

# Nuancing the Pure: The Marks of Rothko

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*The historical period that the avant-garde shared with modernism is over. That seems an obvious fact. What makes it more than a journalistic one is a conception of the discourse that has brought it to a close. This is a complex of cultural practices, among them a demythologizing criticism and a truly postmodernist art, both of them acting now to void the basic propositions of modernism, to liquidate them by exposing their fictitious condition. It is thus from a strange new perspective that we look back on the modernist origin and watch it splintering into endless replication.*

Rosalind Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde'<sup>1</sup>

*There is no passion in nature so demoniacally impatient as that of him, who shuddering on the edge of a precipice, thus meditates a plunge. To indulge for a moment, in any attempt at thought, is to be inevitably lost; for reflection but urges us to forbear, and therefore it is, I say, that we cannot ... Examine these and similar actions as we will, we shall find them resulting solely from the spirit of the Perverse.*

Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Imp of the Perverse'<sup>2</sup>

Like the 'modernist myth' of originality analysed by Rosalind Krauss, the notion of purity has fallen into disrepute among art historians in recent years. It may be, however, that demythologising criticism of the kind advocated by Krauss tends to miss the mark of the purity that it aims to invalidate or 'void'. One manifestation of the 'new perspective' on modernism heralded by Krauss is Mark Cheetham's *The Rhetoric of Purity*. Similarly claiming an approach to art history informed by postmodernist and deconstructive thought, the argument of Cheetham's book is that an essentialist model of purity constitutes one of the 'basic propositions' of modernist abstraction in the twentieth century. As with Krauss, it is the critical power of postmodern discursivity that in this account brings to a close the dominating force of the notion of purity in art, at the same time exposing it as another modernist myth. And yet, is this perspective as strange or as new as it declares itself to

be—or as free of the purity it claims to have superseded? Was purity and its relation to modernist abstraction so straightforward? I suggest, on the contrary, that if we consider the ambivalent articulation of the 'pure' and the 'aesthetic' in Kant's thought and in a post-Kantian aesthetic tradition, we see something like a shadow-play occurring between the 'pure' and the 'impure' with regard to modern art and aesthetics. This co-implication of purity and impurity also marks the history of abstraction. The treatment of colour in Mark Rothko's 'signature paintings' is examined here not only for its instantiation of what one might call the necessary perversity of aesthetic purity, but also in order to call into question the value accorded to the discursive over the non-discursive in contemporary art criticism, which too often entails a forgetting of the painting of modernist painting. Looking at these works, we see a marking of differences that derives its force from a 'pure' nuancing of colour, a nuancing that isolates what we might call—now more than ever—the stain of the painterly.

How does such an approximation of pure and impure take place? Let us consider, briefly and schematically, some ways in which notions of purity and impurity may be tied to art and aesthetics. An 'aesthetic of purity' is said to motivate a work of art, a movement, a manner. A judgment is said to be 'purely aesthetic' or 'aesthetically pure'. In each of these cases it is not easy to determine which of these terms being linked delimits the other. Some contingency or resistance between them—the possibility of a purity that is not aesthetic, the possibility of an aesthetic that is not pure—is intimated by their conjunction. These possibilities can be taken together: it is only in so far as it is not pure, not purely pure, that the aesthetic is purely aesthetic; it is its irreducible difference from 'pure' purity—from moral or some other nonaesthetic purity—that makes the aesthetic purely aesthetic. As soon as the pure can be divided in this way, as soon as there is more than one purity, the pure ceases to be absolutely pure. When one speaks of the pure presence of a colour or a painting, or of the pure response it elicits, a certain corruption of the pure has already taken place—through the delimitation of the aesthetic. A similar approximation occurs when, conversely, the opposition of pure and impure divides the field of the aesthetic. If we were to describe a style of art as absolutely impure, it would be purely impure and therefore not absolutely impure. We can see that the impure cannot be thought without the pure, and vice versa: an aesthetic of purity implies a contamination of the purity that underwrites it; an art of contamination remains involved in the pure, cannot do without it, indeed draws from and is drawn by it.

For a more concrete indication of this approximation of aesthetic purity and impurity, there is—ironically enough—no better place to look than *The Rhetoric of Purity*. This study focuses on Gauguin, Sérusier and, primarily, Mondrian and Kandinsky, as key figures in the history of a paradigmatically ‘essentialist’ abstract painting, defined by its search for purity in art. According to Cheetham, the *telos* of purity ‘powered the initiation of abstract painting to a very considerable, if not exclusive extent’,<sup>3</sup> finding its frame of reference in what is seen to be an ultimately Platonist conception of truth as essence, immaterial, perfect, and absolute. The turn to abstraction in modernist painting would in this way constitute art’s apology (in Plato’s sense) for art before a tradition condemning it as inherently inimical to truth. Modernist abstraction would be the means by which art seeks to mime the nonmimetic truth (the ‘pure’ truth) of the essentialist tradition, repeating its devaluation of semblance in pursuit of ‘the static perfection of the absolute’.<sup>4</sup> The notion of purity, Cheetham writes, represents ‘quite literally a way to close down the material practice of all art’.<sup>5</sup>

Among the multitude of signs that here attest to the pervasive power of the notion of purity in modernist abstract painting are Gauguin’s practice of painting from memory and use of intense, non-naturalistic colours, the exclusion of the feminine implied in Mondrian’s figure of the hermaphrodite as well as his reduced palette and reliance on orthogonals, and the ‘binary’ contrasts and ‘curative’ apocalyptic references seen to be operative in the work of Kandinsky. A postscript on Paul Klee, however, detects in his work a ‘plastic discursiveness’ seen to represent an ‘edifying rejection’ of the rhetoric of purity and the silencing of discourse that apparently goes with it.<sup>6</sup> Klee thus furnishes the point of articulation between the two opposed rhetorics at issue in this book, outlined in the following terms:

A postmodern, rhetorical investigation is in fact a much needed antidote to the perennially seductive appeal to purity in art and society.<sup>7</sup>

Cheetham’s polemic evidently involves a reassertion of the edifying value of art and the submission of the judgment of art to moral and cultural criteria. In effect, postmodern impurity issues a corrective to modern purity:

My interest in and critique of purity in abstract painting has arisen within what I would call the postmodern preoccupation with impurity.... Postmodernism’s relentless discursivity saves it from transcendence and grants it the ongoing potential for important social and historical critique.<sup>8</sup> [emphasis added]

What is striking, reading Cheetham's account, is its blind perpetuation of the logic of purification that it is apparently contesting. One might almost say that in this book the impure is the pure and the pure is the impure. The more impure art is, the more edifying it will be; conversely, the pure in art is understood to be 'unsavoury', a disease requiring an 'antidote'. The reason it does so is that it assumes a straightforward opposition between the terms which are taken to be alternatives, with the preferability of an inherently impure discursivity being advocated.<sup>9</sup> Yet it is surely not simply a matter of eradicating the purity that contaminates art; the fact that Cheetham's argument turns back on itself betrays this difficulty. A further point to note is how far the model of purity being summoned here in relation to art rests primarily on the hypostatization of a purely essentialist Platonism—which mutates into an 'aesthetic ideology' seeking to make good a Platonic hostility to art—and to ask whether this is sufficient for an examination of the notion of purity and how it acts upon the modern tradition in art. From this perspective, the triumph of an aesthetic of impurity is, perhaps, a foregone conclusion. It is also significant that the model of aesthetic purity under consideration scarcely encounters its Kantian and post-Kantian inflections and the difference they mark in instituting a modern aesthetic tradition—a tradition in which a certain autonomy and purity is accorded the aesthetic as such and in which it is not simply truth that is in question.

An adequate account of the ways in which notions of the aesthetic and the pure are articulated in Kant's critical philosophy is hardly possible here. It may be useful, nevertheless, to consider the movement of both terms as they are deployed in Kant's text and their part in opening up a modern thinking of art and judgment. Pure and aesthetic though this judgment may be, the necessary uncertainty which marks the thinking of art in this tradition leaves little promise of an unchanging and absolute truth.

Even though the word 'pure' (*rein*)<sup>10</sup> abounds in Kant's writing, there is an inconsistency in its usage that is less apparent in the use of related terms like '*a priori*', 'transcendental', and 'absolute'. The word is sometimes used to mean 'original'; more often, it carries a sense of negation, of the mere, of being or doing without: it is 'not mixed with anything extraneous'; it is 'devoid of ...'. In particular it frequently indicates an absence of empirical content—Kant in this manner isolates 'pure' intuition from the sensations that provide the matter of sensible knowledge; similarly, it is its non-cognitive, disinterested character that makes pure aesthetic pleasure pure. Yet it is also possible to find

references to 'pure empiricism' in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>11</sup> What is evident is the mobility of the word in Kant's usage, at times seeming to serve as a kind of writer's tic or filler, without definite content or 'essence'—yet acting not so much as an empty signifier than as a signifier of emptying, or (to use Samuel Beckett's word) of lessness.

The 'Transcendental Aesthetic' with which Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* begins deals with the power of sensibility to be receptive to matter (sensation) and to impose on it the 'pure' forms of time (the inner sense) and space (the outer sense). Its place at the opening of the course of Kant's enquiry, and the transcendental privilege that marks this place, in this way assigns an irreducible priority to the aesthetic. It is furthermore the transcendental status of the aesthetic that blocks any possibility of acceding to knowledge of things in themselves through 'intellectual' intuition; in this way, the place of the aesthetic opens up a fundamental division between the powers of (aesthetic) sensibility and (logical) understanding, entailing the necessity of what Howard Caygill calls a 'balancing act'<sup>12</sup> as Kant attempts to articulate their different yet complementary functions in the system of knowledge that the *Critique* seeks to secure. It is the imagination that in effect performs this balancing act in Kant's text: uniquely placed in partaking of both the receptivity of sensibility and the spontaneity of the understanding, the imagination is able to mediate between these two incomensurable powers, allowing the sensible and the intelligible to communicate. In Kant's account of schematism, which deals with precisely this difficulty, the imagination is said to produce a schema (or monogram) by way of 'an image for a concept', with the difference that the schema preconditions and exceeds the restrictive concretion of the empirical image: it is merely thought. Schematism is—

an art [*eine Kunst*] concealed in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly ever likely to have open to our gaze. This much only we can assert: the image is a product of the empirical faculty of reproductive imagination; the schema of sensible concepts, such as of figures in space, is a product and, as it were, a monogram, of pure *a priori* imagination, through which, and in accordance with which, images themselves first become possible.<sup>13</sup>

This prefiguring art of schematism, required in judgment, is arguably pivotal to the entire architectonic of reason envisaged by Kant (of which the *Critique of Pure Reason* would be the outline). Kant's recurrent allusions to the monogram, in particular, point to an ambivalence with regard to this power of the imagination—the risk

that, in introducing an ultimately aesthetic excess into the order of reason, it compromises the integrity of that very order.<sup>14</sup>

In the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* Kant returns to the question of judgment and the 'peculiar' principle that guides 'those judgments, called aesthetic, which concern the beautiful and the sublime in nature or in art'.<sup>15</sup> In the third *Critique*, the aesthetic is no longer considered in terms of its contribution to knowledge and the determinant judgments which, in applying concepts to particulars, would constitute such knowledge. Aesthetic judgment produces no knowledge; it is not determinant but reflective in moving from the singular to the general. Its peculiarity lies in the fact that the judging subject need only consult a subjective feeling in making the judgment; yet for all its subjective character, aesthetic judgment does not take place without the singular offering of a sensible impression. The meaning of the term 'aesthetic' is again transformed at the point when, in judgments of taste, what 'pleases' is not the agreeability of sensations as such, but the form of given sensations—their 'shape' or 'play'.<sup>16</sup> The dis-interestedness of pure aesthetic pleasure thus marks a certain autonomy or freedom of judgment in the midst of the sensible. This autonomy, where the 'free play' of a purely productive imagination is tied to the self-regulative power of reflective judgment, is also vital to Kant's account of fine art, which must be free and offer the 'pleasure of reflection',<sup>17</sup> and to his account of genius, an exemplary talent which requires

the ability to exhibit aesthetic ideas ... a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e. no concept, can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it.<sup>18</sup>

The aesthetic idea, Kant goes on to suggest, would be nothing less than the counterpart, or 'pendant', of the rational idea.<sup>19</sup>

Without elaborating on the exorbitant privilege that comes to be attached to art and aesthetics in the modern philosophical tradition after Kant, we should recognise that a certain autonomisation of art and the fragmentation of experience that accompanies it are consistently at issue in this tradition. Notwithstanding the privilege that it accords to nature over art in its exposition of aesthetic judgment in the work of Adorno, Greenberg, Fried, and Lyotard, among others, Kantian thought remains decisive in setting up questions that bear on the experimentation—and particularly the abstraction—that marks modern art. What takes places with Kant and Hegel, and in their wake, is then not only an aestheticisation—more or less qualified—of philosophical thinking but with it a turn in art towards experimentation, critical reflection and

speculation. The former does not simply amount to a contamination of philosophy by art, any more than the latter is reducible to a process of purification. Both partake in reflection and experimentation.

A figure that is strikingly uncertain with regard to purity in Kant's text is colour, and in particular mixed colour:

sensations of color as well as of tone claim to deserve ... being considered beautiful only insofar as they are pure ... mixed colors do not enjoy this privilege, precisely because, since they are not simple, we lack a standard for judging whether we should call them pure or impure.<sup>20</sup>

The liminal status of colour here raises the question of why, in *The Rhetoric of Purity*, discursivity should be presented as the exclusive or primary alternative to aesthetic purity, especially when this book concerns painting—it almost seems that any non-discursive marking condemns itself, *a priori*, to purity. It is true that Kant's distinction between the possible beauty of pure colours and the doubtful purity of mixed colours loses its pertinence in Hegel's *Aesthetics*, where the exclusion of the merely sensory is not immediately at stake and where the 'magic of the pure appearance of colour' is invoked.<sup>21</sup> Colour is admitted into purity in Hegel's account: it is not that impurity has been admitted into the aesthetic but rather that the delimitation of aesthetic purity has accommodated the materiality of painting. Even so, it is precisely this modern mobility of purity and with it a certain aestheticisation of the pure, evident in the case of colour, that is missing from Cheetham's account.

This absence appears most problematic in Cheetham's study when it is argued that the perennial seduction of aesthetic purity continues 'cyclically' after the European abstraction of Mondrian and Kandinsky, returning in the 'transcendental aspirations of Abstract Expressionism—only to be countered by the impurities of Pop'.<sup>22</sup> How does colour figure in this account, bearing in mind Kant's precarious distinction of pure and nonpure colours? Discussing the use of colour in Pop Art, Roland Barthes writes:

Pop art's colours are ... subject to a style. Pop colour is openly chemical; it aggressively refers to the artifice of chemistry ... And if we admit that, in the plastic domain, colour is ordinarily the site of pulsion, these acrylics, these flat primaries, these lacquers, in short *these colours which are never shades, since nuance is banished from them*, seek to cut short desire, emotion: we might say, at the limit, that they have a moral meaning, or at least that they rely on a certain frustration.<sup>23</sup> [italics added]

### *Literature and Aesthetics*

Barthes in this passage reverses the 'cycle' of purity and impurity proposed by Cheetham, suggesting a different possibility: that Pop Art can be read not as the impure counterpoint to Abstract Expressionism, but rather as the moment at which chromatic purification implies a detachment—not unlike a Kantian disinterestedness, perhaps—that is at once moral and aesthetic in character and which is decisive in elevating Pop to the status of art. What then of the colours, the nuances that sometimes are shades, the nuances which, according to Barthes, were eliminated by Pop—and in particular, what of those paintings of Rothko's that seem to eliminate everything but this nuancing of colour? This is not to say that they are the impure counterpoint to Pop Art; it is rather to show that aesthetic impurity cuts both ways.

Let us recall three remarks of Rothko's concerning the place of colour in his painting. The first seems to disqualify in advance the relevance of colour, and abstraction in general, from his work:

I'm not interested in relations of color or form ... I'm not an abstractionist.... And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point.<sup>24</sup>

The second, from undated working notes, appears to reject colourism, but not the importance of colours:

I use colors that have already been experienced through the light of day ... my colors are not colors that are laboratory tools which are isolated from all accidentals or impurities so that they have a specified identity or purity.<sup>25</sup>

The third, from discussion following a talk given at the Pratt Institute in 1958, concerns colour and line:

People have asked me if I was involved in color. Yes, that's all there is, but I am not against line. I don't use it because it would have detracted from the clarity of what I had to say ... In a way my paintings are very exact, but in that exactitude there is a shimmer ... in weighing the edges to introduce a less rigorous, play element.<sup>26</sup>

How are these statements to be reconciled with one other—and with the evidence of the paintings? How would they be reconciled, for example, with paintings titled *Orange and Yellow*, *Orange and Red on Red*, *Green and Tangerine on Red*, *Red and Violet over Red*, *Green on Blue*? The sheer limpidity of these titles poses a kind of riddle—a point which we will return to. It is necessary first of all, however, to think about some of the techniques Rothko used in painting—an aspect of his work of which he said little—and about the particular disposition of colour which characterises his work.

An essay on Rothko's technique by Dana Cranmer focuses on his manipulation of the physical components of paint mixtures in his painting, and particularly the thinning of paint. Rothko often used oil paint in combination with synthetic paints, including house-paint, sometimes with the addition of unbound powdered pigments and whole eggs.<sup>27</sup> Paint films differing with respect to their material components and consistency were applied layer upon layer, with both the number of layers and the drying time between applications subject to variation. The practice of diluting paint with solvent allowed Rothko to transfer to oil painting effects and techniques derived from his extensive work in watercolour. Rothko would add so much solvent to his paint formula, Cranmer writes,

that the effect of the binding element in the paint mixture was compromised; the pigment particles were almost disassociated from the paint film, barely clinging to the surface. Rothko ignored the limits of physical coherence to achieve translucency ... Light penetrated the attenuated paint film, striking the individual pigment particles ... Physically, these surfaces are extremely delicate if not ephemeral.<sup>28</sup>

Rothko further refined this effect of translucency by applying layers of egg white in between layers of paint—engendering a further 'disassociation' of layers—a traditional technique alluded to in a fifteenth-century handbook and used by Poussin.<sup>29</sup>

According to the art critic Thomas Hess, it was Rothko who, among his contemporaries, initiated the procedure of thinning oil paint, a procedure also adopted by Jackson Pollock and later taken up by Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis.<sup>30</sup> This thinning of paint can have the effect of 'staining' the canvas. In Greenberg's formulation, in making the colour coincident with the canvas, staining tends to be a statement of the painting's flatness. Yet this interpretation fails to gauge the effect of staining in Rothko's painting, where the paint is thinned to considerably varying degrees, which, combined with its layered application, opens up the possibility of variations in tone, chromatic intensity and depth. An assertion of the surface is in general tempered by greater or smaller variations in hue and saturation (for which the other technical term is purity) which continue to conjure effects of pictorial depth and volume and in particular a discontinuous disposition of light, sometimes appearing 'translucent', sometimes matte, sometimes both at once. This treatment of painting materials and the techniques of disassociation, combination, and superimposition it involves, results neither in a Kantian purity of colour nor in the chromatic 'fusion' that Hegel invokes.<sup>31</sup> It partakes of both orientations,

mixing what does not mix and 'disassociating' what should cohere. The same curious logic applies to Rothko's meticulous attention (despite his disclaimers) to the volatility of colour relationships, a volatility which extends beyond the picture's edge. In preparation for an exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1961, Rothko issued the following specifications:

Walls should be made considerably off-white with umber and warmed by a little red. If the walls are too white, they are also fighting against the pictures which turn greenish because of the predominance of red in the pictures.<sup>32</sup>

An analogous separation and non-separation of elements characterises the chromatic disposition of the paintings themselves. In *The Ochre* (1954), a stark difference between orange and pale yellow is framed by a less apparent difference between the orange of the lower rectangular area and the weaker or thinner orange that frames and (perhaps) underlies both zones. At first glance this painting could appear to present a rectangular yellow zone over an orange field. The stark difference of orange and yellow is supplemented by a more elusive difference—a difference of consistency or complexion—between orange and orange. The former difference seems almost irreducible; the latter is delicate. The painting might in this way display the 'kinship and contrast' among colours of which Wittgenstein writes. But it is also more complicated than this, since the lower orange area is marked by barely perceptible divisions and, on closer scrutiny, the yellow as well is by no means chromatically uniform or even in regard to the handling of the paint. Traces of what appears to be an orange underlayer show where the yellow has been less thickly applied. In this way the painting tends to turn into an ensemble of slight differences. How do these 'minor' differences interact with the 'major' difference? Does one difference detract from another, or does the picture in fact present their nonassimilable co-existence? This is one place, perhaps, where a 'play element' enters Rothko's painting—as if the work were designed to lure the spectator, one difference camouflaging another difference—or the series of differences constituting the work—in this way both masking and revealing the difference of the similar.

In the works mentioned above varying complexions of what could be called pure and impure differences co-exist, in each case setting a 'pure' colour with and against one or more 'nonpure' or secondary tone. What I am calling Rothko's signature paintings consistently elaborate such a movement between starkly contrasted areas and intervals in which differences of colour or tone are minimal, barely

visible. We will consider now how the relative indeterminacy of nuance in Rothko's painting also enacts the ambivalence with which the motif of purity bears on the tradition of modernist abstract painting.

If this play of tones is an aspect of Rothko's painting that strikes the viewer, it may be because, as Michel Butor points out, these paintings retain an elusive resemblance to Mondrian's. As with Mondrian, there is a recurrence of a format that is typically recognisable, yet which invariably varies from painting to painting. What is striking about the format in question is the extent to which it deviates from Mondrian's while appearing to follow from it, the extent to which Rothko seems literally to dissolve or half-dissolve the pictorial order of Mondrian's work. Apart from the evident difference in chromatic and tonal range, this dissolution occurs in the blurring of borders, in the elimination of dividing lines and squares, and in the repeated 'Jacob's ladder' format in Rothko's painting that, Butor suggests, looks like a close-up detail of a Mondrian grid.<sup>33</sup> Rothko discolours, crops and blurs a pattern that, at the least, recalls the pattern of Mondrian's painting. The pattern of Rothko's painting, which never appears as such, is (like Mondrian's) the remainder of a process of elimination. For Butor, it is as if painting has been 'bathed': Rothko's blurring and tonal differences 'empty' and 'silence' the field of the picture even more than Mondrian's clearly-defined compositions. From this perspective, Rothko not only continues Mondrian's work of elimination, but goes further; the scene his work presents is one of purification and judgment.<sup>34</sup>

Yet the complexity of the paintings, with their painterly handling, veils of paint, and tonal sophistication, also resists Butor's reading. It is this complexity that also makes it difficult to incorporate Rothko's painting into the tradition of colourism or to align it with the flatness that would be the motif of a Greenbergian formalism. We can recall the differences by which Rothko distinguishes his colours from the 'laboratory tools' of colourism: their lack of purity, isolation, and identity, their debt to 'experience'. And yet in so far as Rothko's paintings consist in nothing other than chromatic movements which interfere with any such identity or purity, they take to an extreme the work of elimination that would be a recurrent motif of the modernist tradition in the wake of Kant. In this sense Rothko abstracts from the impurity of 'experience' in such a way that all that remains of it is pure colour (this Rothko concedes: 'yes, that's all there is'). Here, then, a contamination of the 'pure' is coincident with an abstraction of the 'impure'; it is this paradoxical movement that gives these paintings both their recognisability (as 'Rothkos') and their peculiar lack of

'specified identity'. Rothko writes elsewhere of an art that must 'pulverise' the 'familiar identity of things'.<sup>35</sup>

Such a demand perhaps finds an echo in Lyotard's analysis of nuance as that which escapes any form of chromatic coding. Here, in the essay 'After the Sublime', Lyotard is also concerned with timbre in music:

Nuance and timbre are scarcely perceptible differences between sounds or colours which are otherwise identical in terms of the determination of their physical parameters ... Within the tiny space occupied by a note or a colour in the sound- or colour-continuum, which corresponds to the identity card for the note or the colour, timbre or nuance introduce a sort of infinity, the indeterminacy of the harmonics within the frame determined by this identity. Nuance or timbre are the distress and despair of the exact division and thus the clear composition of sounds and colors according to graded scales and harmonic temperaments ... The matter I'm talking about is 'immaterial', anobjectable, because it can only 'take place' or find its occasion at the price of suspending [the] active powers of the mind.<sup>36</sup>

One might object that here Lyotard has already circumscribed the limits of nuance. How otherwise is it possible to discern these 'scarcely perceptible differences'—to identify them? Difference, here as elsewhere, cannot be thought without some identity, just as, in Rothko's painting, nuancing takes place through a certain chromatic economy of kinship and contrast, continuity and discontinuity, occurring in an identifiable work—and between other, likewise identifiable works. In this sense the paintings consist not so much in colour pure and simple as in a decomposition or seduction of colour. The slight differences they exhibit closely approximate the 'ungraspable' differences of nuance as Lyotard describes them here. The non-cognitive condition necessary to what Lyotard calls a 'passibility' to nuance is also relevant here.<sup>37</sup> Referring to the suspension of the active powers of the mind that this passibility demands, Lyotard evidently follows Kant's distinction between aesthetic judgment and objective, cognitive judgment; at the same time, by taking nuance as a 'presence' that is simultaneously material and immaterial, Lyotard complicates the purity of the Kantian distinction. We could also say that when Rothko demands a 'pure response' to his work,<sup>38</sup> and when he prefers to speak of its communication of 'basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on'<sup>39</sup>—rather than viewing it in formal, chromatic or even aesthetic terms, this insistence remains indebted to the modern aesthetic tradition. In the same way, Rothko's refusal of colourism

accords with the restrictions Kant imposes on the extent to which colour can contribute to pure aesthetic judgment. More particularly, Lyotard's evocation of nuance and passibility leaves painting open to precisely the emotions that Rothko insists on. The emotion of art is also what Barthes, when he speaks of nuance, seeks to defend; and emotion is of course the particular character of sublime feeling—also called a 'negative pleasure'—as Kant qualifies it in the *Critique of Judgment*.<sup>40</sup>

For Lyotard, what is at stake in the purity and the disinterestedness that Kant demands of aesthetic judgment or aesthetic experience is this relatively pure or empty state of passibility to nuance, which makes possible a nuancing of different modes of thought and feeling. This passibility—which recalls the 'negation of attention' by which Kant characterises philosophical abstraction—would be the necessary precondition, or propaedeutic, for discernment and differentiation in general. Regardless of whether such disinterestedness or passibility occurs, it is the degree zero of critical reflection. The optimal surface for the art of judgment would, in this sense, be 'blank'; in less absolute terms, judgment demands a certain aesthetic suspension of time in time, a fold in time discontinuous with 'countable' time and yet never absolutely outside it.<sup>41</sup> Lyotard's revision of Kant's thinking of aesthetic judgment perhaps runs the risk of mystic aestheticism, as Alain Badiou has suggested. Even so (and here, perhaps, Lyotard is close to Kant and Wittgenstein), the 'mystic' element in Lyotard's thought, if we accept this designation, nevertheless contributes to a rigorous elaboration of what is at stake in aesthetic purity—that is, the minimal yet always excessive condition of a critical sensitivity to differences. In contrast to the model of purity constructed by Cheetham, Lyotard accents the specificity of aesthetic purity with respect to modernity in a way that attests to its force and its demand.

At the end of the essay 'After the Sublime', Lyotard suggests that in the order of thought, a difference analogous to that of nuance in painting makes itself felt with words. Perhaps recalling the structure of iterability and alteration which in Derrida's thought opens writing—and the mark in general—to alterity,<sup>42</sup> Lyotard intimates a way of thinking past any simple distinction that places 'discursivity' apart from—or above—a non-discursive realm that is purely or merely aesthetic. Looking at *Orange and Red on Red* (1957), we see, and read, the difference of the nuance and the difference of the word, and the differential interval between word and nuance. Could it not be said that the same applies not only to other paintings by Rothko with less marked plays on repetition in their titles, but to any painting and the

title it bears? No doubt, and yet the singularity of Rothko's signature is that in a sense the work to which it is most often tied does nothing more than multiply this nuancing. To the extent that Rothko's paintings eliminate from painting everything but this nuancing, to the extent that they consist 'purely' in this movement of difference and repetition, their singularity is to mark it as a general condition of painting. Taking Lyotard's view of nuance as at once material and immaterial, pure and impure, Rothko's work would figure as the limit-case of a painting dedicated purely to this law of nuance—and to the nuancing of 'pure' painting.

Returning to Cheetham's *The Rhetoric of Purity*, we can say that it shows a facet of the motif of purity in modern art when it claims:

The state of purity envisioned by abstract painting in this tradition is profoundly conservative in the sense that it remembers an ultimate past authority very like the complete unity of Plato's Forms, and because it strictly curtails any further change.<sup>43</sup>

Following Cheetham's line of argument, one might speak of an endemic essentialism at work in a statement like the following made by Rothko, writing in *Tiger's Eye* in 1949:

The progression of a painter's work, as it travels in time from point to point, will be toward clarity: toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, between the idea and the observer.<sup>44</sup>

Yet, as I have attempted to show, this statement, and the manner of its bearing on Rothko's work, also points in other directions. With regard to the clarity which is or should be the destiny of a painter's work, we can recall a later allusion to clarity, made nearly a decade after the statement in *Tiger's Eye*: the 'clarity' mentioned in Rothko's comments at the Pratt Institute cited earlier, on the nature of his 'involvement' in colour. At issue on this occasion is the use of line which 'would have detracted from the clarity of what I had to say'. Vestigial colour and an elimination or obsolescence of line are now traits of paintings which are 'very exact ... in weighing the edges', paintings where a 'shimmer' or 'play element' co-exists with a certain 'exactitude'. Rothko's attempt to articulate what takes place in his painting approaches with some precision a description of the prefiguring work of the monogram that Kant evokes, favourably and unfavourably, when signalling an art of judgment. It is as if these paintings were designed to mark precisely the 'manifold variations' of that indeterminate, shadowy or floating form, that 'blurred sketch' emanating from the Kantian imagination, sometimes working in a 'pure' capacity, sometimes drawing from

'diverse experiences'. I will conclude with Barthes' writing about Cy Twombly's work, and yet perhaps also about Rothko's painting and the particular idea towards which it travels.

The truth of the red is in the smear ... Ideas (in the Platonic sense) are not shiny, metallic figures in conceptual corsets, but somewhat shaky maculations, tenuous blemishes on a vague background.<sup>45</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Rosalind Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde', in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass., 1986, p.170.
- 2 Edgar Allan Poe, *Selected Writings*, Cambridge, Mass., 1956, pp.228–29.
- 3 Mark A. Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting*, Cambridge, 1991, pp.xi–xii .
- 4 Cheetham, p.138.
- 5 Cheetham, p.xiii.
- 6 Cheetham, pp.140, 143.
- 7 Cheetham, p.xiii.
- 8 Cheetham, p.140.
- 9 Cheetham, p.xvi.
- 10 See Howard Caygill's discussion of the different uses of this word in *A Kant Dictionary*, Oxford, 1995, pp.341–42.
- 11 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* [1787], trans. Norman Kemp Smith, London, 1986, pp.424–25, 427, hereinafter referred to as Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.
- 12 See Caygill, p.363.
- 13 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp.182–83.
- 14 The monogram features in the *Transcendental Dialectic*, this time as a product of the reproductive (empirical) imagination. Kant writes: 'The products of the imagination are of an entirely different nature [in comparison to the ideals of reason and the regulative archetypes they provide]; no-one can explain or give an intelligible concept of them; each is a kind of monogram, a mere set of particular qualities, determined by no assignable rule, and forming rather a blurred sketch drawn from diverse experiences than a determinate image—a representation such as painters and physiognomists profess to carry around in their heads, and which they treat as being an incommunicable shadowy image [*Schattenbild*] of their creations or even of their critical judgments' (*Critique of Pure Reason*, p.487). Kant also refers to the architectonic use of the monogram or outline in the realisation of an idea, an idea 'hidden in reason' and to which the schema is 'seldom adequate' (pp.653–55). As Jacob Rogozinski notes, the 'normal idea' of beauty in the the *Critique of Judgment* perhaps

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- owes something to Kant's earlier characterisations of the monogram: it displays the imagination in its reproductive capacity but is rule-giving with respect to judgments of beauty: 'This normal idea is not derived from proportions taken from experience as definite rules: rather it is according to this idea that rules for forming estimates first become possible. It is an intermediate between all singular intuitions of individuals, with their manifold variations—a floating image for the whole genus' (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* [1790], trans. J. M. Meredith, Oxford, 1952, pp.78–79). The Kantian monogram is discussed in Jacob Rogozinski, *Kanten—Esquisses kantiennes*, Paris, 1986, pp.9–10.
- 15 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. S. Pluhar, Indianapolis, 1987, p.6. 'Peculiar' is the word used in Meredith's translation (p.5).
  - 16 Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (trans. Pluhar), p.71.
  - 17 Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (trans. Pluhar), pp.171, 173.
  - 18 Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (trans. Pluhar), p.182.
  - 19 Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (trans. Pluhar), p.182.
  - 20 Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (trans. Pluhar), 70–71.
  - 21 G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* [1835], trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford, 1975, vol. 2, p.848. This phrase occurs in reference to *sfumato* (an effect associated with Rothko's treatment of colour) which Hegel calls 'the magical effect of colouring'.
  - 22 Cheetham, p.xvi.
  - 23 Roland Barthes, 'That Old Thing, Art', in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard, Oxford, 1985, pp.203–204.
  - 24 Reported in Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists*, New York, 1957, pp.93–94; cited in James Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, Chicago, 1993, p.309.
  - 25 Mark Rothko, undated working notes, in Clifford Ross, ed., *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics*, New York, 1990, p.173.
  - 26 Rothko, quoted in Breslin, p.395.
  - 27 Dana Cranmer, 'Painting Materials and Techniques of Mark Rothko: Consequences of an Unorthodox Approach', in *Mark Rothko 1903–1970* (exh. cat.), London, The Tate Gallery, 1986, pp.191–93.
  - 28 Cranmer, p.192.
  - 29 Cranmer, p.193.
  - 30 Thomas Hess, 'Editorial: Mark Rothko, 1903–1970', in *Art News* 69.2 (1970): 67.
  - 31 Hegel, p.848.
  - 32 Mark Rothko, 'Suggestions regarding installation of his paintings at the Whitechapel Gallery, 1961', in 'Selected Statements by Mark Rothko', in *Mark Rothko 1903–1970*, p.88.
  - 33 See Michel Butor, 'Les mosquées de New York ou l'art de Mark Rothko', *Répertoire III*, Paris:, pp.362–63.

- 34 Butor, p.355.
- 35 Mark Rothko, 'The Romantics Were Prompted', *Possibilities*, No. 1, 1947/8, in 'Selected Statements by Mark Rothko', in *Mark Rothko 1903-1970*, p.84.
- 36 George Lyotard, 'After the Sublime, or the State of Aesthetics', in *The Inhuman: Reflections of Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Stanford, p.140.
- 37 Lyotard, p.141.
- 38 Cited in Breslin, p.331.
- 39 Reported in Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists*, New York, 1957, p.94; cited in Breslin, *Mark Rothko*, p.309.
- 40 Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (trans. Pluhar), p.98.
- 41 On this point, see also George Lyotard, 'Nietzsche and the Inhuman', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 7 (Spring 1994): 120-21.
- 42 See, for example, 'Signature Event Context', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, pp.307-30.
- 43 Cheetham, p.138.
- 44 *Tiger's Eye* 9 (October 1949): 114; in 'Selected Statements by Mark Rothko', in *Mark Rothko 1903-1970*, p.85.
- 45 Roland Barthes, 'The Wisdom of Art', in *The Responsibility of Forms*, p.180.