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Robert Rosenblum, Modern Painting and the Northern Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko

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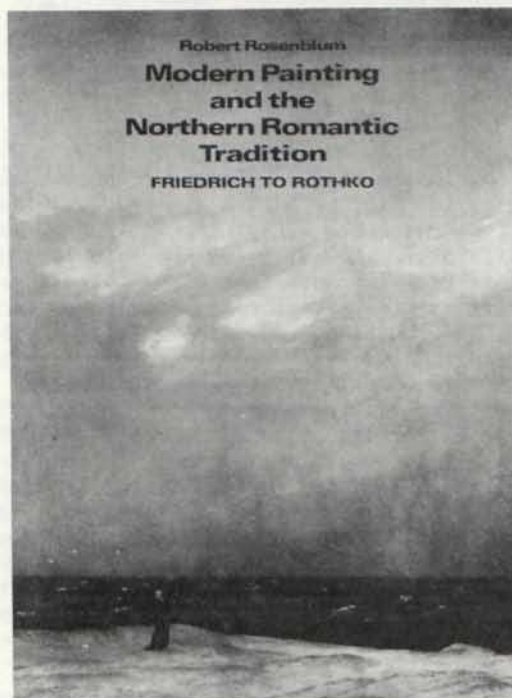

Robert Rosenblum. **Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition:** Friedrich to Rothko. New York: Harper & Row, 1975. Pp. 240, illus. $17.50.

Reviewed by W. J. T. Mitchell

Friends and foes of Romanticism have always agreed on at least one thing: the importance of a displaced, sublimated, or (to use T. E. Hulme's word) "spilt" religious sensibility as a quality of Romantic art. Shelley may start out as an atheist, Blake as an iconoclast, Turner as a godless naturalist, but we still feel that the work of all these artists is inseparable from some form of religious quest, some attempt to probe ultimate mysteries. One of the most difficult problems in the interpretation of Romantic art has been to clarify the precise relation between secular and sacred, supernatural and natural, the infinite and finite which informs the work of particular artists. An easy way out of this dilemma is to divide nineteenth century art into two antithetical columns labelled "sacred" and "secular," give them geographical locations ("Northern" and "Southern"), and announce that you have revealed a "new structure of the history of modern art":

> The gist of my ambitious argument is this: that there is an important alternate reading of the history of modern art which might well supplement the orthodox one that has as its almost exclusive locus Paris, from David and Delacroix to Matisse and Picasso. My own reading is based . . . on the impact of certain problems of modern cultural history, and most particularly the religious dilemmas posed in the Romantic movement, upon the combination of subject, feeling and structure shared by a long tradition of artists working mainly in Northern Europe and the United States. (Rosenblum, p. 7)

Robert Rosenblum is too sophisticated, however, to think that this claim will pass unchallenged, and he carries the art of the defensive preface to new heights, anticipating all the objections a reviewer might make. He apologizes for "the many subtle and perhaps unsubtle historical distortions I have had to make for the sake of internal logic. Perhaps the most incautious of these is my far too simple-minded polarization between French and non-French art, as if all French painters were concerned primarily, if not exclusively, with art-for-art's sake, and all Northern European painters with its opposite extremes" (8). Rosenblum even warns us against the beguiling effect of his own prestige as an art historian, and of the Slade Lectures out of which this book developed, by confessing that he will be "deeply distressed . . . if my own structure of what I now see as a cohesive tradition in modern art were to be codified by innocent readers into a fixed historical truth" (8).

These caveats should be taken very seriously by all readers, innocent or not, and especially by unwary Blake scholars who will be delighted to see the crucial position given to Blake in Rosenblum's "cohesive tradition." The fact is that it is neither cohesive nor a tradition in any recognizably historical sense. The continuity of Northern Romantic art which Rosenblum constructs is riddled with adventitious associations and what Erwin Panofsky called "pseudomorphoses"--"the accidental appearance at different moments in the history of art of works whose close formal analogies falsify the fact that their meaning is totally different" (10). The Southern or "Parisian" or "orthodox" tradition which provides Rosenblum with a handy straw-man throughout is almost equally mysterious. Rosemblum tells us in his preface that he has left the "secure foothills of facts" for the "precarious summits of ideas" (7), and so he evidently feels

no obligation to show that the alleged orthodox tradition actually exists; at least we are not graced with a single footnote, a passing allusion to an author or title, or any other mundane fact which might tell us where to find the case for this orthodox tradition presented.

Our confidence in the cohesiveness of the Paris-based "secular" tradition is hardly reinforced when we turn back to Rosenblum's earlier (and better) *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* to check his assessment of the founding father of this tradition, Jacques-Louis David. Rosenblum's reading of the *Death of Marat* is filled with the purple prose which, in his newest book, is transferred to the Northern Romantics:

> The somber and resonant void above the martyred figure creates a supernatural aura that demands a religious silence; it is the post-medieval painter's equivalent of a gold background. Similarly the Caravaggesque light emanating from a high and invisible source, saturates the bloody scene with an immateriality that metamophoses the victim of a sordid bathtub murder into an icon of a new religion. (*Transformations*, 83)

How are we to reconcile this reading of David with the supposedly secular, aesthetic, realistic tradition that stems from him?

Faced with this inconsistency, Rosenblum falls back on a secondary distinction, arguing that, while a religious aura can be found in *both* Southern and Northern painting, "yet in the Protestant North, far more than in the Catholic South, another kind of translation from the sacred to the secular took place, one in which we feel that the powers of the deity have somehow left the flesh-and-blood dramas of Christian art and have penetrated, instead, the domain of landscape" (17). The antithesis drawn here between Christian art and landscape is both exaggerated (landscape had long been part of Christian art) and beside the point. *The Death of Marat,* Goya's *Third of May* and Ingres' *Napoleon I on his Imperial Throne*--Rosenblum's main examples of Southern religious art--are not examples of the "flesh-and-blood drama of Christian art"; they may echo Christian imagery but they are not pieces of Christian art. If we assume that Rosenblum is claiming less than he says here, and simply arguing that the distinction is between Northern religious landscape and Southern religious *figure* painting ("flesh-and-blood dramas," Christian or otherwise), the problem is not eliminated. First, he will later argue that the "powers of the deity," far from having "left the flesh and blood dramas of Christian art" in Northern painting, are renewed in precisely that format in the work of Blake and Runge. Second, the implication that all Southern landscape tends to be secular, northern religious, will be undermined countless times as the book develops. Constable's views of Salisbury Cathedral will be declared "far too sunny in mood, far too picturesque in vantage point to convey any transcendental message" (30), an assertion which conflicts both with Rosenblum's thesis about Northern religious sentiment, and with all that we know about the actual intentions behind Constable's painting. (Constable's religious attitudes may be consulted in Basil Taylor's *Constable: Paintings, Drawings, and Watercolors*, London, 1973, pp. 26, 228, and 221.) Certain landscapes by the southern-based Corot will be allowed to have religious overtones, but they are "at the most . . . only implicit," whereas the religious dimensions of Friedrich's landscapes will be pronounced "explicit" (31). Yet elsewhere Rosenblum, borrowing from M. H. Abrams, will argue that the ability to implicitly present sacred feelings in the apparently secular domain is a crucial feature of the "natural supernaturalism" he finds in Northern Romanticism, and that the abandonment of explicit and traditional Christian imagery (those "flesh and blood dramas" again) is precisely what his new tradition is all about.

The problem, it should be evident, is that Rosenblum's simple polarities cannot hold the full range or complexity of Romantic and post-Romantic painting in any clear focus, and that he is forced repeatedly to shift the grounds of his distinctions in the face of overwhelming counter-evidence. Turner, for instance, is continually linked with Friedrich as a fellow "Northern Protestant artist," though all the evidence suggests that Turner was quite uninterested in the Friedrichian brand of natural Christianity which grew up in eighteenth century Germany. Contemporary accounts of Turner make it clear that he had, as Jack Lindsay points out, a "total lack of interest in religion, as if it were something so unimportant that he need not even indicate his blank unconcern" (*J. M. W. Turner--His Life and Work*, London, 1966, p. 35). Constable, whose "picturesque, sunny" landscapes are pronounced incompatible with religious feeling on one page, is restored to the Northern side of the equation on another, when his treatment of nature is compared with Gericault's. The *Raft of Medusa* is seen as an "anthropocentric" document, showing man dominating nature (35), in contrast to Northern Romantics like Constable who depict the "pathetic fallacy" in which human feelings are attributed to nature. Laying aside the obvious objection that the pathetic fallacy is an example of anthropocentrism, not an antithesis of it, we have to be a little uneasy when Constable is employed as a secular contrast to the religious Friedrich on page 30, and then is allied with him against the secular French painters on page 37.

Like most of the "great traditions" which have been foisted on the arts, Rosenblum's Northern Romantic tradition is essentially a rhetorical device used to bolster a series of value judgments--in this case a preference for any art that has pretensions to the mystical, symbolic, mysterious, or portentous, and thus provides an occasion for the metaphysical fireworks of critical profundity. A brief tour of Rosenblum's distinctions between southern and northern art quickly reveals the thread of invidious comparisons. Southern landscapes show us "nothing more than a cheerful prospect" (66), a "casually observed experience" like that of a "tourist holiday" (77). Northern landscapes, on the other hand, are always full of "deep" implications of one kind or another (except, of

course, when the Northern artist is working in a picturesque mode, which is probably about half the time). There is "no temptation to read beyond" the surface of Southern painting, unless, Rosenblum admits, it is for "some statement about perception" (73)--presumably a lower kind of message than the deep religious meanings of the Northerners. Northern paintings of children reveal "primal forces" while Southern examples of this genre are "sentimental and prettified" (87-88). Southern art is described throughout as "purely decorative, artificial, prosaic, earthbound, egotistical, concerned only with particulars" (an assertion that is undermined when Rosenblum contrasts the particularity of Van Gogh's flower paintings to the generality of the Impressionists). At its best, Southern art is concerned with close observation and empirical fidelity (a claim which could surely apply to Turner and Constable as well). Northern art, by contrast, is never characterized as "merely" this or that; it is an art which always gives us more than meets the eye, evoking floods of glittering abstractions which, as Rosenblum admits in a refreshingly humorous aside, always sound more convincing in German than English.

Art history has always advanced, it seems, by grand syntheses or dialectical schemes which are then eroded away after years of careful scholarly investigation. Wölfflin's distinctions between painterly and linear in *Principles of Art History* are perhaps the most famous example, and despite universal skepticism about his distinctions, they survive everywhere in the practical criticism and teaching of art. The question is, are Rosenblum's categories of Northern and Southern Romanticism useful as critical fictions in the same measure as were Wölfflin's? I think the answer must be a resounding no. Rosenblum's categories, unlike Wölfflin's, are never subjected to any criticism or analysis, but are thrown out as if they were self-evident. They are not firmly grounded in the concrete properties of the works of art under scrutiny, or in the intentions of the artists, but proceed through a series of "subtle and perhaps unsubtle historical distortions . . . for the sake of internal logic" (8). Substitute the word "rhetoric" for "logic" here and you get the picture. Most important, Rosenblum's distinctions do not serve to differentiate two equally valid and often intermingling currents in nineteenth century art, the complex dialectic between sacred and secular; they emerge rather as thinly veiled attempts to elevate Northern art by depreciating Southern. Perhaps this was inevitable in a book which set out to change the balance of power in art history, and to assert the value of a rival tradition. But neither the value or nature of that tradition is well-served by invidious comparisons masquerading as reasoned distinctions.

It will be important for Blake scholars in particular to be wary of the beguiling over-simplifications of Rosenblum's thesis. Blake emerges from isolation in this book (as he did on much surer grounds in Rosenblum's earlier book, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art*), to take his place as a key figure in the continuity of Romantic and Modern painting. This is heady wine for Blakeans who are used to seeing their man on the sidelines of art history, but it should be sipped with caution. Rosenblum's understanding of Blake is based on criticism which is anything but fresh (the only footnoted scholarship is Anthony Blunt's article on the *Ancient of Days* from 1938), and does little more than repeat the standard half-truths about Blake being against reason, materialism, mathematics, and in favor of imagination, spirit, and emotion. It is very intriguing to suppose that Blake belongs to a tradition that goes through Samuel Palmer to Van Gogh, but in the absence of any demonstration of historical links (Rosenblum says not a word about the Pre-Raphaelites, an astonishing omission) one must rest content with being intrigued, but unconvinced. When Rosenblum does get down to specifics with Blake he presents a far-fetched comparison with Barnett Newman on the grounds that both of them "rebelled against geometry" (209). We are told that "Blake's *Ancient of Days*, like his *Newton* of 1795, is in effect, an evil force, imposing trivial clarity in a sublime universe" (210). Surely our understanding of Blake has gotten beyond the naive allegorizing which sees Newton and Urizen as either trivial or evil forces in Blake's universe. "Heroic folly" or "Sublime Error" seem to be much more accurate descriptions of Blake's attitude toward the activities of these characters, and the images of them which he created.

It would be pleasant to conclude that Rosenblum is, like Urizen, a Heroic Fool trying to reduce the world to two principles, and that he has conducted what Harold Bloom would call a "strong misreading" of Romantic and Modern art, killing off his symbolic father (the orthodox tradition of Paris-based art history) in order to assert a new vision. Unfortunately this is not the case. The father is never named or confronted in any concrete way, and the misreadings are consistently weak. The main value of this book is that is does provide an encyclopedic survey of a great many artists, some of whom *might* belong to a continuous tradition. In particular, it demonstrates that Friedrich's contribution to modern art is probably much greater than has been realized. If Rosenblum had contented himself with documenting Friedrich's influence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries he probably would have produced a much sounder, if more cautious book. As a contribution to our understanding of English Romantic art (and Blake in particular) in relation to the modern tradition, it has much less to recommend it. The task of clarifying the interaction of sacred and secular themes in Romantic and Modern art remains to be done.