This is to certify that the

thesis entitled

THE ART OF ROBERT MOTHERWELL
AND THE POETRY OF FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA,
RAFAEL ALBERTI AND OCTAVIO PAZ

presented by

Jordi Falgas

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

Masters degree in Art History

Major professor

Date 6-12-1995

THE ART OF ROBERT MOTHERWELL AND THE POETRY OF FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA, RAFAEL ALBERTI AND OCTAVIO PAZ

By

Jordi Falgàs

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Art

1995

ABSTRACT

THE ART OF ROBERT MOTHERWELL
AND THE POETRY OF FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA,
RAFAEL ALBERTI AND OCTAVIO PAZ

By

Jordi Falgàs

This study examines the relationship between the art of Robert Motherwell and the poetry of three Spanish-speaking poets, Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti and Octavio Paz.

Chapter I reviews the history and historiography of Abstract-Expressionism's concern with subject matter and literary meaning.

Chapter II analyzes two major basis of Motherwell's art: his use of a surrealist technique known as psychic automatism, and his literary interests, specifically identifying the above mentioned writers.

The remaining chapters are devoted to the analysis of Motherwell's creations and the writers' relevant works: First, a poem by Lorca (Chapter III), followed by Alberti's poems (Chapter IV), and finally those by Paz (Chapter V). Through this research it has been possible to establish why Motherwell's attention was drawn to the work of these three particular poets and their relation to the meaning of Motherwell's art.

"I would like to play a little tune I just composed, not a long ago... entitled *Pannonica*. It was named after this beautiful lady here. I think her father gave her that name after a butterfly... that she tried to catch. I don't think she caught the butterfly."

Thelonious Monk, probably September 1956.

"Tu—dix ell—te mets en carrer qui no ha eixida. Lleixa anar l'aigua per lo riu, que abans que ens partiscam, si subtilment hi volràs especular, coneixeràs gran part del misteri que hi està amagat. Però no et faça cura de publicar aquell quan lo sabràs, car risc de gran perill te'n seguirà, e de poc profit a present."

Bernat Metge, *Lo Somni*, 1398.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Most of all, I must express my gratitude to Dr. Phylis Floyd, my Thesis Director; and to Dr. Linda O. Stanford and Dr. Malcolm Compitello, my Thesis Advisers.

Others whose help was indispensable to me include Dore Ashton, Carol Corey (Knoedler & Company), Jack Flam, Ann Gibson, and Douglas G. Schultz (Albright-Knox Art Gallery) and Stephanie Terenzio, all of them invaluable sources of information and assistance.

And my thanks are due as well, for both help and advice, to Carol Fisher and Bill North, in the Kresge Art Museum; Jim Bredeck, in the Department of Art; and Pat Thompson, in the Fine Arts Library, all at Michigan State University.

Finally, I must thank Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Octavio Paz and Robert Motherwell, for helping me to understand.

I a tu també, tot i que ja sé que no t'he pas de donar les gràcies.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

Painting is silent poetry, and poetry is painting
with the gift of speech. Simonides[1]

Many of the critics and art historians who have studied the artistic career of Robert Motherwell (Aberdeen, Washington, 1915-Provincetown, Massachusetts, 1991), agree that avant-garde poetry exerted a crucial influence on the development of his aesthetic discourse throughout its evolution. Motherwell himself acknowledged this influence in several writings and interviews; and it is explicit in the titles of some of his paintings and prints.

It is my purpose to concentrate on this specific question and its many implications, which appear to form one of the richest and most complex examples that the artistic avant-garde of the twentieth century has given to the already classic relationship between literature and the fine arts.

For many decades, formalists held that the structural features of works of art, not their authors, are what historians and critics should investigate. Such ideas supported the development of abstraction and paved the way for the New Criticism, the reigning theory of the forties and fifties. More recently, thanks first to structuralism and then to deconstructivist theory, we have learned that many events in the history of art—and Abstract Expressionism is a particularly relevant case—diverge from what they were supposed to be according to the formalist critical model.

---

[1] Attributed by Plutarco to Simonides de Ceos, and quoted by Motherwell, "A Process of Painting," reprinted in Robert Motherwell, *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*. Stephanie Terenzio, ed. (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 138. From now on, quoted as *CWRM*.

Early commentaries on Abstract Expressionism by artists as well as critics stressed the spontaneous, nonacademic character of this art. As a result, links between these thoroughly intellectual artists and their sources in literature and philosophy have received less attention than such connections in other periods in art history. Much of the new scholarship has explored this once neglected area. The present study is an attempt to examine how this new approach is pertinent in the case of Robert Motherwell and what he found in the poetry of three Spanish-speaking poets: Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti and Octavio Paz. The question of subject or meaning in these paintings is complex, it is true, but not so complex that it warrants enveloping the pictures in mystification or obfuscation, or justifies the accounts of solely formal and expressive significance. My task here is to reconcile the artist's commitment to abstraction with his simultaneous commitment to expanding abstraction's possibilities for meaning. The myth of pure abstraction—form freed from all mimesis and metaphor—was not one that particularly interested Motherwell, and his work reveals itself to be commited to devising an abstract art rich in complex, articulate metaphors.

CHAPTER 1

MEANING IN THE ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISTS' LANGUAGE

Initially described by its proponents in formal (Clement Greenberg) or existential (Harold Rosenberg) terms, Abstract Expressionism, despite its many disparities, demonstrated a surprisingly cohesive body of repeated themes, reflecting shared convictions.[2] As Ann Gibson has noted, the works of Abstract Expressionist artists increasingly became emphatically large and astonishingly assertive, despite a wide range of individual differences. They urgently confronted the viewer with the language of paint: its viscosity, its capacity to retain a reference—in slashes, ridges, and scrubbings—to the hand that had been moved to stretch the medium's language to these extremes; and its role as a carrier of color (with all of color's inherent psychological and physiological power). Despite this apparent broadness of method, however, the Abstract Expressionists rejected other more divergent directions in art—such as Realism, certain forms of Geometric Abstraction, and Surrealism. According to the critics and writers of the period such as Clement Greenberg or artists like Ad Reinhardt—"form is content, that's it"[3]—, by the late fifties "important" American painting was non-narrative and immediate in its impact.

While reference to what was considered to be primitive and archaic became a conspicuous feature of some controversial modernist painting in New York during the early

---

[2] Subject matter in the New York School has since received special attention. Recent investigations include such studies as David Anfam's *Clyfford Still* (London: Courtauld Institute, 1984); Anna Chave's *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Ann Gibson, *Issues in Abstract Expressionism: The Artist-Run Periodicals* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990); Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

[3] Ad Reinhardt to Sam Hunter, Summer 1966, Ad Reinhardt Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Quoted by Gibson, 51.

1940s—especially in the work of Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still—not all New York School artists were interested in the allegedly 'primitive'. As Michael Leja has recently explained, Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning and Robert Motherwell seem to have preferred modernist 'sophistication' to 'primitivism.'[4] Motherwell, for example, who spent some time in Mexico in 1941, recalled, "I didn't have the slightest interest in modern Mexican painting or in pre-Columbian art."[5] Although many of these artists denied a one-to-one relationship between the forms in their work and specific literary sources or meanings, the relations of particular individuals—such as Robert Motherwell's concern with poetry—to contemporary cultural preoccupations and productions demonstrate that this policy was not due to a reluctance to express ideas or emotions in words.

The New York School was hardly without a poetics and subject matter, or a network of guiding principles. In his account of the New York School, Serge Guilbaut argues that either the artists adapted their work to the same historical forces that were also producing the ideology of the powerful liberal bourgeois elite, or that the sheer ambiguity of the paintings opened them to appropiation by those same powerful interests.[6] Furthermore, Michael Leja has shown that far from fulfilling some mythic role as an intransigent opponent to bourgeois ideology and values, the New York School was deeply immersed in the construction of that ideology. "In some fundamental ways, New York School art went with, not against, the grain of wartime United States culture, and the character of this engagement provides what coherence the group can claim."[7]

The reluctance of the New York School artists to subscribe to a definable program stemmed from what they saw as a desperately narrowed range of options for art. "If one is

---

[4] Leja, 49-120.

[5] Motherwell, "Interview with Brian Robertson, Addenda (1965)," reprinted in *CWRM*, 145.

[6] Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 101-163.

[7] Leja, 39.

to continue to paint or write as the political trap seems to close upon him he must perhaps have the extremest faith in sheer possibility," wrote Robert Motherwell and Harold Rosenberg in their editorial statement for *Possibilities* in September 1947.[8] The disastrous revelations of the Stalinist regime had deflated their hopes that Marxism and Socialism offered a way to resolve the conflict between the individual and society; and the horrors of the Spanish Civil War and the Holocaust cast their faith in human nature into doubt.[9] The election of 1946 swept a Republican majority into both Congressional houses, ushering in an era of conservatism that radical artists, even those most disillusioned with the failure of the left to produce a free modern society, could not accept. To these artists, every political position appeared to evade the complexities both of history and individual experience.

In the case of Robert Motherwell, the concerns (both visual and verbal) mirrored in certain aspects of his art arise from a spectrum of psychological, linguistic, anthropological, literary, and philosophical considerations. This is what Robert Motherwell did when he connected his visual forms with the poets' verbal statements, as we will see in the following pages. In recent years, a group of scholars has considered influences external to the field of art on Abstract Expressionist artists. In Motherwell's particular case, Bradford Collins, Evan Firestone and Robert S. Mattisson's studies are especially relevant.[10]

By the late forties and early fifties, comparisons between the visual and verbal arts had become a significant strategy for determining "meaning" in abstract art. In 1949

---

[8] Motherwell and Rosenberg, "Statement," *Possibilities* (1947), 1.

[9] One of the most vivid documents of this period is *The God That Failed*, ed. Richard Crossman (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950), a series of essays by intellectuals such as Arthur Koestler that chronicles their disillusion with the left and their continued dissatisfaction with the right. See also John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), and Guilbaut, 17-47.

[10] Bradford Collins, "The Fundamental Tragedy of the *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, or Robert Motherwell's Dilemma," *Arts* 59 (September 1984), 94-97; Evan Firestone, "James Joyce and the First Generation New York School," *Arts* 56 (June 1982), 116-21; and Robert S. Mattison, "The Emperor of China: Symbols of Power and Vulnerability in the Art of Robert Motherwell during the 1940s," *Art International* 25 (November-December 1982), 8-14.

Blanche Brown supplied the *College Art Journal* with a list of comparisons between specific paintings or sculptures and literary works, noting that by such conjunctions "one can multiply the aesthetic understanding of the intrinsic values of the work of art itself."[11] Jacques Maritain delivered a series of lectures at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C., in which he celebrated the common traits of painting and poetry and in 1954 Yale University Art Gallery mounted a show demonstrating the correspondence between art and poetry.[12]

The larger question broached here, that of deriving "meaning" from the conjunction of the arts, however, is a topic with a long history of its own. Wendy Steiner's *The Colors of Rethoric* presents a framework for inter-artistic comparisons in the nineteenth century and the earlier part of the twentieth century. As she explains it, the importance of the painting-literature comparison "lies in the fact that painting has until very recently been taken as mimetic, a mirror of the world". When theorists and artists compared the two arts, they were almost inevitably trying through analogical sleight-of-hand to attribute the reality claim of painting to literature. At the same time, the obvious differences between the two arts and between each and reality kept intruding, so that the history of the interartistic comparison swings back and forth like a pendulum between eager acceptance and stern denial.[13] With the advent of modernism the analogy has become of supreme importance once again. The tension between artistic medium and represented world so crucial to Cézanne, to cubism, abstractionism, and surrealism has changed the meaning of the analogy. "By claiming that a poem is like a modern painting one is no longer stressing their mirroring function but their paradoxical status as signs of reality and as things in their own right."[14]

---

[11] Blanche Brown, "The Correlation of Literature and the Fine Arts," *College Art Journal* (Winter 1949-50), 176-80.

[12] See Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) and George Heard Hamilton, "Object and Image," *Art News* 53 (May 1954), 18-21, 58.

[13] See Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rethoric* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

[14] Steiner, xii.

Although there has been an increasingly open exchange among artists in the use of linguistic theory as a model for artmaking during the last two decades, this was less common in America at mid-century. In 1949 there was a strong resistance among the Abstract Expressionists to the idea that language was inextricably meshed with every mode of apprehending the world and therefore, of course, to the idea that what their works represented could be put into words. The Abstract Expressionists' resistance to literary interpretation was remarked upon by their critics, both friendly and hostile. It was also expressed by the avoidance of recognizable images in their work and in their refusal to explain, except in the most general terms, what the work "meant." Some, like Clifford Still, felt that "to interpose any literary allusion is to establish a serious block to communication."[15]

The generation of the 1950s understood Abstract Expressionim as Harold Rosenberg's "Action Painting," according to which the artists theatrically expressed their personal anguish on a blank canvas with little attention to form, style, and subject matter.[16] For Rosenberg, painting was an autobiographical act of self-creation in the everyday world, and the expression of personality. A second critical interpretation of the 1950s invoked the "American" tradition and manifested the country's longstanding search for its own identity in art. Best expressed by John McCoubrey in his *American Tradition in Painting*,[17] this view argued that Abstract Expressionism represented traditional American concerns with emotional honesty: rough, awkward, sometimes boisterous surfaces and forms, and naïve feelings. With Abstract Expressionism, the art could be unpretentious, American, *and* abstract.

---

[15] From a letter by the artist excerpted in *Tiger's Eye*, 7 (March 1949), 60. Quoted in Gibson, "Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language," *Art Journal*, 47 (Fall 1988), 208.

[16] Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News*, 51 (September 1952), 22-23, 48-50. For a discussion of the evolution of the art criticism of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, see: Phyllis Rosenzweig, *The Fifties*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: The Hirshhorn Museum, 1980).

[17] John McCoubrey, *American Tradition in Painting* (New York: G. Braziller, 1963).

Rosenberg's "Action Painting" and the nationalist reading of the Abstract Expressionist movement gave way in the late 1950s and 1960s (although elements remain in most subsequent interpretations) to the New Criticism and formalism of Clement Greenberg and his supporters, who hailed the Abstract Expressionists as advancing certain principles of a virtual international modernist art and saw this as their primary achievement.[18] Locating the art exclusively within the best pedigree—such as Impressionism, the art of Picasso and Miró—this approach focused on the Abstract Expressionists' stylistic evolution while proposing an exclusive concern of the artists with formal questions: purifying the medium, squeezing out illusionistic space, and remarking the space as optical rather than tactile. Yet such an approach minimized the intellectual complexities behind the deceptively simple surfaces and forms. In general, Greenberg and his supporters were actually indifferent, if not hostile, to the declared subjects or "ideology" of Abstract Expressionism.[19]

Since the 1970s a different stream of thought has matured and come to dominate the critical debate. Beginning in the 1940s, but diffused among different authors and artists, critical attention has addressed to subjects and meaning as well as the forms of Abstract Expressionist art. This tendency blossomed in the criticism of William Seitz, Robert Goldwater, Robert Rosenblum, Dore Ashton, Irving Sandler, Thomas Hess, Sam Hunter, Lawrence Alloway, and others during the 1950s and 1960s and it now prevails in the work of more than forty recent scholars. Applying traditional iconographic methodologies, these historians examine Abstract Expressionism within its intellectual and cultural context. The Abstract Expressionism that emerges from this scrutiny transforms previous interpretations

---

[18] See, for example: Greenberg,*Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, John O'Brian, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and Michael Fried, *Three American Painters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Fogg Art Museum, 1965); and William Rubin, "Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition," *Artforum*, Part I, 5:6 (February 1967), 14-22; Part II, 5:7 (March 1967), 28-37; Part III, 5:8 (April 1967), 18-31; Part IV, 5:9 (May 1967), 28-33.

[19] For a detailed discussion of Greenberg's dismissal of Abstract-Expressionist subject matter or "ideology", see: Barbara Cavaliere and Robert C. Hobbs, "Against a Newer Laocoon," *Arts Magazine*, 51 (April 1977), 110-17.

as new information has revamped our understanding of the artists' basic interests and thematic concerns and how these are embodied within the forms of their works.[20]

Among their many contributions, these scholars have been more determined than ever to flush out the Abstract Expressionists' reasons for the evasion of language and literary meaning. Four major explanations have been advanced. The first, discussed by Donald Kuspit, is centered on the formalist position so categorically stated by the critic Clement Greenberg by 1940, whose basis—according to Kuspit—is found in Kant, Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and T. S. Eliot.[21] Irving Sandler, T. J. Clark, Serge Guilbaut, Fred Orton, Griselda Pollock, and others have emphasized a second reason: the association of realism with the totalitarism of Hitler and Stalin. Even American Social Realism's narrative accessibility began to suggest a connection between the propagandistic explication of a painted or sculpted text and totalitarian control.[22] A third reason, also pointed out by Sandler, developed by Paul Rogers and others, and often noted by the artists themselves, was the Abstract Expressionists' suspicion of the literary basis of the descriptive pictorialism and lack of painterly vigor they saw in French Surrealism. They rejected the

---

[20] Some of Gorky's paintings have been demonstrated to flow rather directly from objects he associated with his childhood and his personal life (see Harry Rand, *Arshile Gorky, The Implications of Symbols* [Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld & Schram, 1980]); Pollock's Jungian vision has come to be seen as a factor in his choice of the 'primitive' objects whose forms he chose to adapt for his work (see the articles and comments by David Freke, Donald Gordon, Rosalind Krauss, Elisabeth Langhorne, Irving Sandler and Judith Wolfe); and David Smith's observations about the similarity of social and sexual aggression appear to have played a significant role in the development of some of the forms in his sculpture (see Rosalind Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works, the Sculpture of David Smith* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971] and Robert Lubar, "Metaphor and Meaning in David Smith's *Jurassic Bird*," *Arts Magazine* [September, 1984], 78-86).

[21] Donald Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg: Art Critic* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

[22] Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, c. 1970), 5-12; T. J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg Theory of Art, " *Critical Inquiry*, 9 (September 1982), 139-156; Guilbaut, "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the 'Vital Center,'" *October*, 15 (Winter 1980), 61-78, and *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, 25-29, 38-39; Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, "Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed," *Art History*, 4 (September 1981), 305-27.

illusionistic forms of Yves Tanguy and Salvador Dalí adopting the silent, gestural aspect of Surrealism—automatism—ostensibly for its plastic possibilities alone.[23]

Ann Gibson has added another group of explanations to the Abstract Expressionists' evasion of language.[24] First, a judgement expressed by Carl Jung in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (available in English in 1933), where he wrote that there was a qualitative difference between the power of the "psychological" artist who was aware of the relationship between his intention and his product, and that of the "visionary" artist who was directed by dark primordial drives within his psyche to produce work whose meaning he could not divine.[25] Second, the belief of New Criticism (the dominant literary theory in the United States during the forties and fifties) that interpretation of art was wrongheaded, exemplified in Clement Greenberg's dismissal of artists' intention, which indicates his lack of attention to the difference between a painter's intention and its realization.[26] Third, certain aspects of Russian Formalism also expressed aversion to interpretation;[27] and finally, an attitude central to Existentialist philosophy, which implied that the meaning of a work is not synonymous with the artist's intention.[28] For all these reasons, most artists and critics held that language could not produce a verbal correlative of the meaning and intent of the Abstract-Expressionist work.

---

[23] Sandler, 34-41; Paul Rodgers, "Towards a Theory/Practice of Painting: Abstract Expressionism and the Surrealist Discourse," *Artforum*, 18 (March 1980), 53-61.

[24] See Ann Gibson, "Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language," 209-214.

[25] Carl G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul.* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1933), 164, 171.

[26] This was suggested by Yves-Alain Bois, "Ryman's Tact," *October*, 19 (Winter 1981), 101. In their landmark essay, "The Intentional Fallacy," *Sewanee Review*, LIV (1946), 468-488, M. C. Beardsley and W. K. Wimsatt had pointed out that whatever an artist might say about what he meant his or her work to mean was beside the point. Whatever could not be extracted from the work by a close reading was not relevant.

[27] Scholars such as Victor Erlich, Frederic Jameson, Barbara Korpan, and Serge Doubrovsky have noted points of contact between Russian Formalist thought and Anglo-American New Criticism.

[28] The idea that a work of art might be made with no specific intended meaning for an audience was stated by Jean-Paul Sartre and further elaborated in 1952 by Harold Rosenberg, basically in his now-famous article "The American Action Painters," quoted above.

Gibson is one of several scholars who recently compared the relationship between artists' statements and those of writers in other fields, with images in the work itself;[29] because, as she puts it,

> forty years later we have begun to feel that if consciousness is *not* altogether formed by language, perhaps it cannot profit by attempting to escape it either. I would suggest that the solution to the problem of the relation of intention to meaning in Abstract Expressionism, absent as it is from the artists' statements as they are framed, should not be sought solely in the works or in their reception alone, either. Rather, it may be located at the intersection of these areas, in the play of language with what eludes it, and will involve the imaginative reconstruction of the choices not made; that is, the concepts foregone, emotions unexpressed, and issues untreated, as well as those present in the work.[30]

Working "at the intersection of these areas" we will see how, in the particular case of Robert Motherwell, language was basic not only to his expression of aesthetic thought but to its formation.

---

[29] In addition to those cited in notes 2 and 10, see the works of Anne Edgerton, Robert Hobbs, Rosalind Krauss, Joan Marter, Stephen Polcari, Harry Rand, Elizabeth Langhorne Reeves, Roberta Tarbell, Judith Wolfe, and Sally Yard.

[30] Gibson, "Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language," 212.

CHAPTER 2

BEGINNINGS: SURREALISM AND LITERATURE

Robert Motherwell has often been described as two people: an artist who interacted spontaneously and sensuously with his material and a man of letters. Trained as a philosopher, he was a professor for many years. Through his lectures, writing and editing the *Documents of Modern Art*, Motherwell became one of the most eloquent spokespersons for abstract art and modernism. His study of Eugène Delacroix, then of Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, and Joan Miró, made him intensely aware of himself as an actor in the unfolding chronicle of modern art. Very early on he concluded that representational art—even the Surrealist variety—was a dead end. Only abstract art is modern, he said, because "it is a fundamentally romantic response to modern life—rebellious, individualistic, unconventional, sensitive, irritable."[31]

When he was three, Motherwell's family moved from Aberdeen, Washington, to San Francisco. After graduating from preparatory school, he studied briefly at the Otis Art Institute, then entered Stanford University, where he majored in philosophy and began to delve into modern art, music, drama, as well as psychoanalysis and French literature. He attended a graduate program in philosophy at Harvard University and, in 1938-39, spent a year abroad writing a master's thesis on Eugène Delacroix' *Journals*. He also studied French art from Symbolism to Surrealism.[32]

In 1940 he moved to New York City, which explains why his name appears relatively late in the chronicle of American Surrealism, for a person who later would be

---

[31] Motherwell, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," reprinted in *CWRM*, 85.

[32] For a complete biographical account see *CWRM*, xvii-xxvii.

among the 'founding fathers' of the New York School. In 1937, in the wake of the Museum of Modern Art's Surrealism shows, when Gorky and Baziotes were already reading *Minotaure* and experimenting with Surrealist imagery, Motherwell was a twenty-two-year-old graduate student at Harvard, working toward a Ph. D. in philosophy. In 1939, when Baziotes and Jackson Pollock were already disputing automatism, Motherwell was teaching philosophy at the University of Oregon. By 1940, he had come to New York but, by his own admission, he did not know any American painters and did not care to meet any.[33] Preferring "the French milieu," he studied engraving with the Surrealist Kurt Seligmann and took to hanging around the edges of the growing community of European refugee intellectuals gathering in New York. It was not until the summer of 1941, on a trip to Mexico with Roberto Sebastián Matta—to whom he had been introduced that spring—that Motherwell was finally introduced to Surrealism. "In the three months of that summer," he said later, "Matta gave me a ten-year education in Surrealism." In Mexico City, he visited Wolfgang Paalen, whose show Baziotes and Pollock had seen at the Julien Levi Gallery the year before. On the same trip, Motherwell also met Maria Ferrera, a Mexican actress who would soon become his first wife.

On his return from Mexico, Motherwell began to paint seriously for the first time and, with Matta as a sponsor, he redoubled his efforts to ingratiate himself into the community of European artists. At first, they were intrigued by his brashness. While most Americans remained standoffish, if not hostile, Motherwell—who described himself as "imbued with French culture"—strode fearlessly into the Surrealists' gatherings and engaged them in intellectual conversation. "I would talk to Marx Ernst," he recalled. "[He] probably was the first painter before me to have a degree in philosophy and ... was

---

[33] For this and the account that follows see Motherwell, "Interview with Sidney Simon: 'Concerning the Beginnings of the New York School: 1939-1943," quoted in *CWRM*, 155-168. See also Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989), 422-430.

perfectly willing to talk about intellectual things."[34] In public, Ernst and the others tolerated the nervy young American, often teasing him with arch, ambiguous comments—"You have a tremendous capacity to grow"—that he invariably took as compliments. André Breton even picked Motherwell to be the first editor of *VVV* (part of his halfhearted effort to build bridges to the American artistic community), although Motherwell was fired before the inaugural issue appeared.[35]

In private, however, the Europeans ridiculed him. In their book on Pollock, Naifeh and Smith quote Lucia Wilcox (a friend of Pollock) as saying, "he used to come and insinuate himself into this crowd but they simply didn't pay any attention to him." Ernst dismissed him as "a joke."[36] Breton, who considered all Americans naïve, deplored his intellectual pretensions and referred to him demeaningly as "le petit philosophe."[37] Even Matta, in an unguarded moment, agreed that he was "a windbag and a pompous ass."[38]

In 1942, however, Matta had a use for his new protégé. To prepare for the decisive "manifestation" that would establish a new Surrealist movement, Matta recruited Motherwell to help launch his intensive campaign. They visited artists' studios with their message. Motherwell would arrange the meetings and make introductions, then Matta would explain the movement: the need for a "revolution of the young 'inside' Surrealism;" the need for Americans "to develop some sort of unified direction in their art;" the need to "show up the Surrealists as a group of dogmatic painters no longer attuned to the contemporary world;" and the need for "reliance on truer versions of the technique of

---

[34] Motherwell, interview by Paul Cummings, Nov. 24, 1971; Feb. 21, 1972; Mar. 30, 1972; May 1, 1974; Archives of American Art.

[35] John Bernard Myers, *Tracking the Marvelous: A Life in the New York Art World.* (New York: Random House, 1983), 35.

[36] Naifeh and Smith, interview with Roger Wilcox, 424.

[37] Myers, 35.

[38] Naifeh and Smith, interview with Roger Wilcox, 424.

psychic automatism."[39] Motherwell would follow with an eager, lengthy explanation of Surrealist theory. During the spring and fall of 1942, Matta and Motherwell took their act to the studios of Gorky, Pollock, de Kooning, Kamrowski, and Busa, meeting with mixed reviews. Gorky was bemused, de Kooning indifferent, Kamrowski and Busa were interested, however, and Pollock was "exhilarated." Including Baziotes, Matta now had six artists—himself, Motherwell, Baziotes, Busa, Kamrowski, and Pollock—enough to make a movement.

The Surrealist principle of "pure psychic automatism"—a way of disrupting everyday connections, of mining the unconscious for new, abstract forms to convey emotions and experiences—proved especially fruitful for Motherwell. Motherwell's belief in the expressive power of raw gesture and chance relationships was given impetus by the theories of the Surrealists exiled in New York during those years. The key premise of their creations was "automatism," or encouraging subconscious revelation by beginning a work of art without previous conscious thought. The Surrealists, however, sought hidden figures in these markings, which they then consciously elaborated. Motherwell and several of the other young New York School artists saw in the immediate paint strokes themselves an inherently valuable means for expressing feelings abstractly, one of the most significant discoveries of Abstract Expressionism. From the 1940s on, Motherwell typically began his paintings with various types of automatism.[40]

Due to the prominence of this process in Robert Motherwell's creative method, I believe it is worthwhile to consider the question further. Indeed, the creative principle underlying Motherwell's work involves spontaneous invention. Like the Surrealists, he regarded his own unconscious mind as the chief source of artistic subject matter. But the Surrealists aspired to reach an uncensored, dreamlike state in their art; they used

---

[39] On Matta and Motherwell's tour of artists' studios, see: Cavaliere and Hobbs, 111.

[40] For a larger discussion of Motherwell's use of automatism see Jonathan Fineberg, "Death and Maternal Love: Psychological Speculations on Robert Motherwell's Art," *Artforum* (September 1978), 52-57.

"automatic" writing or painting to enter the hidden levels of the human psyche and to avoid conscious form control.

In the hands of some Surrealists, automatic writing or painting meant producing blindly or so quickly that there would be no interference from the intellect. Motherwell saw this psychic automatism as a creative principle capable of generating original new art without imposing a predetermined style.[41] In retrospect, he regarded this as having been the essential problem for the young American vanguard in the 1940s: to bring American art out of its aesthetic provincialism and into the mainstream of European modernism, while at the same time finding a theoretical basis for generating new art.[42] Surrealist automatism seemed to offer that potential, but on a less purely intellectual level, Motherwell was already profoundly influenced by the introspective focus of Surrealism. Nevertheless, he used this idea of automatism in a slightly different way from the Surrealists.

Jonathan Fineberg has explained how in contrast to the dreamlike, uncensored state to which the Surrealists aspired, Motherwell set out to capture a strong emotional experience of which he was highly conscious from the start and in which he had an active involvement. This does not mean he understood all of its psychological implications or motives, but that he began with a strong emotion which he sought to objectify in his art. Thus each of Motherwell's paintings intentionally embodies both a psychological experience and the artist's active struggle to translate it into a visual metaphor. In addition, every work also brings associations from beyond its own ontogeny—allusions to other events in the artist's emotional life history, previous pictures, and external influences.

In sum, each brushstroke and form is charged with meaning, and a whole new aspect of the expressive richness of Motherwell's work begins to emerge as we closely examine these details—in our case, the meaning he found echoed in a particular poetry—

---

[41] See Fineberg, 53.

[42] Apparently, many of the Surrealist poets and painters were never entirely satisfied with this method because, like Aragon, they confessed years later that they did not always abide by the rules, but deliberately altered their compositions. See Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon House, 1988), 18-19.

relating specific formal devices with particular emotions and piecing together the dynamic interaction between them. Motherwell's interaction with the Surrealist *milieu* and the adoption of his automatist method, together with his literary interests—which we shall see below—are at the very basis of his use of poetry in relation to his visual creations.

Art historian Jack Flam explains that Motherwell's intellectual and academic background distinguished him from the other Abstract Expressionists, who emerged from a more traditional art school training. "In particular, Motherwell's interest in philosophy, in Symbolist literature, and psychoanalysis would serve as the intellectual matrix from which a good deal of his later thinking would develop and be sustained,"[43] a view Motherwell himself acknowledged:

> The thing I should make clear, because I belong to a generation that mainly killed itself, in one way or another—and I'm just as self-destructive—is what really distinguishes me from them [the rest of the New York School]. Now, I'm not talking about esthetic values but about human beings. With Smith, Reinhardt and myself, there was a real belief that the main enterprise was modern culture, of which painting and sculpture are but one aspect.[44]

Dore Ashton went further and explicitly identified Motherwell's literary influences:

> In fact, Motherwell's spiritual concourse with many poets is singularly slanted toward those for whom color—*named* color—is a kind of magical catalyst. No doubt he has had moments of heightened recognition while reading these poets, and has infused them in his work. The list is long, including Coleridge, Poe, Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé of the nineteenth century. Perhaps even more significant is Motherwell's contact with poets of the twentieth century, most of whom are writing in the Spanish language.[45]

Stephanie Terenzio shows how this influence was not limited to Motherwell's aesthetic beliefs but to all his intellectual thinking and philosophy. Terenzio explains

---

[43] Jack D. Flam, *Motherwell* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1991), 13.

[44] Vivien Raymor, "A Talk with Robert Motherwell," *Artnews* (April 1974), 51.

[45] Dore Ashton, "On Motherwell," in Robert T. Buck, ed. *Robert Motherwell* (New York: Abbeville Press/Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1983), 35-36.

Motherwell's adoption and development of some of the postulates of modernism, through his introduction to French painting and literature:

> Motherwell had been captured by the spirit of modernism, an expression of reality with which he passionately identified. For him, modernism was the culture of modern industrial civilization—one without precedent in character. He was determined to investigate it, learn it, and, if possible, add to it. Because Cézanne, Matisse, Baudelaire, Gide, Proust, Valéry, and the French symbolist poets had been among his first (and lasting) attachments, he assumed for a time that modernism was inherently and exclusively French. His notions about leaving New York for Paris faded as he came to realize that modernism was an international phenomenon—including within its ranks such voices as Joyce, Eliot, Lorca and Rilke—and that the French contribution was only one glorious manifestation of a more general reflection of contemporary reality.[46]

Finally, the words of the painter confirm his long standing interest in innovative poets and novelists, which provided him with an "active principle for painting":

> I understood, too, that "meaning" was the product of the relations among elements, so that I never had the then common anxiety as to whether an abstract painting had a given meaning. People who from a purist standpoint have felt that I have allowed too much "literature" at times into my painting, underestimate, in my opinion, the philosophical freedom with which it was done. ... But in the end I certainly learned more from Baudelaire and Mallarmé and Joyce than from philosophy .... For the first time I had an active principle for painting, specifically designed to explore unknown possibilities. A voyage to the New, in Baudelaire's metaphor.[47]
>
> Mallarmé said somewhere, "You don't represent the object, you represent the *effect of the object.*"[48]

Some Abstract Expressionist artists' preference for symbolic over allegorical reference lay in their appreciation of French Symbolism. The crux of symbolist poetry for both William Baziotes and Robert Motherwell, according to the latter, revolved around Mallarmés famous dictum that the poet should represent not the thing itself but the effect

---

[46] *CWRM*, 6-7.

[47] Motherwell, "Interview with Bryan Robertson, Addenda (1965)," *Ibid.*, 143.

[48] Motherwell, "Interview with Richard Wagener (14 June 1974)," *Ibid.*, 217.

that it produces—that poetry should refer indirectly.[49] Thus Motherwell used Symbolist theory to confirm his own painterly direction in which he had already embarked. Motherwell's series of paintings *Throw of Dice* and *Beside the Sea*, from the early 1960s, and the unpublished print series *A Throw of the Dice* (1962-63), whose title is taken from Mallarmé's poem about chance, is based upon this automatist freedom, a combination of intuition and chance. As we shall see, this is only one of many examples of Motherwell's multiple combination of his 'surrealist' method, a literary influence, and the abstract style.

From the early days of his career, Motherwell did not conceal his literary sources. He did so through the titles he gave to several specific works that were considered landmarks in the definition and evolution of his artistic language. The first was *Mallarmé's Swan* (1944), which in turn is an ambiguous name for an ambiguous painting, a fitting tribute to a master of ambiguity, the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé.[50] A few years later he painted *The Homely Protestant* (1948), a title Motherwell chose as he opened James Joyce's *Ulysses* at random and put his finger on the page with his eyes closed (a surrealist techinque). From 1949 are *The Voyage*, based on a poem by Charles Baudelaire, in which modern art is described as a journey towards the new; and *At Five in the Afternoon*, for which Motherwell borrowed the first verse of the first part of the *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* by Federico García Lorca. Later on, in 1967, he produced the incomplete series of paintings which were meant to illustrate a new and unpublished translation of Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell.* And finally, one of Motherwell's last projects was the series of forty prints he created to illustrate Joyce's *Ulysses* (1988). These are the highlights, but other examples will be discussed in the pages that follow.

---

[49] The object was impotant only in terms of an experience of it. Mallarmé felt that the aim of poetry was "peindre non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit." From an October 1864 letter, written in London to Mallarmé's editor, Henri Cazalis, in Paris. Quoted by Jean C. Harris, "A Little-known Essay on Manet by Stéphane Mallarmé," *Art Bulletin* 46 (1964), 562.

[50] See L. Bailey Van Hook, "Robert Motherwell's *Mallarmé's Swan*," *Arts Magazine* (January, 1983), 104-5.

We have already seen how Dore Ashton pointed out the influence of some twentieth-century Spanish-speaking poets on the work of Motherwell and, she believed, particularly on his use of color. Ashton elaborates on three of these poets: "There was Lorca, as early as the 1940s, whom Motherwell recognized as a fellow painter (but in words); Lorca whose famous ballad begins by naming a color: 'Green, how I love you, green.'"[51] Much more intense is Motherwell's involvement with a contemporary of Lorca, one of the generation of *Ultraístas* who renovated modern Spanish poetry. Rafael Alberti—himself a painter—speaks often of his youthful romance with painting, and in his poems spells out colors not only by metaphorical allusion, but literally. Alberti's entire poetic oeuvre is spattered with swatches of color, named and named again. Finally, there is Octavio Paz, a Mexican. A superb feeling for color, as Ashton points out, infuses Paz's work throughout. Dore Ashton is right in identifiying these sources, but I hope to show, in the following chapters, that the shared importance of color was neither the only nor the essential connection between Motherwell and the different poets.

Federico García Lorca (1898-1936), Rafael Alberti (1902) and Octavio Paz (1914) are, then, three important sources Motherwell successively drank from all his life and showed the interest he always felt for some aspects of Spanish and Latin American literature and culture. Talking about his work after Alberti's poems, the artist defined this interest:

> I am not attracted to everything Spanish. It so happens I am particularly attracted to the poetry of García Lorca's generation, of which Alberti is part, the generation of men who could have been my father. Let's say, if I had taken a text of Hemingway to illustrate, it would not be simply because it was American, but because it was a particular part of America that interests me, and the same is true in relation to Alberti. It's not being a Spaniard, but being a Spaniard of that particular generation with those particular political and aesthetic interests; and, more, of being an ancient in the modern world (which is Spain's problem, like Japan's).[52]

---

[51] Ashton, p. 37. "Green, how I love you, green / Verde que te quiero verde" is from the fourth part of Lorca's *Romancero Gitano* (1924-27), called *Romance Sonámbulo.*

[52] Heidi Colsman-Freyberger, "Robert Motherwell: Words and Images," *Art Journal* 34 (Fall, 1974), 19.

For intellectuals of the 1930s and 1940s, the writings of the modern poets Lorca and Alberti and their contemporaries, as well as Lorca's unjust execution, came to stand for a deeply felt sense of tragedy about the Spanish republican defeat. To many, this event symbolized the plight of the individual against oppression and death. But to Motherwell, Lorca and the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) also represented an exceedingly personal confrontation not only with the finality of death but with a whole range of the painter's deepest anxieties.

Although nobody has pointed it out before, we must remember that during the summer, fall and winter of 1938 Motherwell traveled through Europe, he took a studio in Paris where he began to paint, and exhibited at the Parisian Raymod Duncan Gallery, before returning to the United States in 1939. In the summer of 1938 the Spanish Republic had nothing left but Catalonia, Madrid, and some southeastern provinces, and its territory was split in two. The Fascist specter cast its aura of blood and death across the peninsula. It is not difficult to believe that, while Motherwell was in Paris, the news of Lorca's execution shocked him as much as many other atrocities of the war, brought daily to Paris by the firsthand accounts of hundreds of Spanish refugees[53]. In Paris too, Picasso's *Guernica* had been exhibited the year before in the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris Exhibition. In this summer of 1938, while *Guernica* was on display in Scandinavia, Hitler had 1,300,000 men under arms and was announcing his intention to annex the Sudeterland. Again, it is not difficult to imagine the impact of all of these events on a young American student, who was already obsessed with death.

Robert Mattison has suggested that Motherwell's obsession with death may be the unconscious result of his asthmatic condition and health anxieties as a child, and he quotes

---

[53] For years the Spanish government suppressed the truth about Lorca's death. Following his assassination on August 19, 1936, many notes and commentaries on Lorca's rumoured death appeared in the press, but not until much later was the rumour clarified as a fact, and for years many unanswered questions remained. Therefore we might suggest that, although Motherwell probably knew about it since 1938, the continuous appearance of pieces of research throughout the 1940s and early 1950s constantly revived his memories of the tragedy. See Ian Gibson, *The Assasination of García Lorca* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983).

the painter remebering that "there was a great celebration when I reached my sixteenth birthday because nobody expected me to live."[54] In any case, these feelings were reinforced by his experiences in Mexico, subsequent loneliness in New York, and personal response to World War II. The theme of death appears in such intensely personal, early works such as *Surprise and Inspiration*, *Personage* and *Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive*, and later more publicly in the 'Spanish Elegies.'

---

[54] Mattison, *Robert Motherwell: The Formative Years*. (Ann Arbor, Mi.: UMI Research Press, 1987), 42.

CHAPTER 3

FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA AND *AT FIVE IN THE AFTERNOON*

The most famous and representative series of paintings Robert Motherwell produced are the so-called 'Elegies to the Spanish Republic', a subject to which the painter returned again and again, to create more than 140 versions between 1948 and 1991. The 'Elegies' began as a simple illustration for a poem.

As with other twentieth-century avant-garde movements, during the years of gestation Abstract Expressionism was not only discussed in magazines such as *The Partisan Review* or *The Nation*, but in publications closer to it, or "little magazines," as they were often called. Basically, these were *Iconograph* (Spring 1946-Fall 1947), *The Tiger's Eye* (October 1947-October 1949), *Possibilities* (Winter 1947-48), *Instead* (ca. January 1948-ca. January 1949), and *Modern Artists in America.* (1952). In the winter of 1947-48, Wittenborn & Schultz edited *Possibilities (An Occasional Review)*, with John Cage, Pierre Chareau, Harold Rosenberg and Robert Motherwell as editors.[55] Only one issue appeared, although a second one was planned. For the latter edition, Motherwell agreed to illustrate a poem by Harold Rosenberg, *The Bird of Every Bird*; and following a common practice at that time, the painter himself copied the poem in his handwriting above the image he conceived, known as *Ink Sketch, Elegy No. 1* (Figure 1). Due to economic restrictions on the edition, Motherwell used only black and white in his illustration. The second issue of *Possibilities* was never published and the artist kept the little exercise, until one year later, when the following took place:

---

[55] See Gibson, *Issues in Abstract Expressionism: The Artist Run Periodicals*, 33-40.

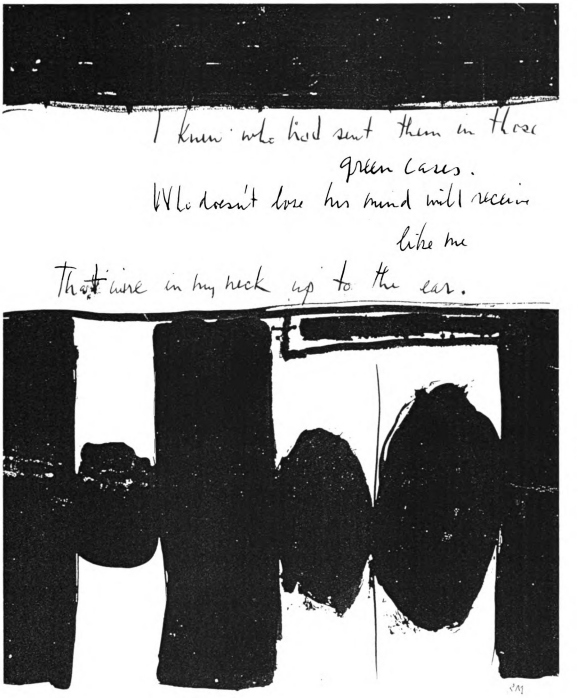

Figure 1

Ink Sketch, Elegy No. 1 (1948)

> At one moment I was looking around for a generating idea, and thought well, I'll try another version, only larger and eliminating the written script. It was one of those times when I just wanted to paint for the act of painting ... When I painted the larger version—*At Five in the Afternoon* [Figure 2]—it was as if I discovered it [the image] was a temple, where Harold's [the *Possibilities* illustration] was a gazebo, so to speak. And when I recognized this [that the image was now a temple], I looked around for whom represented what the temple should be consecrated to, and that that was represented in the work of Lorca ... To be more concise [I would say] the 'temple' was consecrated to a Spanish sense of death, which I got most of from Lorca, but from other sources as well—my Mexican wife, bullfights, travel in Mexico, documentary photographs of the Mexican revolution, Goya, Santos, dark Hispanic interiors.[56]

Motherwell took the title of the painting, *At Five in the Afternoon*, from the first part (*La cogida y la muerte / His Goring and His Death*) of Federico García Lorca's poem *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías (A Flood of Tears for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías).*[57] The death of the famous Spanish bullfighter and dramatist Ignacio Sánchez Mejías occurred on Saturday 11th of August 1934, as a result of a fateful goring he received in the bullring of the town of Manzanares (Ciudad Real). The bullfighter, who was profoundly immersed in the literary circles of the period, was a good friend of Lorca and of all the other members of the 'Generación del 27.' The poet, who refused to see his agonizing friend ("¿Quién me grita que me asome? / ¡No me digáis que la vea!" "Who shouts for me to take a peek? / Never tell me to look at it!" *La sangre derramada* ll. 40-41), did not wait too long to write the elegy, because on November 4th he read it at a meeting with friends. *A Flood of Tears for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* was published as a book in May 1935, less than a year after the death of the *torero*, by the prestigious house Cruz y Raya, under the direction of

---

[56] E.A. Carmean, Jr., "Robert Moterwell: The Elegies to the Spanish Republic," in *American Art at Mid-Century: The Subjects of the Artist* (Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 1978), 97, 98.

[57] Federico García Lorca, *Obras Completas*. (Madrid: Aguilar, 1986), 549-558. The only English translation of the poem available to Motherwell in 1949 was the one in: Lorca, *Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter and Other Poems*. Trans. by A. L. Lloyd. (London: William Heinemann, 1937), 33-43. On its preface (pp. xv-xvi), Lloyd writes that "the *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*, which is surely Lorca's greatest poem, ... seems to synthesize all the poet's personal grief at the loss of a friend, all his struggle with the idea of death, all the unease and omens that were already in the air of Spain a year before the outbreak of the Civil War. Both Spanish and foreign critics have found this poem, so full of beauty, terror and love, the quintessence of the tragedy of Spain."

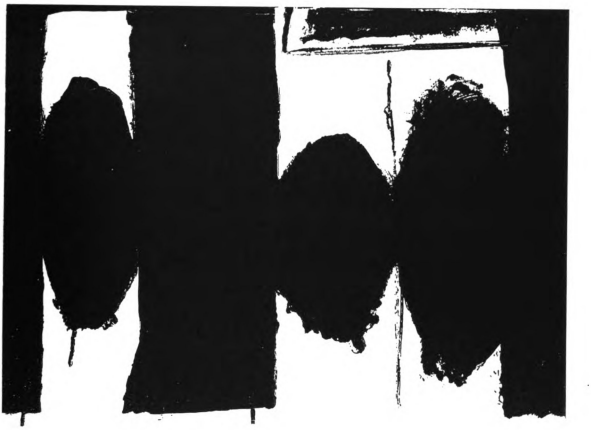

Figure 2

At Five in the Afternoon (1949)

Lorca's close friend José Bergamín. It has been said that this poem reflects the best side of the poet because tradition and innovation alternate in it, together with creative freedom and discipline, lyrical impetus and restraint.[58] It combines traditional elements found in early works, like *Poem of the Deep Song* and *Gypsy Romances*, with the surrealism of his New York cycle of poems. Even in the key word of the title, *Llanto* (a copious amount of tears, accompanied by sobs and wailing), Lorca unites the ancient and the modern. We know from his brother Francisco that he wanted to avoid using the word *elegía* (elegy). In his choice of the modern term *llanto* Lorca conjures from the past the echo of the *plantos*, elegies, or laments, of the middle ages.[59]

Ignacio Sánchez Mejías was dead at forty-three, leaving behind a glorious career in the bullring, marked by tremendous bravery and heart. The literary man left a series of articles on bullfighting, two fine plays, an unfinished novel—and a deep sorrow in the hearts of two of Spain's greatest poets, which, in turn, led to two of the finest elegies ever written. Rafael Alberti wrote *Verte y no verte (To See You and Not To See You)*, and Lorca wrote what one critic, Rafael Martínez Nadal, called the most desolate elegy in all of Spanish literature.[60] Arnason quotes Motherwell as saying that "I have no more prized souvenir," when talking about a Spanish postcard of Sánchez Mejías that hung on his studio wall for many years.[61] From this, we may conclude that Motherwell must have been aware not only of the tragic events recalled in Lorca's poem, but that he also must have felt some admiration for Mejías' life and career.

---

[58] "Lorca's *Llanto* is a similar coalescence of past and present. Emerging from the rich context of centuries of elegiac verse, it speaks also in a contemporary mode which we apprehend as our own. In such a synthesis of the traditional and the actual we find the source of much of the *Llanto*'s depth and grandeur." Calvin Cannon, "Lorca's 'Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías' and the Elegiac Tradition," *Hispanic Review* 31 (1963), 229.

[59] See Federico García Lorca, *Antología Comentada* (Madrid: Ediciones de la Torre, 1988), 279-285. Though usually translated as 'lament', 'llanto' has been recently translated as 'a flood of tears'. See Federico García Lorca, *Ode to Walt Whitman & Other Poems*. Translated by Carlos Bauer (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), v-viii.

[60] See Lorca, *Ode to Walt Whitman & Other Poems*, viii.

[61] H. H. Arnason, *Robert Motherwell* (New York: Abrams, 1977), fig. 79.

H. H. Arnason has observed that Lorca's poetry carried, all together, the passion Motherwell had felt since the late 1930s for the lost battle of the Spanish Republic; and, most of all, his obsession with subjects of life and death, which he already expressed in works such as *Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive* (1943).

> Oh, white wall of Spain!
> Oh, black bull of sorrow!
> Oh, hardened blood of Ignacio!

It is not difficult to see in these verses from *La sangre derramada (His Spilt Blood)*, the second part of *A Flood of Tears*, how Lorca's poetry could inspire a painter like Motherwell. Through his knowledge of the Spanish culture and folklore Motherwell was able to 'feel' the black, white and red in the same way the poet did; and with his painter's sensitivity he could translate them into color spots on a canvas, using his own formal visual language.

In his study of the 'Elegies', Robert C. Hobbs pointed out that in Lorca's poem the verse 'At five in the afternoon' is repeated thirty times. The refrain's repetition produces a powerful cadence and poetic effectiveness which, according to Hobbs, is echoed by Motherwell's *At Five in the Afternoon*. Hobbs says:

> By piling refrain upon refrain and interspersing between them lines that become expletives, Lorca creates a sustained climax that has a lot in common with Motherwell's painting—the refrain "at five in the afternoon" is an inevitable thrust, a continuing, overwhelming force that surrounds and compresses together the intervening lines in a manner very similar to the way that the ponderous verticals of the painting remain implacable, forcing the ovoids to remain suspended in an uneasy tension.[62]

Hobbs has tried to interpret the possible analogies between the poem and the 'Elegies' saying that a comparison between lines in the *Llanto* with Motherwell's paintings demonstrates how closely the latter are tied to the former. The colors and forms of the

---

[62] Robert C. Hobbs, "Robert Motherwell's Elegies to the Spanish Republic," in *Robert Motherwell* (Düsseldorf: Städtische Kunsthalle, 1976), 30.

paintings follow some images projected in this poem. When death is presented in the first section, it is in the form of the "desolate horn" (l. 15) of the bull that lays "...eggs in the wound" (l. 29) of the bullfighter. And eggs provide a direct analogy to ovoids in the paintings. The way Lorca presents the audience's awareness of Ignacio's death is in the line "and the crowd was breaking the windows" (l. 47). Broken panes of glass present violently the theme of the window, an opening into the realm of death and correlate with both the use of it as a symbol representing an anticipation of death and its appearance in the 'Elegies'. The colors in the first section of the poem are mainly red—"iodine covering the bull ring" (l. 27)—and white—"white sheet" (l. 3), "cottonwool (l. 9)", and "frail of lime" (l. 5). In addition, an interesting play of white and green is developed in the line "Horn of the lily through green groins" (l. 43) in which the lily becomes something terrifying, the horn of the bull, and the color green of the coins is caused by the gangrene that has entered the wound. In these paintings derived from the poem, Motherwell often uses the colors red and green to accent large areas of black and white.[63]

Several of Motherwell's paintings produced during the 1950s can be considered part of a series with 'Lorquian subjects;' in the same way that all the 'Elegies' are in a broad sense. The painter himself, in 1951, named a painting *Spanish Elegy: García Lorca Series*; and *Spanish Drum Roll* and *Little Spanish Drum Roll*, both from 1950, suggest a clear analogy between the cadence of a drum roll, the repetitive poem and the painting's repeated shapes. After *At Five in the Afternoon*, Motherwell did a much larger picture with the same basic organization entitled *Granada* (1949). Not coincidently, Granada is the town where the poet was born, and where he was also executed in the early days of the Spanish Civil War by the fascist rebels. Still in 1949, Motherwell next painted a series of related works to which he gave titles of other Spanish cities. He renamed all these early pieces *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, dedicated the entire series to Spain—and especially to Lorca's generation of Spanish intellectuals, as we have seen in his words—and numbered

---

[63] Robert C. Hobbs, *Robert Motherwell's 'Elegies to the Spanish Republic,' Including an Explanation of the Artist's Theory* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: University of North Carolina, 1975), 156.

the pictures in sequence, and continued to do so with subsequent works in this idiom for the rest of his life. Later on, the artist dedicated one of his larger lithographs to the poet, *Lament for Lorca* (1981-82).

As for the subject of the 'Elegies,' their chief expressive metaphor (i.e. the format of alternating bars and ovals in black on white) has a particularly well defined character. In 1950 Motherwell wrote that the 'Elegies' are "all in black and white: they are funeral pictures, laments, dirges."[64] Two decades later he still discussed their intent along similar lines, claiming that "the 'Elegies' treat life and death as fundamentals,"[65] and in 1963 he described their content as the "insistence that a terrible death happened that should not be forgot."[66] When talking about his *Reconciliation Elegy* in 1980, a mural commissioned by the National Gallery of Art in the late 1970s, he said

> My 'Elegies to the Spanish Republic' had been meant, on one level, as an elegy for the tragically missed opportunity of Spain to enter the liberal modern world in the 1930's. And for its tragic suffering then and for decades after. The [*Reconciliation*] title must also unconsciously correspond to a certain subjective stage in my own life. Life and death are now to me subjectively less antagonistic—less sharply opposed: to put it the other way around, both are absorbed by the natural process of living.[67]

Nowhere in Motherwell's oeuvre is the cry of pain stronger, more personal—and yet more universalized—than in the 'Spanish Elegies'. The 'Elegies', perhaps even more than Motherwell's other work, involve a complex system of allusions. They refer, as we have seen, in a very evocative way to numerous forms in the real world, and they also make powerful, though indirect, literary allusions. The notion of 'illustrating' a poem without directly illustrating any of the images that appear in it had its basis in the Symbolist

---

64 Motherwell, *Motherwell* (New York: Sam Kootz Gallery, 1950), n.p.

65 Motherwell, in *Robert Motherwell: Recent Work* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Art Museum, 1973), 14.

66 Motherwell, "Robert Motherwell: A Conversation at Lunch," *An Exhibition of the Works of Robert Motherwell* (Northhampton, Mass.: Smith College, 1963), n.p.

67 Carmean, E. A., Jr., ed. *Robert Motherwell: The Reconciliation Elegy* (Geneva and New York: Skira/Rizzoli, 1980), 77.

principle of *correspondance*, in which Motherwell was already deeply interested. By referring to the poem in the title of the painting, Motherwell has evoked a whole network of allusions that do enrich our viewing of the painting. Furthermore, the painting becomes a field in which the artist and the viewers identify their core of selfhood and see enacted its complex states and psychological operations.

If we linger over his statement: "The image is akin in feeling—a visual equivalent—to the feeling in García Lorca's *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* and was meant to be," we must conclude that the 'Elegies' present themselves as the visual equivalent of a poetic language that the artist identifies with his painterly language.[68] So we must consider the normal layout of the 'Elegies to the Spanish Republic' as sharing the elliptical and many-meaning character of the poetic tongue. The rethorical figure of ellipsis consists in not expressing one or several words that one's mind has to supply.[69] The dictionary specifies that ellipsis is a stylistic procedure, tending to abbreviate discourse, an art of suggestion, in which the writer appeals to the reader's mind and imagination. It is the same for the 'Elegies'; and all the interpretations suggested concerning it are caught up in the polymorphic and plurisemantic treatment of the poetics specific to Motherwell's own pictorial language.

So the 'Elegies' can properly evoke those male genital organs and those gargantuan fruits, those ovoid forms without any of these references ever answering the whole work, because whatever in it feeds each of them—vital force and temporality—life and death—time and eternity—justifies all of them by transcending them entirely. For the work to attain the admirable height of inspiration of the *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 70* (1961), it had not to become fixed into some archetype but to be—as it is—involved in and commited to the multiform nature of its own formal and semantic creation.

---

[68] Motherwell (1977), quoted in Marcelin Pleynet, *Robert Motherwell 1969-1990* (Paris: Artcurial, 1990), 92.

[69] For the Abstract Expressionist's use of rethorical devices see Gibson, "The Rethoric of Abstract Expressionism," in Michael Auping, ed. *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments* (New York and Buffalo: Harry N. Abrams/Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1987), 64-93.

Lorca's poetry came to reinforce Motherwell's approach: a combination and extension of the personal, the liberal political, and European modernism. Following the statement quoted above, Motherwell said:

> The force of Lorca's poem and its resonance are far beyond the death of a matador, but perhaps not beyond the death of Spain. I 'meant' the word *elegy* in the title. I was twenty-one in 1936, when the Spanish Civil War began. And I love the 'Spanish black' that Rafael Alberti writes of, and which some years later I illustrated in a *livre de peintre, A la pintura*, to his poem. The Spanish Civil War was even more to my generation than Vietnam was to be thirty years later to its generation, and should never be forgot, even though *la guerre est finie*. For years after the series began, I was often mistaken for a Stalinist, though I think the logical political extension (not that one need be logical: I hate dogma and rigidity) of extreme modernist individualism, as of native American radicalism, is a kind of anarchism, a kind of conscience.[70]

Paintings and poems of death relate to the historical and contemporary events in a continuum of human possibility. With the 'Elegies' Motherwell joins what Stephen Polcari has called a more Jungian sense of creativity—the visionary—with his more usual opposite psychological concerns.[71] Here the elemental and dramatic dominate. He came to believe, as other Abstract Expressionists did earlier, that life and death are intertwined and part of the same process. His permanently unresolved, conflictive, and unreconcilable 'Elegy' emblems brought forth the Abstract Expressionist antagonisms. Motherwell contributed black and white "protagonists in the struggle between life and death" to his period's psychologized imagination. Before the war, the pattern of struggle was between individuals, as in Thomas Hart Benton; or between man and exterior nature as in John Steuart Curry; or between classes in Social Realist work; or between ignorance and new technology in WPA murals. With Motherwell the struggle is internalized, framed in terms of life principles that he found in his view of Lorca and Spain, elevated, and cultivated for himself as for others through the modern tradition.

---

[70] Motherwell (1977), quoted in Pleynet, 92.

[71] Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 45-47.

CHAPTER 4

RAFAEL ALBERTI, *A LA PINTURA* AND *EL NEGRO*

If Lorca and *At Five in the Afternoon* are at the origin of the most important series of paintings Motherwell ever produced, the poetry of Rafael Alberti is tied to the most ambitious work he ever undertook in the field of printmaking: a *livre d'artiste* including selections from the original Spanish poem cycle *A la pintura (Poema del color y la línea)* (1945-1967) by Alberti, accompanied by 21 aquatints by Motherwell.[72] This is how the artist described his first encounter with Alberti's book:

> One of my habits is browsing in bookshops. One day, perhaps in that same year 1967 that I have been speaking of, in E. S. Wilentz's Eighth Street Bookshop, I found Ben Belitt's translation, published by the University of California Press, of Rafael Alberti's *Selected Poems*, including small portions of his huge cycle of poems in homage to the great art of painting, *A la pintura*. I had found the text for a *livre d'artiste*, a text whose every line set into motion my innermost painterly feelings. And again and again between 1968 and 1972, working on the *livre*, sometimes discouraged, sometimes baffled, a line of Alberti's would start me again. This poetry is made for painters, and this *livre* was made for the poetry. I meant the two to be wedded, as in a medieval psalter, but with my own sense of the "modern."[73]

The prints that Robert Motherwell did at Universal Limited Art Editions represent less than a tenth of his graphic work, nevertheless they comprise a synoptic view of the

---

[72] From now on, we shall distinguish between three different references to *A la pintura:* [Alberti's collected works] Rafael Alberti, *Obras Completas, Tomo II, Poesía 1939-1963* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1988), 266-373; [Ben Belitt's edition] Alberti, *Rafael Alberti. Selected Poems*, Ben Belitt, ed. and trans., (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), 160-193; and [Motherwell's *A la pintura*] Robert Motherwell and Rafael Alberti, *A la pintura/To Painting* (West Islip, N.Y.: Universal Limited Art Editions, 1972).

[73] Motherwell, "The Book's Beginnings," in *Robert Motherwell's "A la pintura": The Genesis of a Book* (exhibition catalogue). Introduction by John J. McKendry. Texts by Diane Kelder and Motherwell (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972), 12.

principal themes, sources, and methods of his art. Color is not only the most important element in his work, it is also symbolic, as we have already seen in the 'Elegies' and shall see in the following pages: Motherwell associated red with blood, wine, and hunters' caps; ocher recalls the color of California hills; blue was a favourite because of his lifelong habit of summering by the sea; white was Mallarmé's white paper, awaiting a word. Black—signifying death, anxiety, Goya—had always been the alpha and omega of his palette.[74]

Motherwell's love for the materials of his profession was a powerful ally in Tatyana Grosman's campaign to get him to work at her print shop at West Islip, New York. She had been trying since 1957, when she met Motherwell at the home of Pierre Chareau, an architect who designed the artist's studio in East Hampton. A year later, she reintroduced herself, mentioning the Chareaus. She tried a new lure: for some time, she said, "we have been doing limited-edition portfolios on which the artist and the poet work together."[75]

After several frustrated attempts to work with Grosman, in 1965, suffering from the slump that many artists feel after a major retrospective, Motherwell went to Irwin Hollander's New York workshop to make lithographs. He worked with the printer Emiliano Sorini in a collaboration that buoyed his spirits and provided the mental stimulus he needed. It was Mrs. Grosman's good fortune to have already issued the next challenge: When Motherwell returned to ULAE in 1968, it was to create the *livre d'artiste* she had proposed to him in 1957.

Motherwell was the only artist Grosman had invited to create images for a text of his own choice. Motherwell demurred, waiting until 1967, when he found Alberti's *A la*

---

[74] "The 'pure' red of which certain abstractionists speak does not exist, no matter how one shifts its physical contexts. Any red is rooted in blood, glass, wine, hunters' caps, and a thousand other concrete phenomena. Otherwise we should have no feeling toward red or its relations, and it would be useless as an artistic element. But the most common error among the wholehearted abstractionists nowadays is to mistake the medium for an end in itself, instead of a means." Motherwell, "Beyond the Aesthetic," *Design* 47, no. 8 (April 1946), 15; reprinted in *CWRM*, 38.

[75] For this account and the one in the following paragraph, and more about Motherwell's printmaking at ULAE, see Esther Sparks, *Universal Limited Art Editions. A History and Catalogue: The First Twenty-Five Years* (New York: The Art Institute of Chicago and Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 165-194; and Terenzio and Dorothy Belknap, *The Prints of Robert Motherwell: A Catalogue Raisonné 1943-1984* (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1991), 9-152.

pintura. When Motherwell wrote to say that he wanted to use the Alberti poems, she made rapid and unusual arrangements. Contrary to all precedent, Motherwell and his wife, the painter Helen Frankenthaler, were invited to work in the studio on the same day at the same time. Frankenthaler preferred the lithography studio; Motherwell descended to the new etching press downstairs to work with Donn Steward. In three days, they finished *Black 1-3*, a page that became the touchstone for the work and was continually referred to by the artist over the next four years.[76]

With two pauses (September 1968 to February 1969 and December 1969 to January 1971), Motherwell worked steadily for the next four-and-one-half years. In forty or more sessions, they produced hundreds of sketches, collages, and printing samples. The archival material was kept because Motherwell prefered to work in his own environment. Steward created that environment for every visit by pinning up the work Motherwell had finished on his previous visit and starting each session with a careful review of the last.

In 1972, Motherwell did the final revision to the *livre d'artiste* and signed the edition. Titled "Robert Motherwell's *A la pintura*: The Genesis of a Book," the work was exhibited for the first time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, in 1972, followed by several other exhibitions in different cities around the United States. It is a book of twenty-four unbound pages consisting of twenty-one intaglio prints, a frontispiece, a title page, a preface page by Rafael Alberti, a table of contents page, and a colophon page. From *A la pintura* ULAE produced only one edition of 40 plus eight artist's proofs and two printer's proofs.

For *A la pintura* Motherwell varied one of his series of paintings that he called 'Opens'—in which a U-shaped "window" is drawn on a field of rich color—to emphasize the diverse perceptions of each hue. In the 'Opens', the characterstic imagery is that of a drawn rectangle or rectangles, suggesting windows and doorways cut into a field of subtly

---

[76] See Diane Kelder, "Motherwell's *A la pintura*," in *Robert Motherwell's "A la pintura": The Genesis of a Book*, 5; and Colsman-Freyberger, 20, where the artist is quoted saying "that one of my favorite plates still remains the first one, which acted as a gauge for the book."

nuanced color. He happened on the motif by accident in 1967, when he leaned a small painting, its back facing forward, against a larger canvas whose surface had already been painted. He was so struck with the "proportion" set up by one rectangle superimposed on another that he immediately outlined the shape of the smaller canvas on the larger one with charcoal.[77]

He might not have taken it so seriously, he agreed in an interview, had Minimalism not been in full cry at the time, and yet he was careful to point out that in their freehand drawing and nuanced, sensuous surfaces, the 'Opens' are the very opposite of Minimalism. "At the time, my life and painting were disoriented; I was breaking up with Helen [Frankenthaler], and I wanted to take a fundamental problem—say, a color field with a relatively simple element, so that if my work began to slide, I could see in what ways," he said.[78] Therefore, it was a formal problem though closely related to a personal problem. And he found his way out of his 'disorientation' in the scrutiny of iconography, representation and creativity which he undertook for the making of *A la pintura* and of the 'Open' series.

The image that resulted, which Motherwell described as "a painted plane beautifully divided by minimal means, the essence of line drawing," became the first of the series, which the artist characterized, in part, as a response to the plain, whitewashed adobe facades of Mexican houses with "beautifully proportioned" doors and windows cut into them. But the 'Opens' also obviously relate to the use of windows in the work of Manet, Matisse and Picasso, carrying to the logical extreme their thrust to balance the palette for both indoor and outdoor light.[79] The U-shape suggested scores of ideas: architectural, philosophic, poetic, and "an opening from an interior world to an external world."[80] They

---

[77] See Motherwell's own account of this event in Motherwell, "The Book's Beginnings," 12.

[78] Grace Glueck, "The Creative Mind: The Mastery of Robert Motherwell," *The New York Times Magazine* (December 2, 1984), 69-78, 82, 86.

[79] Flam, 25-26.

also, perhaps, relate to his own childhood, spent—his mother was an ardent collector of French Provincial furniture—"in a houseful of French doors."

Before the 'Opens', a characteristic aspect of Motherwell's work had been an aggressive compositional revision of the canvas through a long series of overpaintings. The 'Opens' rely on bright color and minimal gesture. They express a restrained classicism inherent in Motherwell's personality, which can be seen as early as his *Spanish Wall with Window* of 1941 and *Wall Painting* of 1943.

The 'Opens' led to some of the most important discoveries Motherwell made in his prints. His lithographs had employed unrevised gestures set against the white field of the paper, which related to the simplified structure of the 'Opens'. As Robert S. Mattison pointed out, in *A la pintura*, Motherwell desired highly saturated hues with an even stronger brushstroke.[81]

> I wanted a more painterly quality than I had found for myself in lithography, and more intense color—literally—than I had ever seen in engraving—after all, the poems were called *Blue, Red, The Palette, The Paintbrush, Black* and so on—and I was painting the 'Open' series in intense color. It was when the master printer in the engraving workshop at Mrs. Grosman's, Donn Steward, introduced me to aquatint as a way of having both a subtle and an intense field, and to "sugar-lift" on aquatint as a felt equivalent to my charcoal lines that we were able to move toward the ultimate realization of what I had in mind. Over four years, Steward's sensitivity of technical response to my intentions, as well as suggestions and even anticipations (so closely did we work together) was sustained in a way that I would not have thought possible. In the midst of this technological era, one of my cherished experiences has been to work with a great and meticulous craftsman.[82]

Each flat sheet of *A la pintura* is a single composition, containing one or two aquatints juxtaposed with stanzas of an Alberti poem printed in English and Spanish in separate colors, excerpted from the edition and translation by Ben Belitt. The artist

---

80 From the film *Motherwell/Alberti: To Painting/A la pintura,* Blackwood Productions, 1973; quoted in Sparks, 171.

81 Robert S. Mattison, "Two Decades of Graphic Art by Robert Motherwell," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* (January-February 1981), 199.

82 Motherwell, *Robert Motherwell's "A la pintura"*, 12.

conceived of these large sheets resting in a box, unbound without wrapper, the top of which is transparent and allows them to be seen and displayed, one at a time.

Following what he found in Ben Belitt's selection, the poems chosen by Motherwell were, in this order: *A la paleta/To the Palette* (collected works, num. VI), *Negro/Black* (c.w., unnum., verses 2, 3, 4, 12, 19, 20, 22, 26, 28, 32 and 34), *Azul/Blue* (c.w., unnum., verses 1, 2, 3, 4, 11, 12, 14, 15, 23, 24, 28, 30, and 31), *Rojo/Red* (c.w., unnum., 2, 4, 9, 13, 14, 15, 20, 24, 31 and 33), *Blanco/White* (c.w., unnum., verses 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 22, 28, 32 and 33) and *Al pincel/To the Brush* (c.w., num. XIV).

In her article "Pintura y poesía en Rafael Alberti" Ana María Winkelman describes the poem *A la pintura* as the culmination of Alberti's profound interest in painting.[83] Alberti, a painter himself, gives the impression that he personally acknowledges what art has meant for him and is concerned primarily with painting. There are, however, references throughout the work to related art forms such as sculpture and drawing. The poems of *A la pintura* are devoted to a variety of topics. There is a series of thirty or so brief poetic impressions on each of six colors: blue, red, yellow, green, black and white. A number of rigidly constructed sonnets treat certain artistic techniques and elements related to art: the hand, crayon, pallet, retina, line, perspective, chiaroscuro, movement, nudity, color, light, shadow, watercolor, artistic taste and divine proportion. Lastly, there are a number of poems dedicated to certain artists: Leonardo, El Greco, Bosch, Rubens, Raphael, Van Gogh, Renoir, Gauguin, Goya, Picasso, and others.

Because of what he found in the Belitt edition, Motherwell was only able to use two of the many poems Alberti dedicated to painter's tools, techniques and senses, all related to the creative act—one is used to open the selection and the other to close it; and four of the six poems are dedicated to different colors, altering the order in which they appear in the collected works. Motherwell did not include the poems *Velázquez* and *Michelangelo*, which

---

[83] Ana María Winkelman, "Pintura y poesía en Rafael Alberti," *Papeles de Son Armadans* 30 (1963), 162.

had been translated by Belitt; and he also introduced, as a preface, a fragment from Alberti's memoirs *La arboleda perdida (A Vanished Grove)*, which is also used in the Belitt edition, where the poet recalls his early vocation as a painter, his visits to the Prado Museum and his discovery of Velázquez, Titian, Tintoretto, Rubens, Zurbarán, Goya, etc.: "I recognized, without puzzling it through, how much sun and Mediterranean air had been packed into the marrow of my Italian-Andalusian bones."[84]

As Robert C. Manteiga points out in his book on Alberti, the greatest contribution of painting on Alberti's work is the poet's understanding and appreciation of color not only as an artistic device, but as a poetic device as well.[85] Since Alberti dealt with painting itself and some major painters, the poems from *A la pintura* provided Motherwell with language and imagery from which the artist could draw a good part of his visual elements, although his goal was not form itself. Instead, he would use form and color as a poetic device as well. Despite the images that the text easily conveys, Motherwell always avoided being too literal. In McKendry's book, it is noted that the illustration of

> One line or one letter
> above me: indelible marvel!
>
> One line or one letter,
> one chalk stroke
> compact in the blackboard's mute nocturne.

(from *White 7-9*) is the most literal image in the book. "The letter A appeared in sketches, but for a long time Motherwell resisted putting it into the final image because it was 'too literal.' It was finally added after the edition was completed to give needed weight to the pages of the *White* poem."[86] In the first two stanzas of *White 3-6*, Alberti says:

---

[84] Motherwell and Alberti, *Preface Page*.

[85] Robert C. Manteiga, *The Poetry of Rafael Alberti: A Visual Approach* (London: Tamesis Books Limited, 1978), 107-124.

[86] *Robert Motherwell's "A la pintura": The Genesis of a Book*, 46.

I—Rafael Alberti—have seen it:
light lives in the popular whites.

My childhood: a withewashed
rectangle, wet quicklime

"Yo", the Spanish word for "I", is here printed in reverse, as if it were the "whitewashed shadow" from Alberti's verse. The reversal also suggests an open book, which Motherwell was still sketching in the experimental stages of *White 3-6*, as the format for *A la pintura*.

It is worth pointing out how the artist answered to other lines of the poem. For instance, the stanzas 4 and 5 from *Blue*

The blue of the Greeks:
columnar, asleep upon plinths like a god.

Wings seize our brushes
when we dip them in indigo.

Motherwell's strong response required an entire page for each of them. In other instances, lines such as

The Venice of Titian: a blueness gone gold.
...
Canvas cannot contain it: but
...
Walls are my history.
...
almost blue in its backward reflections.

clearly determined the image Motherwell finally created. And when a form is clearly described, as in "by the circle, the square and the triangle," Motherwell discarded it in favor of a more subtle visualization. In *White 1-2* (Figure 3), following Alberti's phrase "almost blue in its backward reflections," Motherwell proceeded "backward" in several respects. He started with a Mediterranean blue and white, reversed to black, then opposed blue with its complementary color, orange.

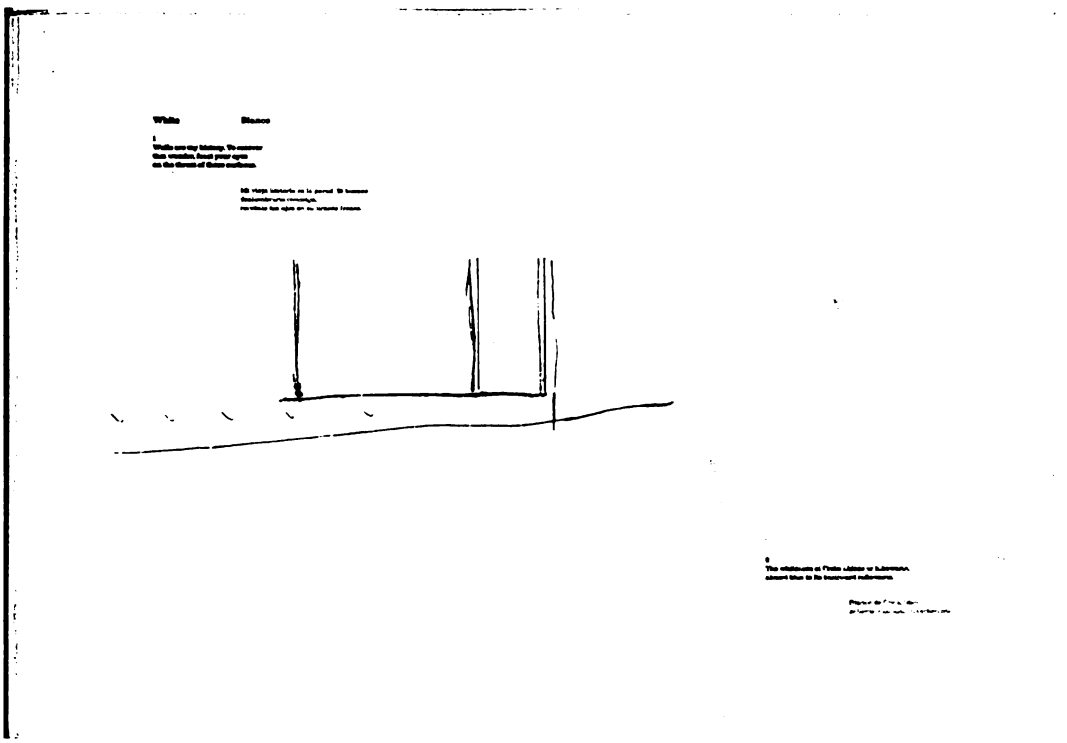

Figure 3

White 1-2 (1971)

Figure 4

Red 8-11 (1971)

The combination of word and image in *A la pintura* represented an ideal of visual and verbal union: as word interacts with image, each image interacts with other images in the series. The last *Blue* (*Blue 12-13*), for example, restates the first (*Blue 1-3*). It also predicts the weight and flaglike crispness of the next page, *Red 1-3*. As each page is turned, new links emerge. Each subsequent viewing-and-reading enriches and illuminates the whole.

The image in *Red 8-11* (Figure 4) changed completely between its original conception and the printing. For three years, Motherwell had maintained the austere mood of his 'Open' series, although his painting had become much looser and more gestural. But here, inspired by the "explosions" and "inferno" in Alberti's text, he made *Red 8-11* one of the most dramatic images in the book. A large gestural brushstroke in lift ground is placed upon a painterly and intensely hued field of red achieved through open-bite aquatint. This combination of gesture and field is the direct source for many of the prints Motherwell made in his studio since 1974.

On the fourth page for the *White* poem, the only one on which there are two images and the last to be completed, the painter used an original creative process: according to McKendry's catalogue, in the fall of 1968 Motherwell visited an exhibition, *The Age of Fresco*. The exhibition included many examples of *sinopia*, a preparatory drawing for a fresco. One of these studies was by Ucello, an artist Alberti mentioned in this poem; so Motherwell could establish a masterful connection between the Italian master's drawing, Alberti's lines, his own work on the 'Open' series and the two images in this page. The artist's own words, once again, express how he confronted the task:

> The problem was iconography. A medieval book of hours on Biblical themes depicts them. A way for a modern artist to deal with references to the pantheon of great painters—Tintoretto, Veronese, Goya, Titian, Rembrandt, et al.—would be through montage (which, unbeknownst to me, Alberti later did himself for the Italian translation of *A la pintura*). But modern artists cannot otherwise use the Renaissance tradition, any more than medieval artists worked in the classical Greek tradition. I decided to cut the Gordian knot by sticking to my own iconography throughout, one that is meant to convey essences. My iconography can cope with, say, the bluenesses of blues, light and air and color, walls,

> perspective, and a general sense of the Mediterranean; with solitude, weight, intensities, placing, decisiveness, and ambiguities; it cannot deal with Venus—except as one aspect of the skin of the world, of which painting itself is also a skin, and in this sense my illuminations are both a higher degree of complexity—but not of subtlety—than the poems. ... Alberti's text has its own magical light, based on the latitude of the Mediterranean countries. New York, Barcelona, Long Island, and Rome (where Alberti now lives in exile from Franco Spain) are approximately on the same latitude. Part of the artistic task is to find identity in differences, metaphors. Metaphors of painting and of poetry and of workshops and of women and of men that are in turn metaphors for reality itself. Indescribable as it is (whatever it is), directly.[87]

In this paragraph, Motherwell explains how the creation of his prints for *A la pintura* was only possible after he decided to use his "own iconography", although during the long process of production of the different works, this language would undergo a permanent scrutiny to reach a "higher degree of complexity" and maintain its "differences". With the combination of an inspiring text and magnificent working conditions, as H. H. Arnason has explained, Motherwell was able to produce one of the remarkable graphic books of this century. In *A la pintura*, all the wide variety of Motherwell's interests, the fantastic range of his talents were brought together. The book of etchings and hand-set letter press, all laid out by the artist, might even be considered as a comprehensive introduction to the way in which the artist worked and thought and his passion for materials, for color, for placement, and calligraphy. These are on the technical and formal side. The book is more significant as a summary or an ABC of one artist's total experience, his wide-ranging interests in poetry, philosophy, and art history as well as in art.[88] So upon the base of Alberti's poetry, Motherwell was able to reassure himself in his own view of creativity and of himself as an artist, a "modern artist".

The prints for *A la pintura* did not define a series of limits but opened up a number of possibilities. In his words, "After the disciplined restraint of the aquatints for *A la*

---

[87] Motherwell, *Ibid.*, 12 and 13. The Italian edition to which Motherwell refers is Alberti, *Alla pittura* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1971).

[88] Arnason, 69-70.

pintura, the *Open* image wanted to erupt, which resulted in six pictures in shades of liquid black, called the *In Plato's Cave* series."[89] Secondly, the rich hue of aquatint encouraged Motherwell to brighten his acrylic colors in a series of works from 1971 to 1975, most notably the intensely red *A la pintura* paintings and *Phoenician Studio*. So we see how Motherwell's experience with *A la pintura* had two direct effects on his invention in other media, both as reaction and stimulus to move further out of his previous 'disorientation'.

A la pintura—a title that Motherwell also used in naming some paintings following this experience—was not the only work that related the worlds of Rafael Alberti and Robert Motherwell. In fact, the poem *El Negro Motherwell* was written by Alberti in homage to Motherwell at the time of the latter's retrospective exhibition in Barcelona in the spring of 1980, a poem that has not been included in his collected works for unknown reasons. The core of *El Negro Motherwell* is, obviously, the symbolic use of the color black by Motherwell, frequently related to his idea of "Spanish," (see quote on p. 20) which is the same one expressed by Alberti. The two artists met in 1980 at the Madrid opening ceremonies of the retrospective exhibition, which had traveled from Barcelona. Alberti unexpectedly rose from his seat, moved toward the podium and, in an electrifying voice, read *El Negro Motherwell*.[90] In that meeting, both agreed that the poem could be the basis of a second *livre d'artiste*, which Motherwell produced between 1981 and 1983, in collaboration with the printer Kenneth Tyler. *El Negro* is a book of nineteen original lithographs, with a preface by Jack D. Flam, illuminating the poem by Rafael Alberti, printed in Spanish with an English translation by Vicente Lleo Cañal. Tyler Graphics Ltd. published an edition of 51 plus 10 artist's proofs, and was exhibited for the first time at the M. Knoedler and Co. Gallery in New York City in 1983.

As in *A la pintura*, Motherwell took an non-traditional approach to design. The pages of *El Negro* come in three sizes, the larger sheets opening out horizontally either

---

[89] Motherwell in Arnason, plate 236.

[90] See Donna Stein, *Contemporary Illustrated Books: Word and Image, 1967-1988* (New York: Independent Curators Inc., c1988), 39.

once or twice. Occasional patches of color—ochre for the earth, blue for the sky and sea—interrupt the passionate, mysterious blacks that define bold, eloquent images which further explore the challenging themes of Motherwell's Spanish Elegy series. Motherwell extracts the titles for his lithographs from the sensuous words and vigorous lines of the poem: *Black Wall of Spain, Through Black Emerge Purified, Elegy Black Black* (Figure 5), *Black with No Way Out, Black Undone by Tears*, etc. In *El Negro*, Motherwell and Alberti collaborated in the fullest sense—each artist creating for in his medium for the other.

El Negro is, therefore, a precious result of a relationship between two artists. With a poem by Alberti that speaks about painting and painters—*A la pintura*—Motherwell created a series of works about creativity. Alberti answers this *livre d'artiste* with another poem, *El Negro Motherwell*, about the language of the painter, who in turn, reacts with another series of images deliberately inspired by the poem, thereby closing the circle of the painter-poet-painter collaboration.

In working with Alberti's poetry, we must conclude that Motherwell found the perfect equivalent for developing his working method, which at this moment of his life consisted in using memories or impressions of the visual world rather than "memories" of a prehistoric or ancient past.[91] Nevertheless, he rarely worked from a motif toward form. He usually moved in the opposite direction, discovering the motif and associations as he read the poetry. In *A la pintura* Motherwell evokes the poem's associations through form and color, he embodies the poem's meaning through form, color and technique; which, in turn, are the poem's subject-matter. The work is a joyous celebration of creativity itself. *A la pintura* provided him with the solution to his "fundamental problem" in life and painting, at this particular moment in time, quoted above. From what we said in the previous chapter, we could describe Motherwell's involvement with Lorca's poetry as a look *outwards*, from the individual to the world. Now we may call his relationship with Alberti's work a look *inwards*.

---

[91] In describing this method, Stephen Polcari notes that it was more like Ellsworth Kelly's than that of the Abstract Expressionists. See Polcari, 320-21.

Figure 5

Elegy Black Black (1982-83)

Word and pictorial utterance were brought together, each reinforcing and enlarging the other's field of meaning. Motherwell said:

> I also should mention that several people have cut up some of the pages and framed just the aquatint image. A sacrilege. Not only is it a violation of the book *as a book*, but the images are related to the typeface, visually as well as in meaning, so that the whole page is the work of art, *not* just the plate on it ... Certainly as much time was spent on placing the plate on the page in relation to the type and the margins, on determining the dimensions of the page, as in actually making the plates. ... There is a considerable interplay. I mean that the plates, abstract as they are, are much more directly related to the text than most people realize. The reason people seem not to realize this is because the imagery is not much related, though it is in several cases. ... But most of the time I used my U-shaped *Open* image. That is, the *Open* plates are homages in part to the Mediterranean spirit in art, as is Alberti's text, and there is the union in our disparatness.[92]

As a result, from the 'Open' and the *A la pintura* series onwards—as will be further exemplified in the following chapter—Motherwell was able to combine a number of divergent formal possibilities into a number of strong pictorial syntaxes, which not only draw upon different parts of the artistic traditions that he inherited, but also upon different parts of his own being and identity as an artist.

---

[92] Motherwell, in Colsman-Feyberger, 20, 21.

CHAPTER 5

THREE POEMS BY OCTAVIO PAZ

The third contact established between the painting of Robert Motherwell and the work of a Spanish-speaking poet took place in a different way than the two previous ones. Here it was not the painter who was motivated by one of his readings but the initiative came from the Mexican Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz, who on the 16th of May 1971 composed the poem *Piel/Sonido del mundo* (*Skin/Sound of the World*), whose title he took from a sentence of Robert Motherwell, quoted by Dore Ashton: "I am interested in the skin of the world, the sound of the world. Art can be profound when the skin is used to express a judgment of values."[93] Octavio Paz explains, in a note to the poem, that the text refers to many of the artist's paintings and collages: the 'Elegies to the Spanish Republic', the homage to Mallarmé (*Mallarmé's Swan*, 1944); the 'Je t'aime' series, from the 1950s; and *Chi ama, crede* (1962).[94]

Although no one has been able to establish when Motherwell first encountered Paz's poetry, in 1978—and probably due to the success of *A la pintura*—Tatyana Grosman wrote to Motherwell: "The poem by Octavio Paz dedicated to you is marvelous. We have to discuss ideas how to publish it; it could be an exciting collaboration between you and the poet."[95] Sadly, it was too late for Mrs. Grosman, who died in 1982. Nevertheless, it is

---

[93] See *Robert Motherwell: Bilder und Collagen 1967-1970.* Exhibition catalogue. (St. Gallen: Galerie im Erker, 1971), 26.

[94] See Octavio Paz, *Obra Poética (1935-1988)* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1990), 615. From now on, quoted as *OP*.

[95] The first translation of Paz's poetry in English was published by Lloyd Mallan, "A Little Anthology of Young Mexican Poets," in *New Directions 9* (1947); followed by *Sun Stone*, trans. by Muriel Rukeyser (London & N.Y.: New Directions, 1962). T. Grosman, letter to Motherwell, September 29, 1978; quoted by Sparks, 174.

clear that Motherwell did not forget about Octavio Paz's poetry, because in 1981 the painter dedicated an important and large canvas to the poet, entitled *Face of the Night (For Octavio Paz)*. And afterwards, during the years 1986 and 1987, Motherwell revived Grosman's suggestion and decided again to unite poetry and prints to produce another *livre d'artiste*, with three poems by Octavio Paz. *Three Poems by Octavio Paz* presents twenty-seven original lithographs by Robert Motherwell and was published by the Limited Editions Club, New York City, in 1988, in an edition of 750 plus 30 artist's proofs.

The poems Motherwell selected were: *Nocturno de San Ildefonso* (*San Ildefonso Nocturne*), *Vuelta* (*Return*), and *Piel/Sonido del mundo* (*Skin/Sound of the World*), reproduced in this order in the book, alternating the original Spanish verses with English translations. Only the third poem, dedicated to Motherwell, was reprinted in its entirety and several fragments were used from the other ones—as it was done with *A la pintura* by Alberti. *Vuelta, Piel/Sonido del mundo* and *Nocturno de San Ildefonso* appear, in this order, in Octavio Paz's book *Vuelta* (1969-1975). From the first one, dedicated to José Alvarado and included in the series *Ciudad de México*, Motherwell took seven fragments; and from *Nocturno de San Ildefonso* he used eight, taken from all the four different parts in which the original is divided: *Inventa la noche en mi ventana...*, *Calles vacías, luces tuertas...*, *El muchacho que camina por este poema...*, and *Las ideas se disipan....*[96]

There is a text written in September 1987 in which Robert Motherwell himself introduces and talks about the poet, on the occasion of Octavio Paz's visit to the Poetry Center in New York City for a reading of his work. Motherwell, who at that time had just finished his work with Paz's poems, welcomed him and read the text—to which the following fragment belongs—where he also mentioned his links with Mexico and Surrealism, two of the many points of contact between the two artists:

> Paz and I were born within some months of each other, which means that at precisely the same historical points in time we were faced with the same

[96] *OP*, 362-70, 388-93, 410-29.

> problems—political, social, aesthetic—fascism and Stalinism, the Great Depression, World War II, the aesthetics of late modernism, the emergence of his Northern neighbor as a superpower, and in the future, the possibility of the ultimate holocaust. —I slightly know Octavio Paz personally, but for more than a year I have been working on illustrating three poems of his in a very limited edition deluxe—what the French call a painter's book. My mind is filled with his images and insights, and had I had the chance, would have chosen him above all others as my savant through our horrifying shared period of time. What more all-encompassing guide or guiding light?[97]

It is in *Nocturno de San Ildefonso* where we find clearly explained why Motherwell was so captivated and inspired by Paz's poetry. This poem is filled with many images and references to which Motherwell could certainly relate in terms of both his biography and his visual language: The poet, looking out of his window at night, catches the signs and seeds that "night" suggests to him. The window is also a tunnel: "Estoy a la entrada de un túnel" (I am at the entrance of a tunnel, *OP*, 411); only words can guide him out of it, out of the chaos that surrounds him. in his disorientation. As he speaks—"hablo con los hojos cerrados" (I speak with my eyes closed, *OP*, 413)—somebody, a force beyond his will and control, changes his words magnetically. He leaps back to 1931 (the year he published his first poem), his personal history now "broken images" (*OP*, 415). He recalls his comrades as the night life of the city enters the poem and interferes with the lineal flow of memory. The adolescent of seventeen and the poet of sixty meet in the poem. Paz's past has become a *mea culpa* of a generation who for a while were seduced by Revolution:

> Good, we wanted good:
> to set the world right.
> We didn't lack integrity:
> we lacked humility.
> What we wanted was not innocently wanted.
> Precepts and concepts,
> the arrogance of theologians
> (*OP*, 419)

But it is as a poet—"dar ojos al lenguaje" (to give eyes to the language, *OP*, 423)—resurrecting the full living richness of words that Paz has fullfiled his destiny, his duty.

---

[97] Motherwell, "Introduction for Octavio Paz," in *CWRM*, 282.

Poetry points to this "verdad del tiempo no fechado" (truth of undated time, *OP*, 423), the intense present of experience that all men and women share. As Jason Wilson has pointed out in his analysis of Paz's poetry, here the poet has found another sense to fraternity from the socialist one of the 1930s: it is all Humankind. "All that is left of Paz's life in history is language; words in a poem."[98]

Vuelta describes Paz's return to Mexico and his shock at seeing Mexico degraded by modern progress, capitalist lucre, megalomaniac government, and the sordid fantasies of the middle class. The poem is dense with allusions: López Valverde, Shiki, Wang Wei, Tablada, Mallarmé, some of Paz's early poems, the Nahuatl word "burning water," and so on. It opens with the noise of the city and the poet returning to the home of his infancy in Mixcoac. He finds an image for 1970s Mexico: "En los buzones / se pudren las cartas" (Letters rot / in the mailboxes, *OP*, 363), implying absence of communication and hopeless bureaucracy. Then he slips back in memory, a "balcón / sobre el vacío" (balcony / over the void, *OP*, 365)—using a similar image to that of the window in the previous poem, and related to the association established with the window by Motherwell in his 'Open' series. Tortured by the omnivorous presence of the alienating city, his past is "bruma" (mist) and his present a version of hell. Paz's packed sentences and sounds mimic nightmare city life that permeates everything from sex to cinemas and words. Mexico City's only value is being branded with the dollar sign. The poet then asks himself what he has achieved in his life against the city: "¿Gané o perdí?" (Did I win or lose?, *OP*, 369). But he does not wish to escape these times. He affirms: "El espacio está adentro" (Space is within, *OP*, 371), the heartbeat of pure time. The wind blows the poplars as the poet continues to be buffeted by time: "Camino sin avanzar / Nunca llegamos" (I walk without moving forward / We never arrive, *OP*, 371). The poet is now less optimistic about antidotes to history while affirming that being alive is all that counts.

---

[98] Jason Wilson, *Octavio Paz* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 139.

If we turn now to the images Motherwell created in this *livre d'artiste*, we can establish a close parallelism between the poems' tone and Motherwell's visualization of its meaning. First, the eight lithographs that accompany the verses of *Nocturno de San Ildefonso* (see Figure 6) came from a series of nine drawings Motherwell made in 1967 (as part of a project for the Museum of Modern Art in New York City), to illustrate an edition of Arthur Rimbaud's book *A Season in Hell*, which was never published.[99] In the same way as Paz does in the poem, Motherwell went back to images he had previously created—interestingly a series also derived from literary forms—and established a dialogue with his own past and previous work.

Several other images in the series are linked in structure to other previous Motherwell paintings. As Paz does in *Vuelta* and in *Piel/Sonido del mundo*, Motherwell is looking retrospectively at his life and work. The prints *Je t'aime* and *Return* refer to the series of paintings *Je t'aime*, from the 1950s; *Spanish Elegy* (Figure 7) and *Mexican Elegy* to the 'Elegy' series; *A Throw of the Dice* makes reference to Mallarmé and to Motherwell's 'Beside the Sea' series, from 1962; the untitled prints (Terenzio and Belknap, cat. nos. 371 and 376) are closely related to the 'Lyric' suite, from 1965; *Red Samurai* to the 'Samurai' series from 1974; and *Mexico City Personages I, II* (Figure 8), and *III*, are very similar to such paintings as *The Grand Inquisitor* (1983) and *Quintet* (1986). Therefore, if we look at the images Motherwell used in *Three Poems by Octavio Paz* we will be confronting, as Octavio Paz does in his poems, the "broken images" of a personal artistic and creative history. In the same way as the poet does in his poetry, the mature Motherwell seems to ask himself about his achievements in life and in his art.

We have seen how the *A la pintura* and the 'Open' works brought him the solution to a formal problem he had been wrestling with for a decade and to a personal moment of uncertainty. It was almost as though he were starting out to be a painter all over again.

---

[99] The project was abandoned by the museum, but Motherwell subsequently used one of the nine drawings he had made for the project as his contribution to the museum's memorial to Frank O'Hara, *In Memory of My Feelings* (1969). The eight unpublished mylars remained in the artist's possession until they were transferred to aluminium plates and printed for the poem *San Ildefonso Nocturne*.

Liberated by the new imagery and renewed in his personal life by his marriage to a German photographer, Renate Ponsold, Motherwell spent the last two decades of his life working hard and exhibiting widely. Retrospective exhibitions in the United States and abroad, as well as numerous book-length studies of his work and his own writing and lecturing, occupied his non-painting time. By keeping him constantly searching his soul for its aesthetic essence—a what-kind-of-painter-is-it-that-I-really-am? syndrome—his self-examination and these art historical studies augmented his normally high level of anguish about his work. In his preference for working in long series of related works, Motherwell had always proved to be constantly concerned with his work as a developing process, as seen both in advance and in retrospect. In the last years of his life he came to be even more concerned. "Having a retrospective is making a will," he once said.[100] Not only was Motherwell confronted with his own legacy in those retrospective exhibitions, but he seems to have struggled in this last years of his life to create a body of work *retrospective* in itself, that is a sum of all his previous achievements. And he seems to have found the encouragement to do so through Octavio Paz's words.

---

[100] "Letter from Robert Motherwell to Frank O'Hara dated August 18, 1965," *Robert Motherwell* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965), 70.

Figure 6

Nocturne I (1967-88)

Figure 7

Spanish Elegy (1987-88)

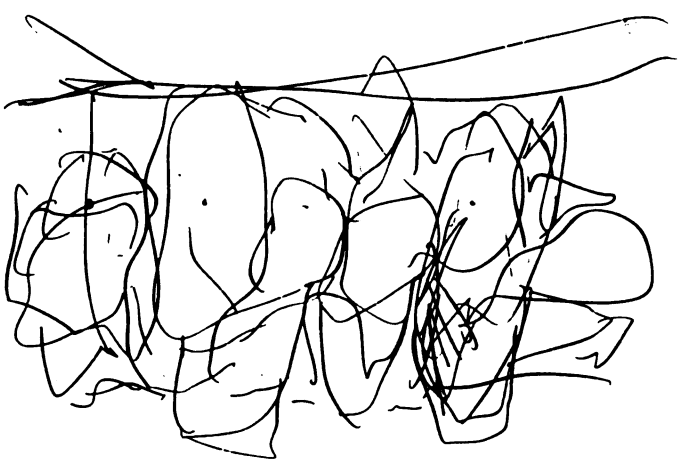

Figure 8

Mexico City Personages II (1986-88)

CONCLUSION

It gives me a chill what words can do.
Robert Motherwell[101]

Abstract Expressionism has become synonymous with a reluctance to explain, and that reluctance has become associated with the assumption that it is irrelevant to discuss meaning as the relation between form and subject matter. As I explained at the beginning, recent scholarship, nonetheless, has been devoted to attempts to decode Abstract-Expressionist paintings and sculptures by rooting out their inherent and often ambiguous subject matter, with fruitful and sometimes surprising results. Following the same path, I have attempted to show how some of the works of Robert Motherwell also have a very particular meaning. My approach has focused on the close relationship between the poems by three Spanish-speaking writers and Motherwell's visualization of their meaning. Along the way, a few questions have been answered, but many new ones are now open, showing once again the richness and complexity of Motherwell's art.

A very important feature of this research has been the possibility of establishing a connection between the work of art (or series of works), the poem (or group of poems), and Motherwell's life and interests at a particular moment in time. The interlacing of these elements within his social and cultural background and his use of a particular technique, which influenced his entire artistic career, provides the answers to our search for meaning. Even though we are often caught up in the polymorphic and plurisemantic treatment of the poetics specific to Motherwell's own pictorial language, we are now able to understand why he chose to work with these particular poems by these particular poets and at that

[101] Motherwell, "An Artist's Odyssey," *Art & Antiques* (February, 1989), 73.

particular time of his life. Furthermore, we have seen how the relationship changed and evolved in each case.

At the basis of it all, the three Spanish-speaking poets provided Motherwell with a number of themes and ideas that are characteristic of that culture's journey through Modernism, and particularly of the literature from both Spain and Latin-America.[102] "If you have taken on the adventure of Modernism as I have—and the history of it—there have to be a few prophets to help you when you get discouraged. You go back to them for reinforcement."[103] Again, as we have seen earlier, he is telling us that it was his interest in the different sides of Modernism that directed his attention to these poets, and not a romantic search for the 'exotic' or the 'different' that might be found in Spanish culture from the North-American point of view.[104] He considered the poets as "prophets" of his own 'religion.'

Writing in the 1930s, Lorca "helped" him talk about political ideas and ideals, about war, and about life and death in the post-war world of the late 1940s and 1950s. The works related to Lorca's writing are what we could call a look *outwards*. From the 1940s, Alberti offered the Motherwell of the 1960s and 1970s a glance *inwards*, towards himself as an artist and as a creator. Finally, in the 1980s, Motherwell found in the words of Octavio Paz the perfect equivalent to his retrospective meditations as a mature artist, the one who looks back at his own language, creations, life and times, therefore being a *retrospective* look.

Motherwell constantly went "back for reinforcement" and not only to these three masters from Spanish literature. Actually, as he tirelessly explained and as I have sketched at the beginning of my thesis, this incessant quest was part of a much larger personal

---

[102] As we have already seen, Motherwell always worked from translations, therefore missing the important role played by the original language and, although he was conscious of it, relying on somenone else's translation into English, a question that could be further explored.

[103] Motherwell, "An Artist's Odyssey," 73-74.

[104] Dore Ashton recently suggested to this author to "try to imagine a romantic American seeking inspiration in the exotic." Letter to the author, December 1994.

exploration of, in his own words, the "international and universal tribe of intellectuals and artists whose most serious works of art ... fall under the umbrella of the aesthetic called Modernism."[105] Obviously, this is a broad question that still needs to be addressed, especially regarding Motherwell's interaction with the works of such writers as Guillaume Apollinaire, Charles Baudelaire, André Breton, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Stéphane Mallarmé, Marcel Proust, Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Valéry, to name just a few, as well as the work of several modern musicians and philosopers. The relations of Robert Motherwell—and of the rest of the New York School artists—to contemporary cultural preoccupations and productions was more diverse and diffuse than a single study can illustrate. I believe I have made some progress along the path.

---

[105] Motherwell, "Remarks," in *On the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Yale University Art Gallery* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1982), 17. Reprinted in *CWRM*, 259.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alberti, Rafael. *Rafael Alberti. Selected Poems.* Ben Belitt, ed. and trans. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966.

_____. *Alla pittura.* Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1971.

_____. *Obras Completas, Tomo II, Poesía 1939-1963.* Madrid: Aguilar, 1988.

Anfam, David. *Clyfford Still.* London: Courtauld Institute, 1984.

Arnason, H. H. *Robert Motherwell.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977.

Auping, Michael, ed. *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments.* New York and Buffalo: Harry N. Abrams/Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1987.

Beardsley, M. C. and Wimsatt, W. K. "The Intentional Fallacy," *Sewanee Review* LIV (1946): 468-488.

Bois, Yves-Alain. "Ryman's Tact," *October* 19 (Winter 1981): 101.

Brown, Blanche. "The Correlation of Literature and the Fine Arts," *College Art Journal* (Winter 1949-50): 176-80.

Buck, Robert T., ed. *Robert Motherwell.* New York: Abbeville Press/Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1983.

Cannon, Calvin. "Lorca's 'Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías' and the Elegiac Tradition," *Hispanic Review* 31 (1963): 229-238.

Carmean, E. A., Jr., ed. *Robert Motherwell: The Reconciliation Elegy.* Geneva and New York: Skira/Rizzoli, 1980.

Carmean, E. A., Jr. and Rathbone, Eliza E., eds. *American Art at Mid-Century: The Subjects of the Artist.* Washington, D. C.: National Gallery of Art, 1978.

Cavaliere, Barbara and Hobbs, Robert C. "Against a Newer Laocoon," *Arts Magazine* 51 (April 1977): 110-117.

Chave, Anna. *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

Clark, T. J. "Clement Greenberg Theory of Art," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (September 1982): 139-156.

Collins, Bradford. "The Fundamental Tragedy of the *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, or Robert Motherwell's Dilemma," *Arts* 59 (September 1984): 94-97.

Colsman-Freyberger, Heidi. "Robert Motherwell: Words and Images," *Art Journal* 34 (Fall 1974): 19-24.

Crossman, Richard. *The God That Failed.* London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950.

Fineberg, Jonathan. "Death and Maternal Love: Psychological Speculations on Robert Motherwell's Art," *Artforum* (September 1978): 52-57.

Firestone, Evan. "James Joyce and the First Generation New York School," *Arts* 56 (June 1982): 116-21.

Flam, Jack D. *Motherwell.* Oxford: Phaidon, 1991.

Fried, Michael. *Three American Painters.* Cambridge, Mass.: Fogg Art Museum, 1965.

Gaddis, John Lewis. *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1972.

García Lorca, Federico. *Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter and Other Poems.* A. L. Lloyd, trans. London: William Heinemann, 1937.

_____. *Obras Completas, Tomo I.* Madrid: Aguilar, 1986.

_____. *Antología Comentada.* Madrid: Ediciones de la Torre, 1988.

_____. *Ode to Walt Whitman & Other Poems.* Carlos Bauer, trans. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988.

Gibson, Ann. "Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language," *Art Journal* 47 (Fall 1988): 208-214.

_____. *Issues in Abstract Expressionism: The Artist-Run Periodicals.* Ann Arbor, Mi.: UMI Research Press, 1990.

Gibson, Ian. *The Assasination of García Lorca.* New York: Penguin Books, 1983.

Glueck, Grace. "The Creative Mind: The Mastery of Robert Motherwell," *The New York Times Magazine* (December 2, 1984): 69-78, 82, 86.

Greenberg, Clement. *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism.* John O'Brian, ed. 4 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Guilbaut, Serge. "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the 'Vital Center,'" *October* 15 (Winter 1980): 61-78.

_____. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Hamilton, George Heard. "Object and Image," *Art News* 53 (May 1954): 18-21, 58.

Harris, Jean C. "A Little-known Essay on Manet by Stéphane Mallarmé," *Art Bulletin* 46 (1964): 562.

Hobbs, Robert C. *Robert Motherwell's 'Elegies to the Spanish Republic,' Including an Explanation of the Artist's Theory.* Chapel Hill, N. C.: University of North Carolina, 1975.

Jung, Carl G. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul.* New York: Harcourt Brace, 1933.

Krauss, Rosalind. *Terminal Iron Works, the Sculpture of David Smith.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971.

Kuspit, Donald. *Clement Greenberg: Art Critic.* Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979.

Leja, Michael. *Reframing Abstract Expressionism.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

Lewis, Helena. *The Politics of Surrealism.* New York: Paragon House, 1988.

Lubar, Robert. "Metaphor and Meaning in David Smith's *Jurassic Bird*," *Arts Magazine* (September 1984): 78-86.

Manteiga, Robert C. *The Poetry of Rafael Alberti: A Visual Approach.* London: Tamesis Books Limited, 1978.

Maritain, Jacques. *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.

Mattison, Robert S. "Two Decades of Graphic Art by Robert Motherwell," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* (January-February 1981): 197-201.

_____. "The Emperor of China: Symbols of Power and Vulnerability in the Art of Robert Motherwell during the 1940s," *Art International* 25 (November-December 1982): 8-14.

_____. *Robert Motherwell: The Formative Years.* Ann Arbor, Mi.: UMI Research Press, 1987.

McCoubrey, John. *American Tradition in Painting.* New York: G. Braziller, 1963.

Motherwell, Robert. *Motherwell*. New York: Sam Kootz Gallery, 1950.

_____ . *An Exhibition of the Works of Robert Motherwell.* Northhampton, Mass.: Smith College, 1963.

_____ . *Robert Motherwell.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965.

_____. *Robert Motherwell: Bilder und Collagen 1967-1970.* St. Gallen, Swi.: Galerie im Erker, 1971.

_____. *Robert Motherwell's "A la pintura": The Genesis of a Book.* New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972.

_____. *Robert Motherwell: Recent Work.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Art Museum, 1973.

_____. *Robert Motherwell.* Düsseldorf: Städtische Kunsthalle, 1976.

_____. "An Artist's Odyssey," *Art & Antiques* (February 1989): 73-77.

_____. *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell.* Stephanie Terenzio, ed. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Motherwell, Robert and Alberti, Rafael. *A la pintura/To Painting.* West Islip, N.Y.: Universal Limited Art Editions, 1972.

_____. *El Negro.* Bedford Village, N.Y.: Tyler Graphics, 1983.

Motherwell, Robert and Paz, Octavio. *Three Poems by Octavio Paz.* New York: Limited Editions Club, 1988.

Motherwell, Robert and Rosenberg, Harold. "Statement," *Possibilities* (1947): 1.

Myers, John Bernard. *Tracking the Marvelous: A Life in the New York Art World.* New York: Random House, 1983.

Naifeh, Steven and Smith, Gregory White. *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga.* New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1989.

Orton, Fred and Pollock, Griselda. "Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed," *Art History* 4 (September 1981): 305-27.

Paz, Octavio. *Obra Poética (1935-1988).* Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1990.

Pleynet, Marcelin. *Robert Motherwell 1969-1990.* Paris: Artcurial, 1990.

Polcari, Stephen. *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Rand, Harry. *Arshile Gorky, The Implications of Symbols.* Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld & Schram, 1980.

Raymor, Vivien. "A Talk with Robert Motherwell," *Artnews* (April 1974): 50-52.

Rodgers, Paul. "Towards a Theory/Practice of Painting: Abstract Expressionism and the Surrealist Discourse," *Artforum* (March 1980): 53-61.

Rosenberg, Harold. "The American Action Painters," *Art News* 51 (September 1952): 22-23, 48-50.

Rosenzweig, Phyllis. *The Fifties.* Washington, D.C.: The Hirshhorn Museum, 1980.

Rubin, William. "Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition," *Artforum* (February 1967): 14-22, (March 1967): 28-37, (April 1967): 18-31, (May 1967): 28-33.

Sandler, Irving. *The Triumph of American Painting.* New York: Harper & Row, ca. 1970.

Sparks, Esther. *Universal Limited Art Editions. A History and Catalogue: The First Twenty-Five Years.* New York: The Art Institute of Chicago and Harry N. Abrams, 1989.

Stein, Donna. *Contemporary Illustrated Books: Word and Image, 1967-1988.* New York: Independent Curators Inc., ca. 1988.

Steiner, Wendy. *The Colors of Rethoric.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Terenzio, Stephanie and Belknap, Dorothy. *The Prints of Robert Motherwell: A Catalogue Raisonné 1943-1984.* New York: American Federation of Arts, 1991.

Van Hook, L. Bailey. "Robert Motherwell's *Mallarmé's Swan,*" *Arts Magazine* (January 1983): 104-105.

Wilson, Jason. *Octavio Paz.* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986.

Winkelman, Ana María. "Pintura y poesía en Rafael Alberti," *Papeles de Son Armadans* 30 (1963): 162.