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# Rothko: Black on Grey, 1970

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## Rothko: Black on Grey, 1970

## I. Black

There were four howling colors here before;  
 Lamplight after shadows found no grey.  
 Still in the eye all colors change by light,  
 As though the light, voice-like, within their core  
 Could chant for life, could choke the sound away,  
 Till deepest of all roar the dull leaden nights:

Outside, the pellitory, climbing night,  
 Winds a sinew, grips an apple core  
 (Winter hard is dropping), and fades away  
 Into the black and life-inhaling light.  
 Outside the green tormented wall, before  
 The window, is an agitated grey.

Dreams Rothko simple color: black on grey.  
 (Unseen, but seen, the darkened eye of night,  
 Stirred murmuring by shadows there before,  
 Appears and disappears the work away.)  
 So white the canvas under wintry light,  
 The shadow drawing from the inner core,

A single river white diffuses from the core  
 Of two darkling spaces veiled in night.  
 One might, as one black plane suffusing grey,  
 Speak of death as my father dead before,  
 But psyche's wings adjust the chuted light,  
 By deeper hues, by darkness wash away.

Early he began to blur his dreams away.  
 The unaffected solely go before  
 As Charon and the lady ferry into night  
 On Acheron, travelling over grey  
 Green swells where death lacks color at its core,  
 And those who sleep no longer need the light:

One who does not die, darkens with the light.  
 But what eyes smoulder, what sight, ashen-grey,  
 Will whiten this man's fire-ruptured core?  
 Sprinkle him with dust, and on the path of Night,  
 Face-downward, put his ash away.  
 What seems an end has been an end before.

At the White Rock, floating toward night,  
 One imagines light. But there is water grey  
 To cross and Rothko still before.

## II.

I believe certain actions downward fall,  
And down as we fall, we sing them all.  
But had we not seen this, too, one night—  
A mixture of pale grey below the black—  
We would have felt somehow ourselves that  
Moving toward darkness  
Was a kind of light  
That neither stasis nor silence can express.

## III. Grey

It was an attitude that regarded grey  
Or black as color; it brought around the night,  
And when night came, he regarded it before  
His time and put the simple color away.  
For there was something cold came thus to light  
That much distorted and dislodged his core.

After so many years of paint, was it the night  
That moved his sleeplessness more than before,  
Or was it a sudden dryness of the grey  
Mistral, thinning through darkness his tethered light  
Like a candle's shadow at end, that whipped his core  
Until diminishing, a final urge gave way?

But he no longer bears destroying before  
Our eyes. And his heart, born dark from a grey  
Womb, returns uncolored into dust—no light,  
No fire. Weary of this whitened core,  
A departing shade swirls slowly away,  
Drawing a dark eye into weightless night.

STEVEN WALLACE

## Notes

1. 14 *darkened eye of night*: Aeschylus *The Persians* II. 426–28:

lamentations, cries  
Possessed the open sea, until the black  
Eye of evening, closing, hushed them.

1. 19 *single river white*: Some scholars believe that the name of the river Acheron derives from the Greek word *Acherōis*, “white poplar,” which occurs in Homer’s *Iliad* (XVI. 482), the feeling being that the term is probably quite old, like most tree names, and Acheron should be the original single river in a grove that the dead had to cross.

1. 23 *chuted light*: After Rothko received a commission to do the murals for the Houston chapel, his last major undertaking, he converted a carriage-house into a studio, also his last. He then placed a parachute over his skylight to adjust the natural light that came in during daylight hours, since he preferred at this stage of his life to keep things relatively dark.

1. 28 *travelling over grey green swells*: Euripides *Helen* 1501–2:

over the grey green saltswell and  
blue fleshed pale foam of the sea.

1. 29 *death lacks color at its core*: Homer *Iliad* 23. 103–4:

Oh, wonder! Even in the house of Hades there is left something, a soul and an image,  
but there is no real heart of life in it.

For Homer, the dead lack color because they lack blood. Hence, when Odysseus descends into the underworld, those dead he meets must drink blood before they can speak (*Odyssey* XI. 99).

1. 30 *And those who sleep . . .*: Hesiod *Works and Days* 152–55:

Yet even these, destroyed beneath the hands of each other, went down into the moldering domain of cold Hades; nameless; for all they were formidable black death seized them and they had to forsake the shining sunlight.

*Epigrammata Graeca*, II, 298. 3–4:

For I see no bright light, nor do I hear anything,  
but leaving the sunlight am in dark sleep.

1. 34 *sprinkle him with dust*: This refers to a ritual practiced by elephants at the passing of a friend.

1. 37 *the White Rock*: Homer *Odyssey* 24. 11–14:

They went along, and passed the Ocean stream, and the White Rock, and passed the gates of Helios the Sun, and the country of dreams, and presently arrived in the meadow of asphodel. This is the dwelling place of souls, images of dead men.

1. 42 *But had we not seen this . . .*: W. B. Yeats, “The Shadowy Waters,” II. 29–40:

First Sailor. I saw them on that night as well as you.

But when I had eaten and drunk myself asleep

My courage had again.

Second Sailor. But that’s not all.

The other night, while he was playing it,

A beautiful young man and girl came up

In a white breaking wave; they had the look

Of those who are alive for ever and ever.

First Sailor. I saw them too, one night. Foragel was playing,

And they were listening there beyond the sail.

He could not see them, but I held out my hands  
 To grasp the woman.  
 Second Sailor. You have dared to touch her?  
 First Sailor. O she was but a shadow, and slipped from me.

1. 49 *it brought around the night*: W. B. Yeats, "Meru," II. 9-14:  
 Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,  
 Caverned in night under the drifted snow,  
 Or where that snow and winter's dreadful blast  
 Beat down upon their naked bodies, know  
 That day brings round the night, that before dawn  
 His glory and his monuments are gone.
1. 50 *And when night came*: W. B. Yeats, "The Grey Rock,"  
 II. 95-97.  
 'Twas roundly spoke, but when night came  
 He had betrayed me to his grave,  
 For he and the king's son were dead.
1. 52 *there was something cold came thus to light*: Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing*,  
 4. 01. 111-13:  
 D. John Come, let us go. These things come thus to light,  
 Smother her spirits up.  
 Bene. How doth the lady?  
 Beat. Dead, I think.
1. 54 *After so many years*: W. H. Auden, "The Dark Years," II. 3-8:  
 after so many years the light is  
 novel still and immensely ambitious,  
  
 but, translated from her own informal world,  
 the ego is bewildered and does not want  
 a shining novelty this morning,  
 and does not like the noise or the people.
1. 58 *a candle's shadow at end*: William Empson, "Legal Fiction,"  
 II. 15-16:  
 Earth's axis varies; your dark central cone  
 Wavers, a candle's shadow, at the end.
1. 60 *he no longer bears destroying . . .*: W. H. Auden, "Herman Melville," II. 17-19,  
 24-26:  
 Evil is unspectacular and always human,  
 And shares our bed and eats at our table,  
 And we are introduced to Goodness every day, . . .  
 It is the Evil that is helpless like a lover  
 And has to pick a quarrel and succeeds,  
 And both are openly destroyed before our eyes.
1. 61 *heart, born dark*: Pindar, Fragment 225:  
 Whenever a god sends joy to a man,  
 he knocks hard on the heart which was black before.

When the Greek poets were writing about the inner man, they regarded darkness as the normal state of the internal organs, probably because they were familiar with their physical appearance.

Whiteness of the internal organs was indicative of abnormality, as we see in the case of Pelias (see note to line 63 below). Thus a "heart born dark" is a normal heart, although the suggestion is that, due to the grey womb, it will begin to turn light until it becomes a white (abnormal) heart.

*grey womb*: Pindar "Pythian Ode" 4. 98:

What groundling woman let you forth from a grey womb?

1. 62 *returns into dust*: Job 34:15:

All flesh shall perish together, and men shall turn again unto dust.

Psalms 104:29:

Thou hidest thy face, they are troubled: thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust.

*no light, no fire*: Shakespeare, *Pericles*, 3.01. 55–60:

Lyc. Here she lies, sir.

Per. A terrible child-bed has thou had, my dear,  
No light, no fire. Th' unfriendly elements  
Forgot thee utterly, nor have I time  
To give thee hallow'd to thy grave, but straight  
Must cast thee, scarcely coffin'd, in the ooze.

1. 63 *whitened core*: Pindar "Pythian Ode" 4. 109–10:

For I hear that unrighteous Pelias, trusting in his white heart, took power by force from my parents, the legitimate possessors.

1. 64 *A departing shade*: Homer *Odyssey* II. 218–22:

but it is only what happens to all mortals when they die.  
The sinews no longer hold the flesh and the bones together,  
and once the spirit has left the white bones, all the rest  
of the body is made subject to the fire's strong fury,  
but the soul flutters out like a dream and flies away.

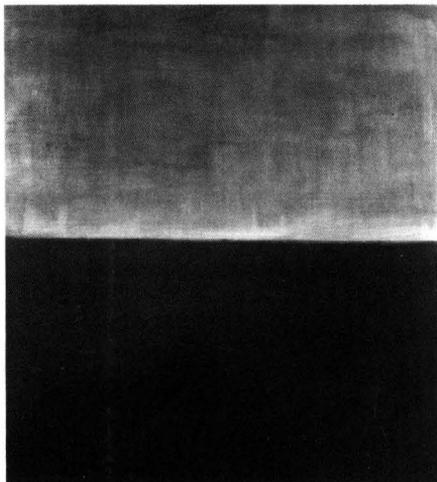
*swirls slowly*: Mark Rothko, "Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea," 1944 Oil on Canvas, 75" x 84¾".

1. 65 *dark eye*: Sophocles *Antigone* 1302–4:

There, at the altar, dying on the sword,  
She closed her darkened eyes, but first she mourned  
The glorious grave of Megareus, who died first.

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MARK ROTHKO