to the chapel, we base our discussion on the most complete and authoritative study of the subject, by Sheldon Nodelman, published more than ten years ago.<sup>16</sup> The chapel was commissioned by John and Dominique de Menil, two rich art patrons who were Catholic, French in origin, and great friends of Père Couturier. It was intended to be a building destined for Catholic worship, located on the campus of the University of Saint Thomas, run by the Basilian fathers. A prestigious architect, Philip Johnson, was called to work alongside Rothko.

In fact, both of these conditions would fall aside within three years. The chapel would be built on another site, a de Menil property, and would be non-denominational. Johnson would withdraw from the project, being unable to come to an agreement with the painter's demands. It seems that from the very beginning a strict, inexorable logic governed this project, totally focused on the painted canvases, and any intromission that did not fit with this was swept away.

The architectural structure would in reality be conceived and built on the basis of the genesis of the paintings, that is to say by replicating the installation that Rothko had created in his New York studio to paint the cycle of canvases. The ground plan of the interior is octagonal, a plan on which Rothko insisted strongly. This type has precise symbolic connections with the Christian tradition: the number eight is symbolic of Redemption, just as seven is symbolic

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<sup>16</sup>Sheldon Nodelman, *The Rothko Chapel. Paintings, Origin, Structure, Meaning* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997).

of creation. Furthermore, the octagon combines the shape of the square, symbol of earth, with that of the circle, symbol of heaven.

By a curious trick of fate, the painted canvases number a total of fourteen, but without their having any tie with the *Stations of the Cross*. In actual fact, the number of paintings goes down to eight because Rothko introduced the great innovation of multiples: there are three triptychs on three different walls.

But all the paintings in this space constitute something totally new with respect to Rothko's classic paintings. In effect, this is the first time that he conceives them as a function of an environment that in turn was expressly designed to hold the paintings. We could say that he pursues a convergence between painting and architecture: painting becomes monumental and architecture becomes a part of the composition of the painting.

The canvases present an unprecedented compositional and chromatic simplicity. Five are monochrome. The others are merely bichrome, with a shape, a black rectangle, on a dark red, almost violet background. The rectangle has unusually sharp, stiff contour lines (see Figures 3 and 4).

The extreme poverty of composition, Nodelman notes, creates in the viewer, at first impact, an "oppressive effect... one of an ambient at once urgently demanding and frustratingly remote and unresponsive."<sup>17</sup> Thus the eye is led to focus on the outlines of the canvases, on their external form and relation to the surface of the wall, which also becomes a part of the painting composition.

Nodelman has made an admirable analysis of the chapel's structure and meaning, which to his mind should be read as a single installation in which the canvases cannot be separated from their architectural context, and vice versa. As for the meaning, he has demonstrated all their complexity, hypothesizing three different levels of reading, ranked hierarchically. We shall try to summarize as briefly and schematically as possible what he says:

1. On the most immediate, material level, what attracts the attention are the individual canvases—or triptychs—in their most obvious sequence: an order of reading that follows the two axes, longitudinal and transversal, of the chapel, indicated by the main walls that form the square.

Entering, we encounter the first axis:

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<sup>17</sup>Nodelman, *The Rothko Chapel*, 301.



a) in front of us, on the opposite wall, in a recess that suggests the apse of a Christian church, is a monochrome triptych, with a slightly lighter tone of the color in the central panel, which in turn recalls altarpieces.

b) on the wall facing this, the entrance wall, is a single two-color panel. If the triptych recalls the quiet and unity, albeit in three sections, of the divine world, this isolated panel, heroically and tragically solitary, takes us back, with its black color, to the sphere of the earthly, mortal human condition.

The second axis cuts transversely across the first. It connects the two side walls occupied by two triptychs, very different from the apse one. They are bichrome, like the entrance panel, and their configuration is highly dramatic, just as their position on the wall is more compressed and claustrophobic, also because of the presence of the side doors. Multiplicity, constriction, imbalance: these are characteristics that recall the drama of existence in history, in temporality. The arrangement of the three panels, of which the central one is out of alignment, could vaguely recall the image of the crucifix.

We can see how this first level of reading, this movement along an axis, gives priority to the four main walls, that is, the square. Moreover, it is a level of reading that is closest to the types of the Christian tradition. These are present, however, as a residue that Rothko certainly planned, but in discreet terms, so that they can be promptly sublated in a subsequent, higher level of reading.

2. Up to now, we have neglected the four monochrome panels on the walls set at an angle. And we have not taken into account the fact that it is impossible to look at one single painting in the chapel without our peripheral vision encompassing also those on the wall next to it. These two factors therefore impose on us an order of reading that no longer proceeds along the axes, but moves in a circle. The result is a reading that is no longer sequential, as though it were narrative or dramatic, but rather structural or structuralist—in the sense this term takes on in linguistics.

The eight canvases, in effect, combine together and oppose each other on the basis of two pairs of opposites: internal unity (monochrome) vs. internal multiplicity (bichrome), and external unity (single panels) vs. external multiplicity (triptychs). The two oppositional types intersect inside each individual piece, so that we have:

a) bichromatic multiples (internal multiplicity + external multiplicity): lateral triptychs

b) single monochromatic panels (internal + external unity):  
corner monochromes

c) single bichromatic panels (external unity + internal  
multiplicity): entrance panel

d) monochromatic multiple (external multiplicity + internal  
unity): apse triptych

Nodelman detects in this structure the square of Aristotelian logic, widely used in linguistics and semiology during that period.

The fact is that at this point, through a reading tracing the links and crossed references among the canvases, the viewer, rising above the individual paintings physically present on the walls, becomes aware of purely virtual qualities, or to put it better, a matrix of qualities, in which the Platonic opposition between One and Many is always brought into play. From the material world, we have moved up to the world of essences, of ideals. It is the eye of the mind that can grasp this ideal matrix.

Here Nodelman recognizes a Platonic kind of dynamic, as well as Augustine's scheme of three levels of vision:

a) the level of *sensory vision*, which grasps objects in their multiplicity and material aspect

b) the level of *rational vision*, which grasps the proportions, numbers, and harmony underlying sensible phenomena. These are the two types of reading that have emerged up to now in the structure of the chapel.

c) Augustine holds that there is also a third level, that of *intellectual vision*: the gaze that grasps everything in relation to God and the salvation of the soul. How is this third level configured in the space of the chapel? According to Nodelman, we move to the third level when "the site of the artwork is displaced from the object to the viewer." To extend the span of one's vision to embrace the entire installation, the viewer is forced to move, first his head and then his entire body, but with a frustrating result: "He is engaged in a continuous rotational sequence that returns upon itself . . . where there is no stopping point or conclusion."<sup>18</sup> For the viewer, the object becomes ever more fleeting, in an ever-renewed confrontation with temporality. We have moved from space to time:

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<sup>18</sup>Nodelman, *The Rothko Chapel*, 330–31.

The spectator is situated . . . as the center of the installation conceived now much less as an object than as an event, a “work” to be undertaken and enacted. . . . But also the conventional relationship between the spectator and actor is reversed . . . . The spectator becomes the actor . . . under the interrogation . . . of the paintings. The chapel becomes a theater of the self . . . an ordeal for spectatorial subjectivity itself.<sup>19</sup>

This is why a chapel like this one could not have held up to being destined to Catholic liturgy. It is in contrast with the very idea of *liturgy*, in its meaning of *common* work or action. The Rothko Chapel is indeed the site of a liturgy, but it should rather be called a *mono-urgy*, the work of one. This place of mystic ascesis, this “cell” can, however, turn into a solipsistic prison. Nodelman himself suggests this when he draws an intriguing parallel between the chapel and the place represented in Borges’ famous story, “The House of Asterion.” Asterion is the Minotaur. He stands in the center of a room with fourteen doors; each gives access to a room that in turn has fourteen doors leading to fourteen rooms, and so on. Fourteen is the number of infinity, and the room with fourteen doors is the labyrinth. Asterion does not know if this labyrinth, from which he cannot manage or does not want to exit, is his work or not.

I conclude this point by referring to two photographs taken from the Houston Chapel’s website. They seem to me to be a perfect visualization of these different levels of reading. The first depicts a Catholic Mass, celebrated by the famous Brazilian bishop Helder Camara. The altar is set up in correspondence with the apse, in accordance with the chapel’s axial orientation.

In the second photograph, we see a Sufi dance, a mystical branch of Islam. The whirling movement of the circular dance is the perfect manifestation of the profound structure of the chapel.

#### 4. *Congdon: the flesh is the hinge of salvation*

Among the Abstract Expressionist artists, Congdon is the only one who—starting at a certain moment in his life—adhered to a specific faith, Roman Catholic Christianity. And who, from his

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

conversion to his death, lived an organic, concrete belonging to the sacramental and communal reality of the Church.

The event of his conversion was certainly a leap, a break with the past. But at the same time it cannot be isolated from a whole complex of circumstances, events, and decisions—as well as of traits of temperament—that contributed to determining his anomalous position in the context of American art of his generation. We shall try here to indicate very schematically, point by point, the principal reasons for this anomaly.

#### 4.1 *The war and the Holocaust: conversion to painting*

Congdon is the only artist of his generation who was a direct witness of the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust. His portrait of a dying Jewish woman made at Belsen in 1945—*Morgen Tod*—is, at least on the symbolic plane, Congdon's certificate of birth as a painter. The war led Congdon to his first conversion: from sculptor to painter. And, as a painter, almost inevitably, he converted to the modernity that in that period, between 1948 and 1949, was being decided in New York on 57<sup>th</sup> Street at the Betty Parsons Gallery. Here Congdon discovered his own idiom and, at the same time, his subject matter: from the human face—*Morgen Tod*—he moved to the façades of the Bowery slums and then to the disfigured face of the City.

#### 4.2 *Conversion to Europe*

Alone among his fellow artists, Congdon left New York and the United States to return to the site of the tragedy of the war, Europe. From 1950 he lived in Italy. His conversion to Europe was also a conversion to history, but history was a theater of ruins, of crumbling monuments. For him, one of the most traumatic sights of the war was that of the destroyed abbey at Monte Cassino. Among the notes in his war diary, we find this quotation from *The Spirit of Forms* by Élie Faure, in which the famous art historian exalts the great painters; in civilization's moments of crisis, of the dissolution of the human community, it is their task to “*carry on the heroism of the world*.” They have no other function than to recreate in their soul, in their own manner, the primitive unity so as to

transmit it intact to the organism that is to be. *When the columns of the temple collapse, the function of the painter-hero is to present his two shoulders for the burden of the architrave until another approaches and permits him to die.*"<sup>20</sup>

In the monumental views of the early 1950s—Piazza San Marco, the Colosseum, Athens, the Taj Mahal, a curious and anachronistic repetition of the classic Grand Tour—Congdon establishes a singular connection between painting and architecture; translated into a very modern gestural language that captures them like a fleeting reflection, these views are apparitions, epiphanies of a lost communion among human beings. The painter-hero attempts to save the traces of them in an act of heroic *pietas*. In these views, Congdon creates his own peculiar form of the sublime: the painter-hero is a Samson who presents his shoulders to the shaky columns of the temple—he is truly the *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*.

#### 4.3 Epiphany of the other

But the heroic-monumental phase ran its course, and here we are in the mid-1950s with this unusual painting, *Sahara 12* (see Figure 5): the desert swallows up man's life and works. Right here, in this great emptiness in which one loses sight of the horizon and the normal dimensions of space, we have the unexpected revelation of man, the sudden invasion of his body by means of one part of it, a foot, not painted but impressed directly into the paint as though into desert sand. An almost ritual gesture, by which the painting itself becomes a *place*—it is truly Congdon's *Here and Now*, his self-referential act, an offering himself to the other. This is how Congdon reread this sign more than thirty years later:

"I am in the center of a round oasis in the Algerian desert in 1955; I am standing in the imprint of a big bare foot of an Arab—not two but one! I take off my shoe, take a step and put my foot inside his. The other embraces me . . . in Paris, after my return: I remembered and painted the round oasis. At the last minute I realized that the picture was missing something; I took off my shoe

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<sup>20</sup>Quoted in "Answer to Life Magazine Questionnaire," 1950, manuscript, William G. Congdon Foundation Archives.

and rested my foot not on his this time, but on the oasis itself, on the world, on the place, so that this may become a person, may become me, may become Christ—that is to say, the Church!”<sup>21</sup>

#### 4.4 Eros and painting as confession

His stay in the Sahara also marked Congdon’s encounter with St. Augustine and his *Confessions*, i.e., with Augustine as a psychologist of the depths, a scrutinizer of the most secret and even shameful recesses of the conscious, the Augustine of the dialectic between soul and body, spirit and senses. Here emerges another great peculiarity of Congdon, which distinguishes him from his American colleagues: nomadism and painting are interwoven with each other, and in both there emerges the search and desire for the other, the dimension of *eros*, also in its specifically sexual aspect. Congdon himself would confess this many years later, in the same lecture quoted earlier: “The sexual act and the creative act are the ultimate instruments for which the desperate man sacrifices himself, dies in the other, in others.”<sup>22</sup>

His art lives in a perilous contiguity with his frustrations on the plane of human relationships. It is called to “redeem”—Congdon’s own word—the experience of human limitation and incompleteness. Congdon was never able or never wanted to avoid this contiguousness, accepting it as an integral part of the creative process. The work must be born *despite* himself. Thus it is an experience, as precarious as one will, of transcendence:

We go just so far with God—and no further. Is it in this area of no further that we *create* to compensate the balance? Presumptuous—ungodly + yet *God*. Of course we can’t succeed so we are driven on. Do we create in the grief of our non-Saintliness?<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>William Congdon, conference delivered at the Rimini Meeting for the Friendship among Peoples in Rimini, Italy, 1987 (William G. Congdon Foundation Archives).

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>Letter to Isabella Gardner, 22 April 1955, quoted in *Congdon* (Milan, 1995), 274, fn. 38.

#### 4.5 *The (wounded) “flesh” of painting*

Here, then, is why his art presents a physicality, a sensuality, a carnality, that is hard to find in the work of other American painters. His materiality comes closer to European painting of that same period: Fautrier, Dubuffet, Tàpies, or Burri. The physicality of his painting is related also to another aspect: the format of his pictures is never larger than the reach of both his arms, in other words, the range of his gesture. His painting remains easel painting. But easel painting of a particular kind, since it preserves an essential tie with sculpture: not a canvas, but a hard, stiff panel; not a brush, but spatula, palette knife, awl. His paintings are almost bas-reliefs. His gestural expressiveness is very physical; it even manifests aspects of self-punishing violence, as witnessed by his use of the awl.

#### 4.6 *The black of birth: a metaphysics of seeing*

Congdon almost always painted on a panel prepared with black paint. The painted image had to be born out of a cancellation of vision. Even if he never completely abandoned a reference to perceptible reality, Congdon always considered himself no less “abstract” than his colleagues, free, like them, of an object’s outer appearances. And on the basis of his experience, in his countless notes he worked out a proper aesthetics, or even a metaphysics of seeing and the image. Even if the artist starts from a physical object, the goal is to reach something ontologically different, which is the *image*:

Image is a translation from the object sensed as known before beginning to paint. It is not the object sensed as known, but a translation of the object (sensed as known).<sup>24</sup>

The place where the image is generated is what the artist calls the subconscious, or also memory: a place inaccessible to the intellect and the conscious mind. The operation of painting must bring to light—in the sense of revealing, but also of causing to be born—this image as a work. The act of painting is assimilated to

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<sup>24</sup>Handwritten notes, 1954, leaf 1 recto (William G. Congdon Foundation Archives).

giving birth: the picture is not made, but born. Obviously, all this has to do with what we have already said about the affective and sexual component in Congdon's art. That the image is consigned to memory, to the subconscious, means that it is communicated to the artist in a form that is above all affective (the connection between memory and heart is essential).

#### 4.7 Conversion from painting or in painting?

No differently from his fellow artists in the New York School, Congdon had a conception of painting that was certainly religious. The circumstances of his life and certain traits of his temperament resulted in painting, at a certain point, no longer being enough for him, and in the need for a radical change in his life. But in this way a conflict was also opened between the "divine" incarnated in painting and the God incarnated in Christ and in the Church.

At first Congdon tried to resolve this conflict by moving to the second level of religious painting, which Maritain called "painting which deals with specifically religious themes," but without however ever aspiring to the third level ("sacred painting... put at the service of public prayer.") But after some years (and the meeting with Rothko was in some ways the turning point), he beat a precipitous retreat, going back to the "secular" dimension of painting. He returned to the theme of place, as the *Subiaco Luna 5* of 1967 bears witness. All this took place after a process of deepening on two planes: of faith and of art. This is the problem: how to respect the freedom, the gratuitousness of the creative gift without placing the artist in a sort of solipsistic and unreal isolation?

The solution to the conflict is sketched out in a text written in 1971 and published many years later in the American edition of *Communio* under the title "An Artist, His Art, and the Christian Community."<sup>25</sup> The central point of this text is the discovery of the Church, of the "Christian community," as *communio*: not a pure sociological or institutional reality, but the living experience of the Face, the You of Christ, who comes to dwell in the depths of the I

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<sup>25</sup>William Congdon, "An Artist, His Art, and the Christian Community," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 170–88.



in order to assimilate it to Him. The communion that in this way operates in the depths of the I and remakes it into the image of Christ is thus *analogous* to the “natural” communion that the artist lives with things as he generates the image of the painting. Obeying these two voices without mistaking one for the other, the artist obeys one sole mystery, even if it is articulated in two different ways.

#### 4.8 *The height of the sacred: the “Absolutely Separate”*

Freed from the “religious subject,” Congdon was also free for the religious subject, for the only explicitly religious subject that he continued to paint until the end of the 1970s in a great number of versions: the Crucifix. This is the only case where we see emerging in his painting the human figure, always banned by some mysterious prohibition. But the connection with iconographical tradition is loosened little by little, and the figure itself undergoes a process of metamorphosis and consummation. The human figure becomes disfigured: under the pressure of the flesh, as in *Crocefisso 90* of 1974, or like a “bone” or rigid bar suspended on the black background, as in *Crocefissi 105, 111, and 165* (see Figure 8).

The theme by now is Holy Saturday, the descent into hell, the ultimate mystery of Christ’s total solitude. Suspended in the void, with no connection with earth or sky, Christ is here truly the height of the sacred, if by this term we mean that which is “separate.” And yet, in this unrecognizable remnant of humanity, the strength of the gesture infuses an energy, a movement upwards that in some way enables us to intuit the *anastasis*, the rising up, the resurrection of Christ.

As the philosopher Massimo Cacciari has maintained, here Congdon came to grips with the central knot of all of Christian art: how to show as indissolubly joined the humanity and the divinity of Christ, his ultimate desolation and his greatest glory?

#### 4.9 *From the sacred to the sacramental: heaven is earth*

The final season of Congdon’s life coincided with his move to a Benedictine monastery in the countryside near Milan. Here a profound change in his style took place. He came to the discovery of a correspondence, an analogy between the orthogonal shape of

the panel and the look of the landscape, that is to say between the color of the fields and the “fields of color.” The result is a Color Field Painting *sui generis*, and obviously absolutely “outside time.” And thus a gradual leaving behind of the division between sky and earth—which is overturned, becoming vertical, with the consequent abandonment of the naturalistic perception of the landscape, of the hierarchy between high and low, etc.

This new conception of space is matched by a new notion of time. As Fred Licht has observed, in the Milanese countryside Congdon rediscovered the *cyclical time* of the seasons and crops. And I would add: the cyclical time of the *liturgy*, of Christian liturgy that adopts the natural cycle, making of it a sacramental sign of redemption and salvation.

In this phase, Congdon resumed a dialogue with the two artists that we have associated with him here, Rothko and Newman, which is particularly visible in these paintings: *Verso Primavera (Ianua coeli)*, *Virgo Potens* and *Giallo con blu* of 1985; or *Cielo-neve* of 1986 and *Neve cielo* of 1987, which strikingly recall some of Newman’s zips; or again *Neve cielo notte* of that same year, which seems to combine Newman’s vertical divisions with Rothko’s masses of radiant color-light. But looking more closely, Congdon’s colors are always shades, tonal relationships that do not lose contact with the visible, with nature. There is a fidelity to the visible on which Fred Licht has commented in these words:

While Kandinsky (or also Rothko) leave tangible human reality behind them, Congdon introduces us into the immanence and ubiquity of a divine force made manifest in everything that we can know through the five senses, through our intellectual and emotional comprehension of experience. His art, like his religion, is based essentially on the transubstantiation of reality and not on its sublimation.<sup>26</sup>

##### 5. In conclusion: between the absurd and the sublime

I shall try to pull everything together in very synthetic terms. The anomaly of Congdon seems to me to have a great deal to do

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<sup>26</sup>In *William Congdon, 1912-1998. Analogia dell'icona* (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2005), 132.

with the fact that he lived straddling post-war America and Europe, not only physically but also spiritually. The tragedy of the war had different and, in a certain sense, even opposite effects on European and on American culture.

Europe emerged from the war with a deeper wound in its soul. In the 1940s and 50s, here the culture and aesthetic of the *absurd* prevailed:<sup>27</sup> in the theater of Beckett and Ionesco, the painting of Bram Van Velde, the COBRA, Dubuffet, Burri even. It has also been called the culture of impediment, the impasse, the blind alley, in other words of spiritual impotence or nihilism.

America, on the other hand, produced a culture of the *sublime*: a tragic sublime, perhaps more metaphysical than religious. But it still depends on the energy of an individual freedom—in some ways heroic—capable of bearing up under the absurd and chaos.

Congdon certainly took part in this idealism of American culture, but he accepted being contaminated by the decadence and corruption of Europe. Immune, however, from the nihilistic cynicism of European culture, he had the ingenuousness and freedom to re-interrogate the ruins of its tradition with a virgin eye. He brings to this the root of American idealism, but in turn freed of that individualistic self-reliance that at bottom, I suspect, still persists in his fellow artists. □

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<sup>27</sup>See Yves Cusset, “L’absurde et le sublime. D’un double deuil de la transcendance après 1945,” in *Traces du Sacré* (exhibition catalogue, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 7 May–11 August 2008).



Figure 1.  
Barnett Newman,  
*Stations of the Cross*,  
National Gallery  
of Art,  
Washington, D.C.

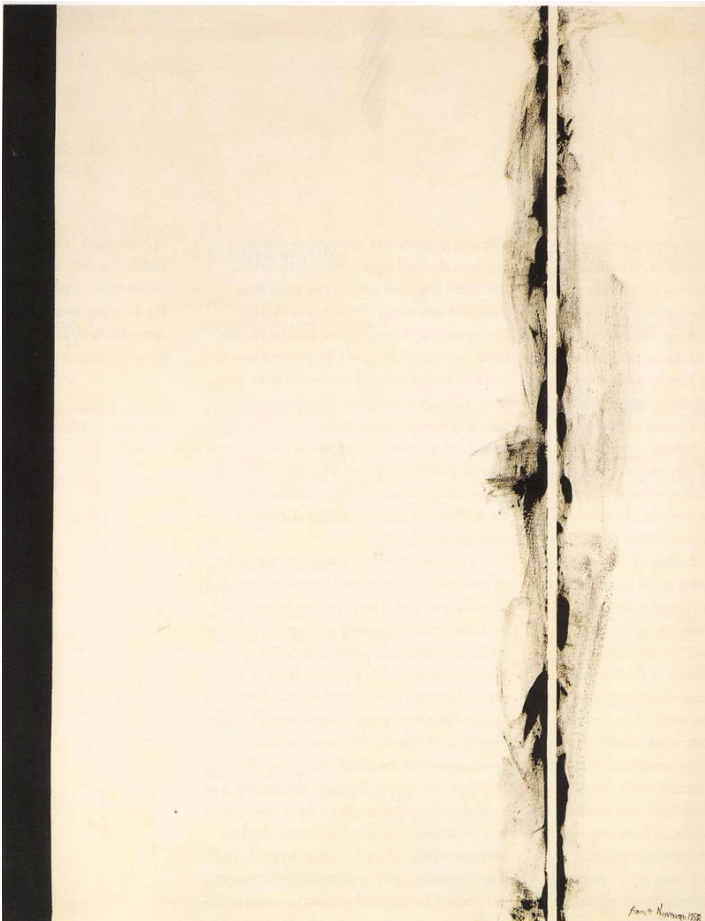


Figure 2. *Stations  
of the Cross, First  
Station*

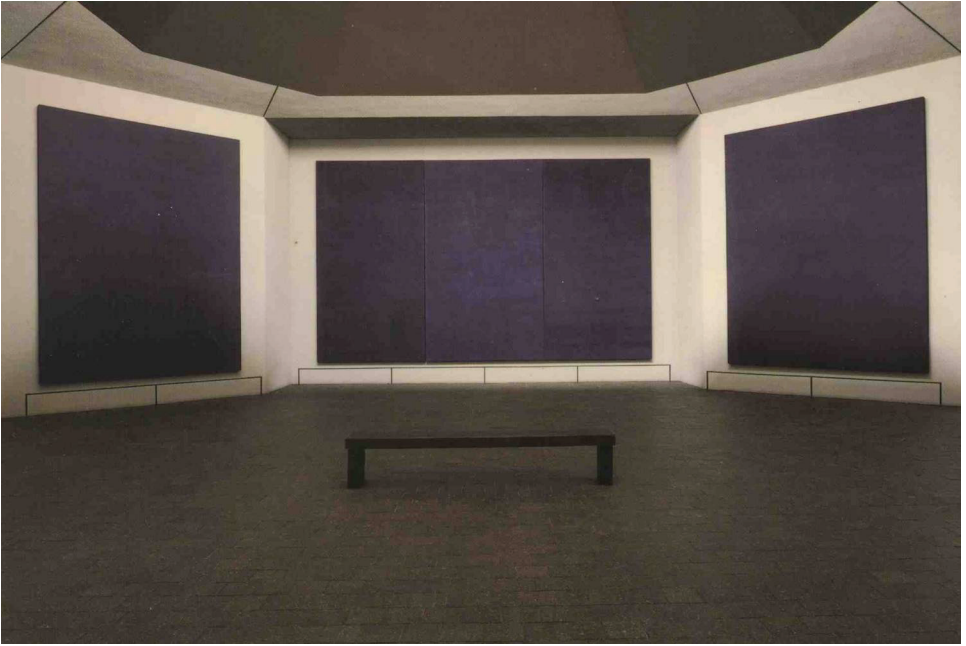


Figure 3. Mark Rothko,  
*Rothko Chapel*, Houston, Texas

Figure 4. *Rothko Chapel*,  
Houston, Texas







Figure 5. William Congdon, *Sahara 12*, 1955

Figure 6. William Congdon, *Rome-Colloseum 2*, 1951







Figure 7. William Congdon,  
*Verso Primavera 4 (brina rosa)*, 1983

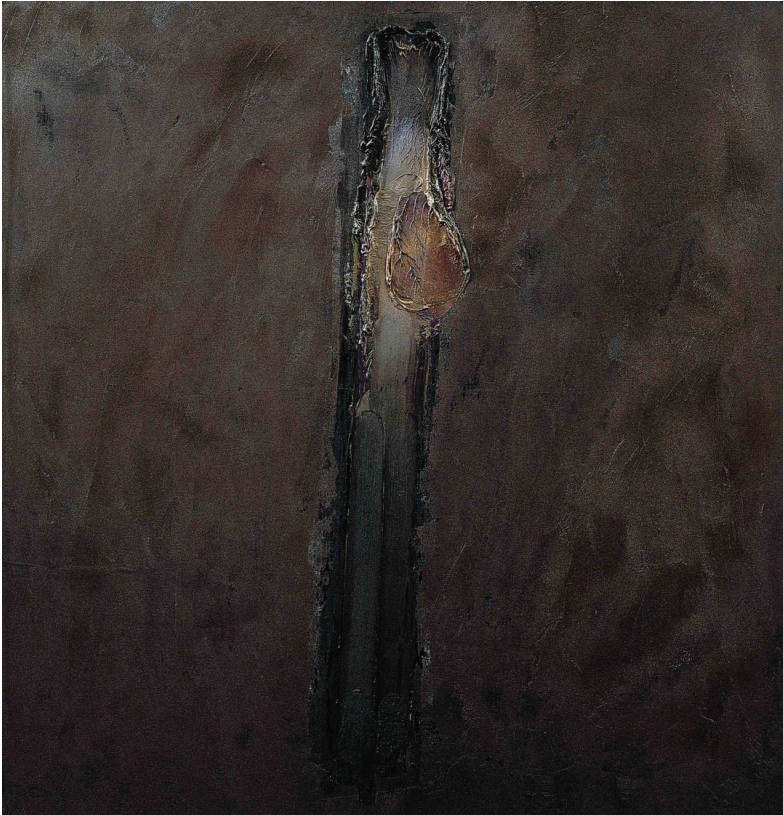


Figure 8.  
William Congdon,  
*Crocefisso 165*, 1977