

Was there a myth in the making?—A Structuralist Approach to Robert Motherwell's *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*

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In 1948 Robert Motherwell created a small abstract drawing in black and white to illustrate a poem by Harold Rosenberg. Motherwell had planned to publish this drawing in the second edition of *Possibilities*¹ (Figure 1). When the edition was not published, he put the drawing away and forgot about it. Then, in 1949, Motherwell rediscovered the piece while cleaning out a drawer. Now realizing that the tension created by the reduced palette of black and white was echoed in the interplay between the sensuous ovals and thick, assertive rectangles, he reworked the original drawing into a small painting which he titled *At Five in the Afternoon*. He took the new title from a line in a poem by Federico Garcia Lorca² (Figure 2).

Although small in scale (15" x 20"), the new painting was pivotal for Motherwell's artistic development. It became the germinal work for the theme and imagery of his best known series, the *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*. Originally, he chose the title *At Five in the Afternoon* because it made reference to Lorca's poem about the violent death of a Spanish bullfighter. As Motherwell continued to return to this imagery, he felt the need for a title that would carry similar connotations but would be more easily understood by a larger segment of society. Therefore, he renamed the series *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*.³ In discussing the title Motherwell states:

... I take an elegy to be a funeral lamentation or funeral song for something one cared about. The "Spanish Elegies" are not "political" but my private insistence that a terrible death happened that should not be forgotten. ... But the pictures are also general metaphors of the contrast between life and death, and their interrelations.⁴

Over the years Motherwell sustained an interest in the "Elegies" because, in his own words, "I felt that I had found an archetypal image, something that people who didn't know the title or even like abstract painting were affected by."⁵ What brought Motherwell to make such a claim? In this paper the methodology and philosophical orientation used in the creation of the *Elegy Series* will be examined to try to determine if Motherwell did indeed produce a sort of modern-day archetypal structure.

Robert Motherwell retains a rather unique position among modern artists. His eloquent articulation coupled with his rigorous academic training in philosophy thrust him to the forefront of the Abstract Expressionist movement during the 1940s and '50s. Here he assumed the role of an unofficial spokesperson. Studies under Meyer Shapiro and subsequent association with the exiled European artists residing in New York during World War II gave him a substantial historical foundation for his involvement in modern art. Such a background did not impel the artist to fabricate an intellectual philosophy of art and then endeavor

to paint accordingly; rather, the intuitive, expressive experience of painting became, for him, constantly interwoven with a modifying intellectual strain.⁶

It was from the Surrealists' principle of psychic automatism that Motherwell found his original inspiration for the *Spanish Elegies* series. Like the Surrealists, Motherwell was fascinated with the concept of tapping into the subconscious; but for him, it was not merely to unearth such things as Freudian symbols of repressed sexuality. Rather, as Jack D. Flam states in his 1983 publication on Motherwell, it was to discover "... a language that could adequately express complex physical and metaphysical realities."⁷

Following the Surrealists' methods, Motherwell used automatic "doodling" to create elementary forms which he later refined into the formal vocabulary of mammoth ovals and monolithic rectangles.⁸ These primary forms became, in turn, what Flam defined as "the basis for the nonspecific but highly charged iconography of the 'Elegies'"⁹ (Figure 3).

When asked by Max Kozloff, during an interview in 1965, what "catalyst" or "agent" brought American Abstractionists from a state of imitation to that of mature expression, he cited the "principle of Surrealist Automatism."¹⁰ Yet Motherwell did not totally abandon himself to this concept, which is why Flam suggests that the painter was also influenced by the vocabulary of geometric shape and limited color scheme found in the De Stijl group.¹¹ Therefore, it seems that the shapes found in the *Elegy* series vacillate between Mondrian's cool, hard-edged designs and van Gogh's emotional, turbulent brushstrokes (Figure 4). This combination of rational and expressionist means of representation is the corollary of Motherwell's continual endeavor to achieve a balance between intellect and intuition, between structure and spontaneity. In fact, after he had created the basic forms for his first "Elegy" through automatic drawing, he consciously revised them until he instinctively sensed that he had abstracted the underlying framework which would adequately express the struggle between life and death.

In the *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, Motherwell communicated this conflict through polar opposites, the stark chromatic scheme being the most obvious. The tendency of the black figures to dominate the canvas is held at bay by the perfect balance of the white background. Thus, the "Elegies" are seldom referred to as "black" paintings, but are perceived as a combination of forms created by sharp contrasts. Likewise, the tension between the sensuous, undulating ovals and the static, angular verticals is never broken. Motherwell did not allow the opposing shapes to overshadow one another, just as he would not allow the white to bleed into the black. Bleeding might have softened the edges or would have created substantial gray areas. As a result of the restrictions, the canvas has too much tension to be considered inert, but is also too stable to be considered active. Like a dammed up stream, it evokes both

movement and pause simultaneously without compromising either.

In 1944, four years after he had begun to paint professionally, Motherwell spoke of the problems facing the new generation of American artists. He stated that every epoch has both "temporal" and "eternal" values and that it is the mission of each artist to extract only those values that "... persist in reality in any (time, in any place) ... like the confronting of death."¹² Motherwell argued that it is not the "abstractness" of modern artwork that tends to alienate the artist from the rest of society, but this "rejection, almost in toto, of the (temporal) values of the bourgeois."¹³ In portraying "eternal" values, the true artist cannot afford to be blinded by the superficial and outmoded components of his own environment, but must break free of them to experience the deeper concerns of the "spiritual" life in modern terms. It is only with fresh insight that Motherwell could develop an authentic visual vocabulary which would adequately express in universal terms the personal tension he found in the confrontation of death.

Motherwell acknowledged his belief in the existence of universal structures of communication that were, in his words, "... found in the interaction of the body-mind and the external world."¹⁴ This belief, which had caused him to use psychic automatism in his works, contains striking parallels to the concept of mythic structure introduced by the teachings of his contemporary, the noted sociologist Claude Levi-Strauss. Both men were greatly influenced by Jungian theory, especially the idea that archetypes are transferred by common racial experiences into the unconscious of the individual. Levi-Strauss further taught that "... the purpose of myth is to provide a ... model capable of overcoming contradictions."¹⁵ That is, in myth polar opposites often exist side by side. Motherwell, in painting with both intuition and intellect, structure and spontaneity, as well by utilizing opposing formal qualities and color schemes, brought these opposites together and thus fulfilled the function Levi-Strauss assigned to myth.

During the early Forties, when the Abstract Expressionists were emerging as a cohesive movement, Levi-Strauss was teaching at the University in Exile in New York City, later known as the New School for Social Research. In one of his later publications he stated, "When the mind is left to commune with itself and no longer has to come to terms with objects, it is in a sense reduced to imitating itself as object."¹⁶ This concept was employed by Levi-Strauss to explain the similarities between the structure of many myths and fables from diverse cultures and during different epochs. He proposed that the similar structures exist not in the tale but in the mind of the teller.¹⁷

According to this Straussian reasoning, by eliminating the traditional "object" as subject matter in his "Elegies," Motherwell perhaps sought to confront the structure of his own mind. If this is so, then his endeavors to represent "eternal values" through motifs abstracted from automatic sketching were actually efforts to communicate universal metaphors through the structural language of the mind.

Both men believed that this "language" could only be apprehended through indirect means. Motherwell, in discussing the perfect mode of painting, stated:

... it is close to mindlessness, or to pure essence, with nothing between your beingness and the external world. As though your beingness was being transmitted without intervention; ... it is more what you unconsciously know than what you think.¹⁸

A blueprint of the mind's structure could not be discovered through intellectual pursuit. If anything, mentally searching for it prevented any trace of the "language" from surfacing. As Levi-Strauss stated, "... although the possibility cannot be excluded that the speaker who created and transmits myths may become aware of their structure and mode of operation, this cannot occur as a normal thing, but only partially and intermittently."¹⁹ Hence, Motherwell, in order to become a myth-painter of Levi-Strauss' definition, was once more confronted with two extremes: mental awareness of a universal language of the mind, and the need to become oblivious to that awareness in order to make use of the structure.

Just as myths are often retold with only slight variations to the story, Motherwell repainted the composition of *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* over 160 times with only slight alterations. The motivating factor behind his compulsion in reworking this iconography has been a subject of frequent speculation by modern scholars. Motherwell's own explanation is outlined in a letter to his friend and biographer, Frank O'Hara:

... it is really an effort to find out what is the essence, what is magical, what is radiant in a theme, what is not. Because any work of art is very complex and if one feels that there is something very good in it, it is at the same time often not so clear what it is that is good.²⁰

Levi-Strauss saw the repetition of a single motif with only slight variations as an essential component of mythic structure. He believed that it was only through the retelling of a story that eventually its "essence" would emerge. Therefore, he stated, "... since mythological thought has no interest in definite beginnings or endings, it never develops any theme to completion. There is always something left unfinished."²¹ The myth defies obsolescence because it remains open-ended. The nonessential details of the story will change as temporal values in society change, but the core will remain the same, shaped by the structure of the mind.

Robert Motherwell searched for a universal language which would adequately express eternal values by continually reworking a formal vocabulary derived from psychic automatism. The "Elegies" remained open-ended for so long because they allowed Motherwell to believe he might momentarily transcend his own temporality and tenuously grasp the eternal.²² By assuming a structural language of the mind in the *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, Robert Motherwell attained an enduring presence that might allow his work, like other myths, to defy obsolescence.

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- 1 Robert Motherwell and Harold Rosenberg, *Possibilities I*, Sept. 1947.
- 2 "At Five in the Afternoon" is the constant refrain of Part One of Garcia Lorca's 221-line poem *Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias* who died in the bull ring. For a publication of the poem see H. H. Arnason, *Robert Motherwell* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1982) 118-122.
- 3 In his essay entitled "Spanish Themes," Pete Rohowsky writes "... Motherwell explained that he later changed the name of the painting to *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* because 'someone would occasionally come up to me and say—I saw a most marvelous picture by you ... what was the name? Something to do with cocktails?'" Peter S. Rohowsky, "Spanish Themes," *Robert Motherwell: Recent Works*, Exhibition Catalogue (Princeton Art Museum, Princeton, N.J., 1973) 37.
- 4 Stephanie Terenzio, *Robert Motherwell and Black*, Exhibition Catalogue (Storrs, Connecticut: The William Benton Museum of Art, 1980) 127.
- 5 Motherwell goes on to say "... when the question of a title came up, I felt that the image made it my really first public painting, and I wanted something that would connect with a large public theme. Spain had been significant for me. It was the beginning of my political consciousness, of the realization that the world could, after all, regress." Phil Patton, "Robert Motherwell: The Mellowing of an Angry Young Man," *Art News*, March 1982:73.
- 6 Motherwell states "Everything I have ever written was about painting, and after the fact of painting. I have never made a program and then painted it. I have always painted first, and then, for whatever reason, tried to find out what I was painting in words." Barbara Catoir, "The Artist as a 'Walking Eye': Questions for Robert Motherwell," *Pantheon* July/September 1980:290.
- 7 Jack D. Flam, *Robert Motherwell* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983) 25.
- 8 Robert C. Hobbs states "The quality of monumentality in the (forms) comes more from the internal relations of part to part than the actual size of the works themselves." Robert C. Hobbs, *Robert Motherwell*, Exhibition Catalogue (Dusseldorf, Germany, 1976) 32.
- 9 Flam 20.
- 10 Motherwell continues "... a plastic automatism, a kind of 'doodling' that fundamentally respected the French tradition, that is the Impressionist, Cubist and Fauve tradition, of the picture plane, of color, etc. ... To put it another way, if one is interested in abstract art, and starts *a priori* to make an abstraction, the human mind seems to be monotonous and limited: one makes squares or circles or crosses or triangles. Basic, rudimentary geometric forms. Now, supposing you wanted to make an abstract picture ... but at the same time you wanted an abstract picture as rich as nature. The only known means of doing it is through the various modes of automatism. The main means we picked up were linear, which again, can most accurately be described as doodling. And, as Abstract Expressionism progressed, many people didn't understand that this was the core of it. They thought other things were, and the doodles were often added afterwards, to 'look' Abstract Expressionist." Max Kozloff, "An Interview with Robert Motherwell," *Art Forum*, September 1965:33-37.
- 11 Flam 19. Motherwell himself alludes to the Flatness of the composition by stating that he could never envision the "Elegies" from the side, that is to say, in three-dimensional space. Natalie Edgar, "The Satisfaction of Robert Motherwell," *Art News*, October 1965:39.
- 12 The Lecture, entitled "The Modern Painter's World," is reprinted in its entirety in Barbara Rose, ed., *Readings in American Art Since 1900* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968) 133.
- 13 Rose 131.
- 14 Frank O'Hara, *Robert Motherwell: With Selections from the Artist's Writings* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1965) 37.
- 15 Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *Journal of American Folklore*, October/December 1955:443.
- 16 Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969) 1.0.
- 17 For a more complete discussion of this theory see Levi-Strauss, "Myth" 428-444.
- 18 Flam 23.
- 19 Levi-Strauss, *Raw* 11.
- 20 Catoir 286.
- 21 Levi-Strauss, *Raw* 6.
- 22 In 1980 Rizzoli published a monograph which documented the tedious step-by-step process of creating the final "Elegy" of the series. E. A. Carmean, Robert Bigelow, John E. Scofield, *Robert Motherwell: Reconciliation Elegy* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980).

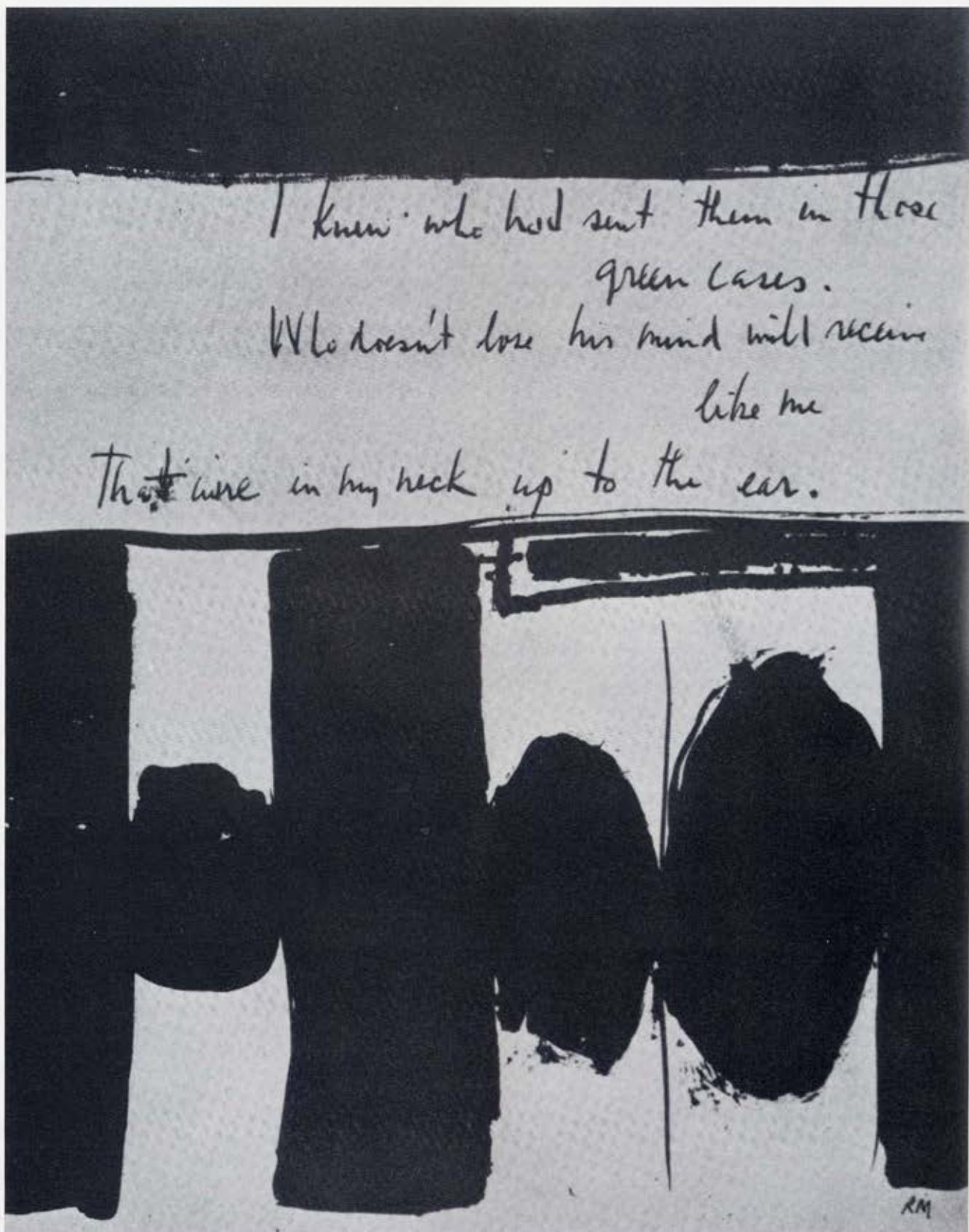


Figure 1. Robert Motherwell, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 1*, 1948, india ink on rag paper (14½" x 11"), Artist's Collection.

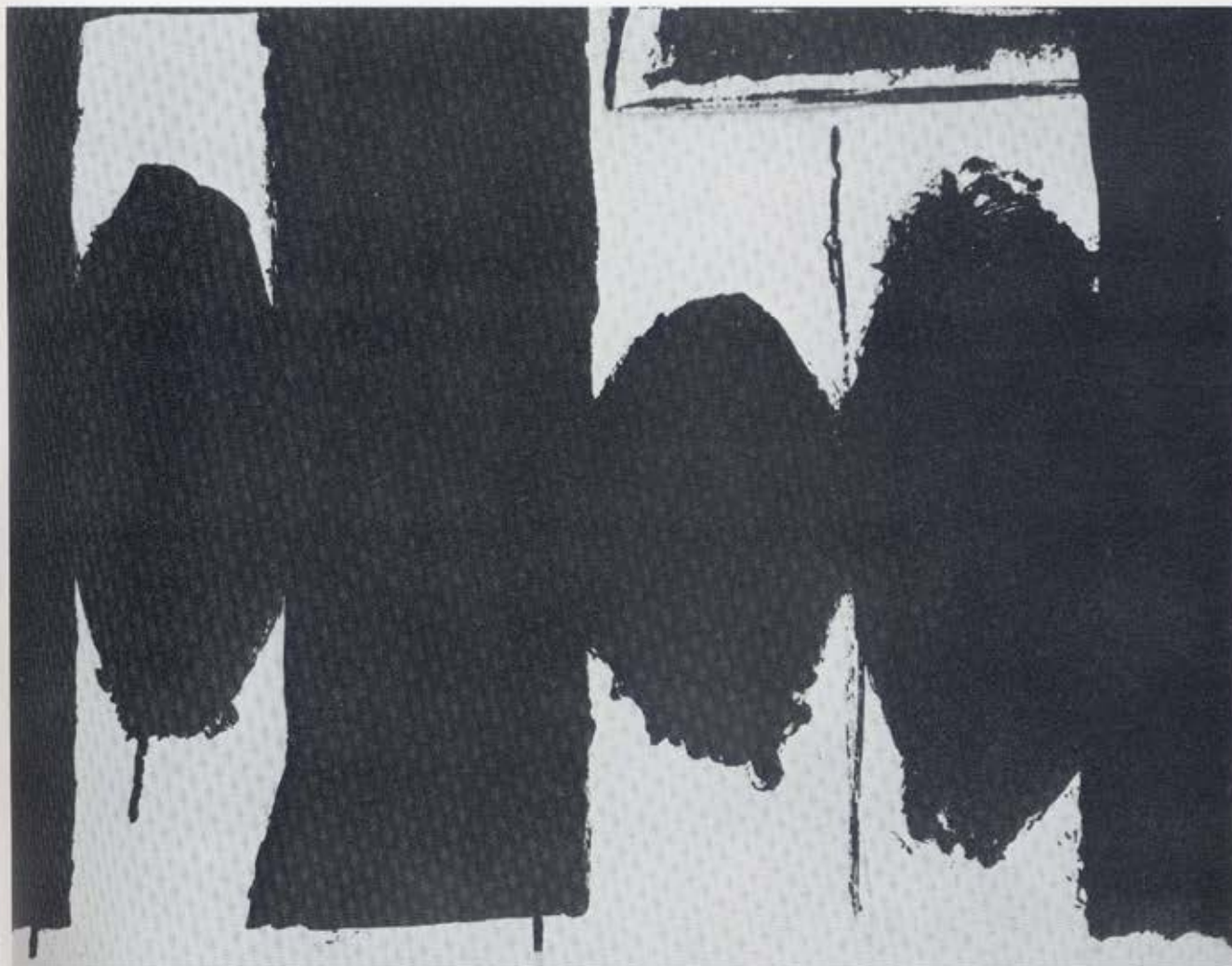


Figure 2. Robert Motherwell, *At Five in the Afternoon*, 1949, casein on board (15" x 20"), Collection of Helen Frankenthaler, New York.

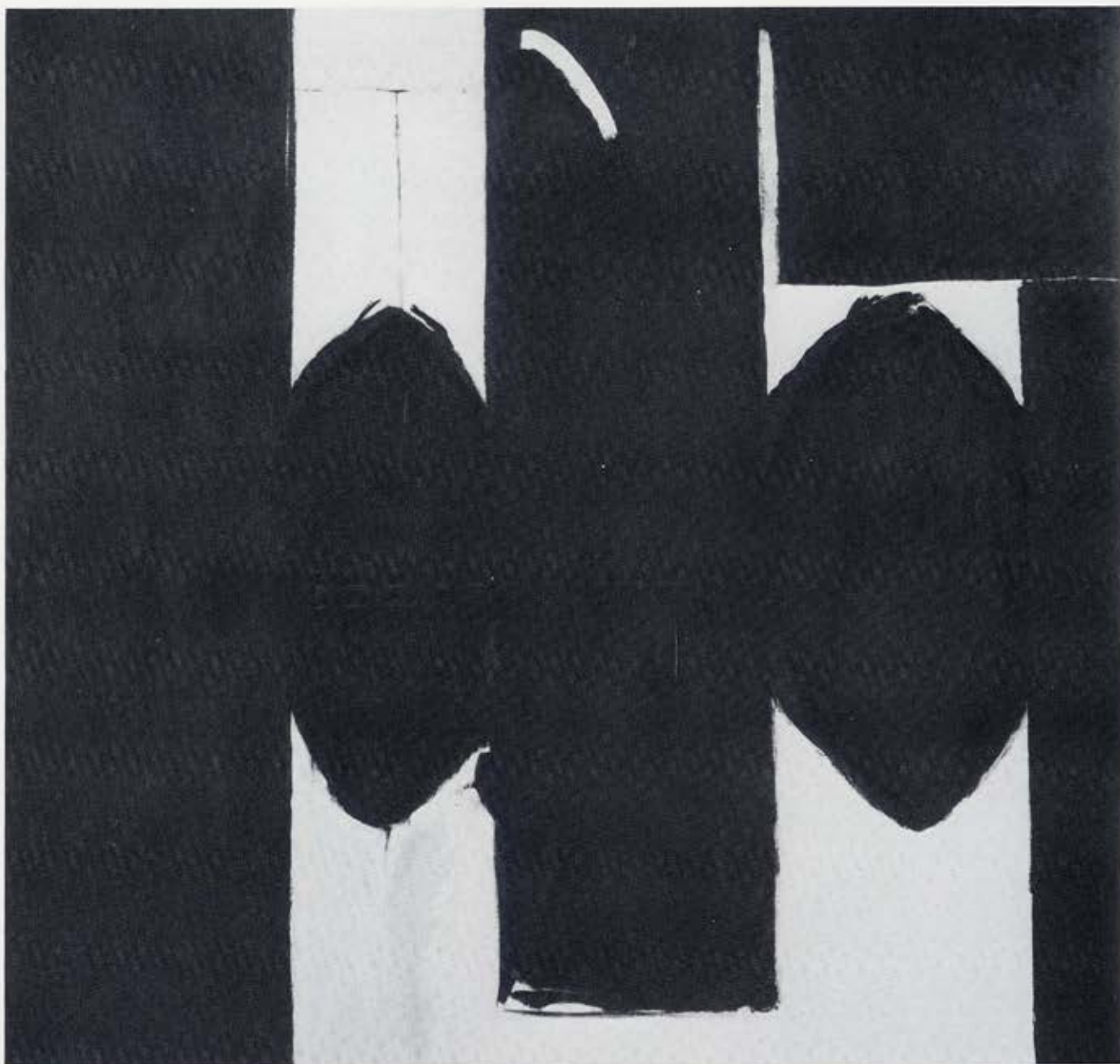


Figure 3. Robert Motherwell, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 55*, 1955-60, oil on canvas (70" x 76 $\frac{1}{8}$ "), Contemporary Collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

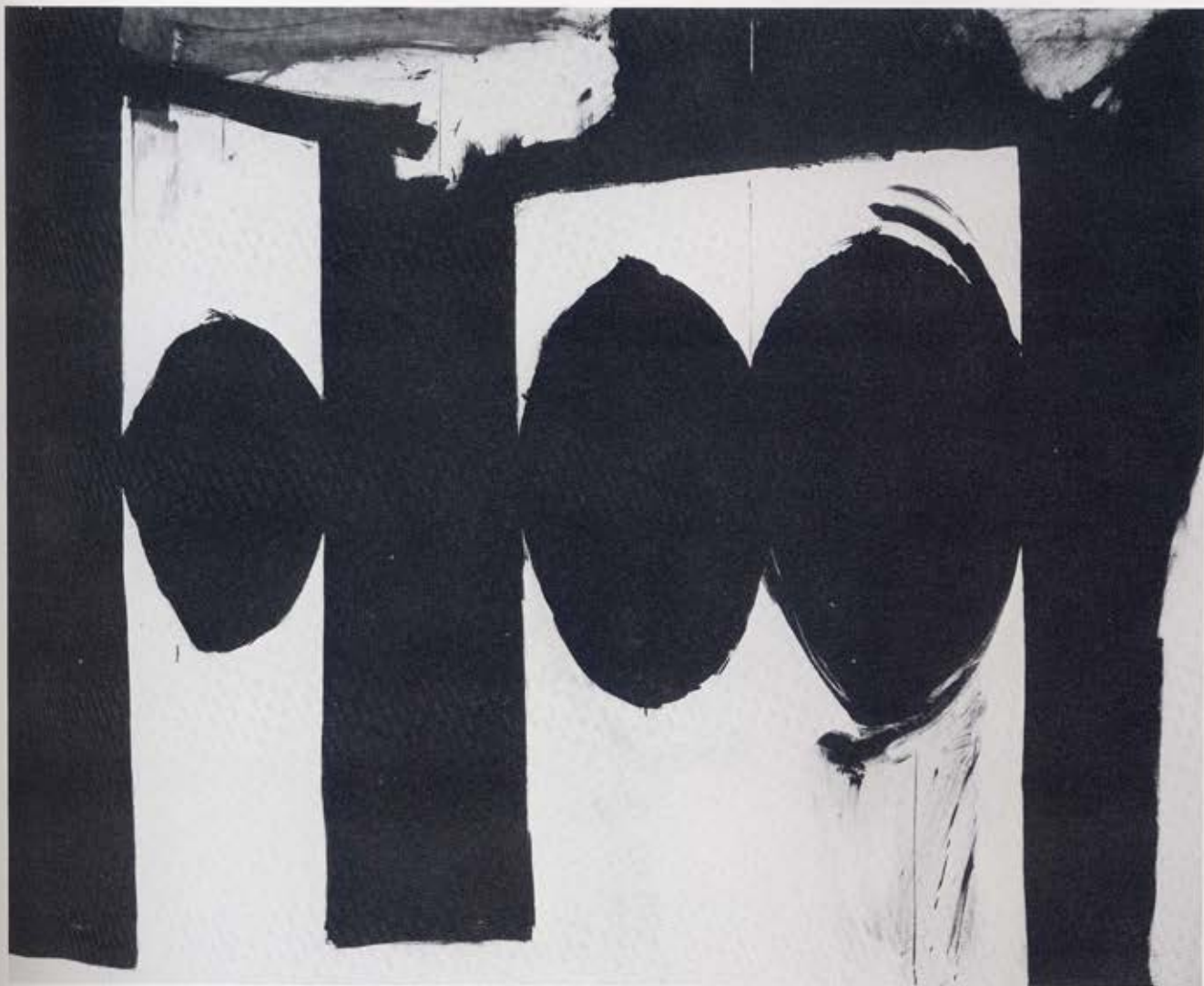


Figure 4. Robert Motherwell, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 54*, 1957-1961, oil on canvas (70" x 90¼"), Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.