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Blind Windows: Leopardi with Rothko

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This is why the idyll is the greatest paradox in poetry, just as tragic painting is the greatest paradox in painting. (Lukács [1910] 2010, 124)

This essay examines the way in which an Italian poem of the nineteenth century created one of the most famous *places* in the Italian literary imagination: a Romantic landscape turned inside out, where there is literally *nothing* to see. A comparative study of paintings by one of the most representative artists of the so-called “abstract sublime,” Mark Rothko, offers a new visual-arts framework for analysing and interpreting the poetics of this place. The poem is Giacomo Leopardi’s idyll *The Infinite (L’Infinito)*:

Sempre caro mi fu quest’ermo colle,
e questa siepe, che da tanta parte
dell’ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude.
Ma sedendo e mirando, interminati
spazi di là da quella, e sovrumani
silenzi, e profondissima quiete
io nel pensier mi fingo; ove per poco
il cor non si spaura. E come il vento
odo stormir tra queste piante, io quello
infinito silenzio a questa voce
vo comparando: e mi sovvien l’eterno,
e le morte stagioni, e la presente
e viva, e il suon di lei. Così tra questa
immensità s’annega il pensier mio:
e il naufragar m’è dolce in questo mare.

(Always dear to me was this remote hill / and this hedge, which from so great a part / of the ultimate horizon excludes the sight. / But sitting and gazing, termless / spaces beyond it, and superhuman / silences, and the profoundest quiet / I form in my thoughts; where nearly / the heart gives in to fear. And as the wind / I hear rustling through these plants, I that / infinite silence to this voice / go comparing: and I recall the eternal, / and the dead seasons, and the present / and living one, and the sound of it. So, in this / immensity drowns my thought: / and being shipwrecked is sweet to me in this sea).¹

Leopardi wrote *The Infinite* in the spring 1819. He was almost 21 years old, finally attaining the legal age to leave the oppressive environment of his family home and his little village, but his escape plans were foiled and he was on the brink of suicide. In his intellectual diary, the *Zibaldone* (1817-1832), a note from this period records the fantasy of throwing himself into his garden's pool, to experience the panic of drowning and "a brief moment of contentment" in returning unharmed to the surface (Leopardi 2015, 80). In the same period, Leopardi suffered from an eye complaint that forced him to spend most of the day in a dark room, making it difficult for him to read and write: his "sketches" (*disegni*, as he used to call his literary plans) accumulated in his head so hastily and copiously that memory could not hold on to them, he could only watch them fade away (Leopardi 1998, 77). He later noted that this temporary partial blindness also changed him from poet to "professional philosopher" (*filosofo di professione*) (2015, 116), contemplating truth in darkness—Pascal's *profession* of a "lack of clarity" (*manque de clarté*) in his *Pensées* (Sel. 260) may come to mind. As we shall see, the sense of an oppressive environment and the poet's temporary blindness are both crucial to understanding the poetics of place in *The Infinite*.

Shipwreck of a Sonnet

The Infinite is the first idyll of the *Canti* (1831-1835), Leopardi's main collection of lyrical verse. The para-etymology of the idyll as a "little picture" (*eidyllion*) was still popular in the Romantic age (Böschstein-Schäfer 1967, 2–4), and Leopardi wanted to bring drama and passion into his pictures (2015, 1003). The prose *Idyllen* (1756-1772) by Salomon Gessner, who was also a landscape painter, had been translated into *terza rima* in 1818, and Leopardi knew that *The Infinite* could not be simply a variation on the classic pastoral genre, with its idealized landscapes, where nature sings and love rules. It was not his first attempt at the genre, but it signaled a longing for a new form. At first sight, this "little poem" (*poemetto*) (2015, 544) could be compared to a sonnet. In its fifteen lines, however, the distinctive features of the sonnet form tend to dissolve in the subject matter like a drawing in watercolor: measure and structure are exceeded; the hendecasyllables are "unrhymed" (*sciolti*); only the first and the last line are syntactically complete. What remains is an abstract picture with a "little sound" (*sonetto*), echoing in this single-stanza idyll through its false yet expressive etymology.

In fact, like the lyrical subject at the end of his poem, it can be argued that the possibility of a sonnet is shipwrecked in the paradox of a *tragic* idyll. Whilst Nietzsche noted that the modern "longing for the idyll" (*Sehnsucht zum Idyll*) reduced tragedy to *opera* ([1872] 1999, 90), the comparison at the heart of *The Infinite* performs a drama of picture and sound that we could

¹ This is a literal English rendition. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

now see as a *film*, recasting the experience of a poetic form under the aesthetic conditions of the world created by cinema—but a film about what?

Alistair Elliot included *The Infinite* in his collection of *Italian Landscape Poems* (1993, 71), with the cautionary note that, for Leopardi, a landscape is above all “a place to stimulate thought” (6). However, despite the many deictics and the high location, which combines depth and distance, in this idyll we do not see much of a landscape, if we see anything at all beyond the “hedge” (*siepe*). Giorgio Agamben ([1982] 1991, 66–81) read it in the context of a Provençal “tenson of nothing” (*tenso de non-re*), as a poem about the unattainable and unspeakable *origin* of poetic language, where the poem “takes place” and transcends it “once and for all.” Poetry finds itself in the same place as philosophy, as Leopardi realized through his blindness. Giuseppe Ungaretti pointedly asked, “how can a blind man gaze?” (1974, 473, my translation). On a structural level, the “gaze” (*mira*) is destined to drown in the final word “sea” (*mare*), which had served as a rich rhyme for “love” (*amare*) since a medieval poem in unrhymed hendecasyllables, *Sea of Love* (*Mare amoroso*). The actual hill is probably Mount Tabor, near Leopardi’s family home, but it could be any other place; it is just the scene of Panic self-effacement. Likewise, there is no precise indication of time. The temporal shifters move from a definite past to the present—the continuity between the two tenses is established and extended in circles by the opening adverb “always” (*sempre*), which seems to resonate within the beginning of Lamartine’s *The Lake* (*Le Lac*, 1820),² rippling the surface of the “ocean of ages” (*océan des âges*) with the almost timeless monosyllabic verb “was” (*fu*). We can only assume that there is some degree of light (otherwise the line of the horizon would not be visible), but it could be a moonlit recollection like Leopardi’s idyll *To the Moon* (*Alla luna*), which has a similar setting and was composed around the same time; there is also a clear correspondence with a sonnet by Ugo Foscolo, *To the Evening* (*Alla sera*, 1803).

The scene is a reflective “fiction” (*mi fingo*), a countryside drama happening in the mind of a poet who cannot see much and stares out at what can only be imagined. With reference to Friedrich Schiller, whose ideas were widely discussed among the Italian Romantics, we could say that this idyll is “sentimental” (*sentimentalisch*), staging an inner drama of *reflection* in a state of *division* between the poet and nature: the sentimental poet “removes all limitations” from the subject matter, translating the idyll into an *idea*, so that the poem finds its “infinite content” (the hallmark of poetry) in a “portrayal of the absolute”, as Schiller writes ([1795] 1993, 229–230). In Leopardi’s vocabulary, “sentimental” is both philosophical and lyrical, in the manner of Petrarch’s sonnets; the absolute of the idyll becomes poetic when its treatment is *sublimissimo* (2015, 675), namely based on the contrast of materially “small objects” that are apprehended by the poet’s mind as without boundaries (899). The last line of *The Infinite* is a moment of pure *sentimental* reflection: the poet drowns in his stanza, but with the pleasurable thought of a painter always coming back to the surface unharmed.

A painting that is often compared to Leopardi’s poem is Caspar David Friedrich’s *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, dated around 1818. This comparison is instructive because it cannot be illustrative. Friedrich’s painting certainly embodies a heroic, epic view of the Romantic *sublime*, with the “wanderer” rising like a tower above the landscape and dominating the horizon with his gaze. However, Leopardi loses himself in the fog like Italo Calvino’s Marcovaldo coming out of a cinema: “he saw nothing. Absolutely nothing,” and in front of himself he projected “a never-ending film on a boundless screen” ([1963] 1997, 61). Also, the poet is neither desperate for a “shipwreck of the mind” (*naufragio della mente*), as we read in a chapter of Petrarch’s *De remediis* (1360–1366, II.54), nor does he indulge in Lucretian

² Thanks to Seth Whidden for the suggestion.

contemplation, as at the beginning of the second book of the *De rerum natura* (1–4), where the sight of a stormy sea from a safe distance appears “sweet” (*suavis*). To Leopardi’s mind, “being shipwrecked is sweet” (*naufragar m’è dolce*). In Foscolo’s epistolary novel *The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis* (1802), which is one of the many sources of *The Infinite*, Leopardi found a passage that discussed the limits of painterly representations of the “supreme, immense, inimitable nature”: confronted with a sublime landscape, the poet can only verticalize his gaze and drown in the blue sky “as though in the middle of the ocean” (Foscolo [1802] 2002, 54). The sublime escapes the representational gaze of a picture, but the poem of a “shipwreck” (*nauagion*) can *perform* its effects of terror and pleasure, as explained by the pseudo-Longinus in his *Peri hypsous* (X)³—and the poet who drowns in it can see and sing the tragic horizon of the human condition.

The comparison with a Romantic landscape painting like Friedrich’s *Wanderer* reveals the paradox of form and “longing” (*Sehnsucht, vágy*) that inhabits the idyll, a paradox that György Lukács ([1910] 2010, 111–112) exemplified in the difference between a typical landscape in Germany and in Italy: a German, northern landscape can be suffused with melancholy but remains “homely” (*heimisch*), familiar and inviting, “one can even pull one’s notebook from one’s pocket and—to the accompaniment of a nostalgic rustling of leaves—write poetic songs of longing;” a typical Italian landscape, on the other hand, is like a “composition,” something that already has a form and keeps the observer outside, close and distant at once. In Leopardi’s idyll, the hill is prosaically “dear,” but so is the hedge; the poet sits and stares, but the only landscape that he can see is in his imagination and through memory; the familiar becomes uncanny: he writes a song of longing (the idyll) and is shipwrecked through the most Italian of poetic forms (the sonnet). The epic momentum of the sublime is lost in elegy, lyricism turns to tragedy. To analyze Leopardi’s *place* in its own terms, then, we should move away from figurative associations and consider its *poetics*.

Inside Out

In a note of July 1820, Leopardi explained that an open “view of the countryside” can give a certain pleasure, but “a restricted and in some ways confined view” (*veduta ristretta e confinata*) enables the “desire” (*desiderio*) for the “unlimited and permanent in the soul” (2015, 132), which is the condition of poetry. Schiller ([1975] 1993, 204) acknowledged this condition as the “two-fold source” (*doppelte Quelle*) of sentimental poetry, which “translates” (*versetzt*) the limitations of the actual world into the forms of its infinite idea, and Leopardi similarly described it in 1828: one can see a tower in a countryside and hear a bell, he wrote, but only the way in which this vision resonates in the inner landscape of imagination can produce the pleasure and beauty of the poetic experience, which is based on a realization that “the world and its objects are in a certain respect double” (2015, 1991–1992). We could say that the poet translates the actual world and its *terms* into a language of longing—even the assonance between the words “countryside” (*campagna*) and “bell” (*campana*) only comes to light in this *double vision* of the world as language.

The structure of desire enabled by the “confined view” can be conceived as that of a *window*, a recurrent motif in Leopardi’s poetry. *The Infinite*’s first line plays antiphrastically on the opening of Petrarch’s Sonnet 65 in the *Canzoniere*, where the poet expresses his “hate” (*odio*) for the “window” (*fenestra*) through which Love shot his arrows (without killing him). This is

³ Thanks to Fabio Camilletti for the suggestion.

also a classical *topos* of the theory of painting, and Dorothea Wight's landscapes offer insightful variations on this subject. According to the influential Renaissance treatise *De pictura* (1435) by Leon Battista Alberti, the surface to be painted should be framed to function "as an open window through which the *historia* can be observed" (2011, 167). In *The Infinite*, the *historia* that is being observed is that of the poet's soul, the *experience* of the infinite becomes its subject. In his *Literary Sketches (Disegni letterari, XII)*, in a note from 1828, Leopardi precisely redefined the idyll as a poem expressing the "historical adventures of my soul" (*avventure storiche del mio animo*).

In a series of notes for an autobiographical novel drafted just before *The Infinite*, Leopardi had already evoked the "little window" (*fenestrella*) formed by the highest steps of a ladder in his garden (not far from the pool of his drowning fantasy), comparing it to the opening under the roof in Noah's ark (1995, 94). We can easily think of the single-stanza idyll by analogy with the absolute view of the sky through this "little window," which has the universal flood as its narrative frame. *Perspective* concerns inner vision, not geometric representation, as Alberti would have it. In the same passage of the autobiographical sketch, however, the poet recalled the vertiginous and frightening view from the tower of his village, rising over an immense landscape, and he described it as an "optical chamber on the infinite" (*camerottica per l'infinito*). The metaphor was being turned inside out.

As in a *camera obscura*, the "idyllic optics" (Bigongiari [1958] 1962) of *The Infinite* is inscribed in the poetic image through two main projection effects. The first effect is that the image of the projected reality is inverted horizontally, so that the sky becomes an abyss in which the poet can drown his thoughts. Secondly, and more interestingly, the reality of the projected image lies behind the poet, rather than in front of him. This second effect follows the peculiar perspective laws of memory, and childhood memories in particular. The theory of the "confined view" is explicitly derived from the pleasure that Leopardi experienced as a child "in looking at the sky through a window or doorway or *casa passatoia* as they call it" (2015, 132–133). In a note of 1818, the poet also remembered the experience of his "dark room" (*camera oscura*) in the summer nights when he was a child: only the window shutters were closed, not the pane, and in his bed, "suspended between fear and boldness", he awaited the tolls of the clock tower's bell (42). The "sweet remembering" (*dolce rimembrar*) of this childhood scene in the poem *Recollections (Le Ricordanze, 1829)*—one of the so-called "great idylls" (*grandi idilli*)—happens in the darkness of the same inner space as the "sweet shipwreck" of *The Infinite*; and in both situations, a sound wave animates an "image within" (*immagin dentro*): the poet could even shut his eyes, his body rises over the horizon from the profundities of finitude like an "optical chamber on the infinite".

Leopardi's theory of "double vision" can be further understood in conjunction with another note from 1828, where he reflects that the view into the "rooms" (*stanze*) that he can see in his walks "from the street below, through their open windows," arouses "very pleasurable sensations and beautiful images," whereas the view of the same rooms "from inside" would be uninspiring, and he concludes: "Is this not an image of human life, of its conditions, its goods and its delights?" (2015, 1993). It is certainly a condition of poetic desire. In other words, the poetic image is the result of a vision turned inside out through projection and reflection. *The Infinite* has a radical approach to this "image of human life" (*immagine della vita umana*): the window of this *stanza* is closed, but the poetic lines, like shutters, let the rhythmic sound of "the eternal" reverberate inside. As the hedge "excludes" (*esclude*) the sight of the landscape, which is literally "shut outside," the perception of distance (perspective) is precluded, and the verticality of depth is established over the stretch of the horizon. Baudelaire expressed this idea

with an illuminating paradox in his prose poem *Windows (Les Fenêtres, 1869)*: “He who looks from the outside through a window open never sees as much as he who looks through a window closed” (1997, 93).

We can say that the “little picture” of Leopardi’s first idyll functions like a *blind* window, which allows the poet’s reflection upon his inner and infinite landscape. A certain irony of fate appears in the fact that along the hedge, on the top of the hill near the poet’s family home, the first line of *The Infinite* has been inscribed in capitals, on a white marble plate, on the wall of an ex-monastery. In many ways, Leopardi’s failure of vision was a radical development of Romantic painting, which is marked by the rejection of the “sweet perspective” (*dolce prospettiva*), in the sense that the Renaissance gave to this word, namely the representation of forms on an inclined plane of reality, so that a certain distance is perceived from a single viewpoint. Alessandro Parronchi (1964) aptly connected the aesthetics of Leopardi’s hedge to Romantic painting by way of the “new theory of vision” that George Berkeley articulated in his *Essay* (1709): perspective is perception, a matter of habitual associations between sight, sound, and touch. The privileged observation point is abandoned in favor of a space that is infinite and undefinable, as in the atmospheric landscapes by J.M.W. Turner, where the subject grows smaller and drowns in the *bigger picture*. Leopardi’s perspective is a theory of reflections that shimmer on the crest of an infinite shipwreck of form in memory.

Hedge of Color

Let us imagine a possible picture of *The Infinite*: as in a northern landscape, forms float in a *sentimental* nebulousness, “their contours are gently blurred” (Lukács [1910] 2010, 111); a grey-blue sky opens wide under the horizon, inverted as in a dark room, and the earth-green hues of the hedge grow darker in the upper part. What we see is something like *Green on Blue* (1956), by Mark Rothko. Some drips of color seem to run upwards, because the artist often turned the canvas upside down while painting. As suggested by Robert Rosenblum, “Rothko, like Friedrich and Turner, places us on the threshold of those shapeless infinities discussed by the aestheticians of the Sublime” (1969, 353), but without a surrogate and privileged viewer inside the painting: the viewer is in the same place as the painter, they long for form and perform the drama of their vision from the outside, in a shared experience. A 1964 photo by Hans Namuth (Jones 1966, 33), which portrays Rothko in his studio, staring at one of his color-field paintings, could be compared with Friedrich’s *Wanderer*. Moving one step further from the visual treatment of the Romantic landscape, we can focus on Rothko’s “classic” works of the late 1950s to shed new light on the sense of place created by Leopardi’s idyll. After all, as the painter of the “abstract sublime” once famously quipped: “That chap Turner learned a lot from me” (Breslin 1993, 666). It is not necessary to try to argue that Leopardi might have learned anything from Rothko, but it can be effectively assumed that “it is the poet and philosopher who provides the community of objectives in which the artist participates” (Rothko 2004, 21).

Like Leopardi with his poem, Rothko tried to paint, as he once said, “both the finite and the infinite” (Ashton 1983, 179). As for the poet’s idyll, the painter’s world is simply composed of “a quantity of sky, a quantity of earth, and a quantity of animation” (Rothko 2006, 112), elements that can be painted but not drawn. Despite the similarities or resonances with Rothko’s classic paintings, however, one element appears particularly at odds with Leopardi’s poem: color. In *The Infinite*, nothing is described in terms of color: the hedge is neither green nor brown, the hill is bare and remote, the sky is not even mentioned—we could say that

nothingness is described as such. To the extent that it is the mark of visible reality, color is a sentimental limitation of the subject matter, and it comes to tinge the poetic structures of imagination by its pure absence, by the *expressive abstraction* of a structural “grayness” that transcends what Rothko had called “objective impressionism” (2004, 38-42). Invisible color fields reach us like sound waves from beyond the absolute line of the horizon, which is by turns excluded and expressed by the hedge.

The earliest autograph manuscript of *The Infinite* shows that the “ultimate horizon” is a variant of the previous hemistich “celestial border” (*celeste confine*). As the Italian word for “celestial” (*celeste*) also denotes a color, namely “sky-blue”, the “ultimate” variant is consistent with a choice for poetic abstraction against the material over-determinations of sight. A forged draft of the poem—unfortunately believed to be authentic for a long time, but still interesting for its clichéd imagination—replaced the hedge with a Petrarchan “green laurel” (*verde lauro*): one could think of Petrarch’s Sonnet 197, where the assonant name of the beloved muse, Laura, is whispered by the “sky-blue aura” (*aura celeste*) through the “green laurel”. Philologists would add that the verbal form “drowns” (*s’annega*) is a probable variant of “turns to black” (*se anera*) from Boiardo’s *Amorum Libri* (CIII, 10). This is all the color that we can suppose (but not see) in the poem. For comparison, we can consider the idyll *Recollections*, where the poet sits on a “green clod” (*verde zolla*) and his day-dreaming gaze wanders over the horizon between the sea and the “blue hills” (*monti azzurri*); or the fourth stanza of *The Broom* (*La ginestra*, 1836)—the last poem of the *Canti*, composed just one year before Leopardi’s death—, where the vision of *The Infinite* is staged on a volcanic landscape, probably at night but in full color, under a sky that is of the “purest blue” (*purissimo azzurro*), as real as the *desire* of the far-off stars reflected on the ocean.

In his youthful *Discourse on Romantic Poetry*, written just a few months before *The Infinite*, Leopardi explained that Romanticism tried to “transplant” (*strascinare*) poetry “from the visible to the invisible and from things to the ideas” ([1818] 2013, 115). The removal of colors in *The Infinite* corresponds to this Romantic poetics of the *invisible*, but from a different angle. In a note of 1821, Leopardi argued that colors are “beautiful” only when they “express” (*esprimono*) something, as opposed to just being applied to objects, and they can be expressive only when they exist in *harmonic* relationships, like musical sounds; however, the “immensity” (*immensità*) of our visual “habituations” is an obstacle to the perception of colors without objects, therefore to the possibility of a “pure composition” of colors in abstract yet harmonious relationships, something like a “music of colors”, as the poet writes: “Sight is the most material of all the senses, and the least suited to all that has to do with abstraction” (2015, 863). Color resists abstraction, but its absence can be used to say something, precisely, about nothingness.

Leopardi’s poetic solution in *The Infinite* consists of *translating* impressions of light into the palette of a soundscape, following a two-part structure that reminds us of a sonnet: the octet would conclude with “gives in to fear” (*si spaura*) and the caesura would double as a *volta*, so that the sestet would end with the “sound of it” (*suon di lei*). The surface of the “little picture” comes to terms with this “little sound,” only to be shipwrecked in translation as in a *camera obscura*, according to the same metaphor used by Leopardi in another note of 1821 (2015, 455–456): the sheet of paper where he composed his first idyll was, already, the place where the image of the infinite was projected, reflected, and translated into the “suprahuman” (*sovrumani*) yet not-so-foreign silences of writing—the place where the beating of the poet’s heart and the wind rustling through the plants play a concert of the human seasons, and the pen-stroke through the “celestial border” draws a contemplative hedge for the “ultimate

horizon". After all, unrhymed hendecasyllables were the meter of choice for the Italian translations of classical poems.

Translation reveals significant syntactical ambiguity. The "sound of it" can find its subject in the present and living "season" (*stagione*), but the feminine pronoun in the original Italian (*lei*) can also suggest the voice of a loved muse. Perhaps, we could think of the young woman remembered in the later poem *To Silvia* (*A Silvia*, 1828), following her death in 1818: she was only glimpsed through a window, and her song "resonated in the quiet rooms" (*sonavan le quiete stanze*) as in the restricted form of a sonnet, reaching back into the "profoundest quiet" of this single-stanza idyll. In Leopardi's autobiographical sketch of May 1819, another loved woman is evoked in a romantic dream, with a similar setting to *The Infinite*: the "view greatly longed for" (*vista già tanto desiderata*) appears at dusk, through the "home door ajar" (*porta di casa socchiusa*) alongside a "little forest of very low trees" (*selvetta d'arbori bassi bassi*), like a hedge on a declining hill (1995, 98). In fact, the indeterminacy of "the sound of it" is comparable to the vagueness of "behind it" (*di là da quella*), at the beginning of the idyll's fifth line, where there is uncertainty about whether the subject is the excluded part of the horizon or the hedge that excludes its sight. On a thematic level, the feminine pronoun can equally refer to a personified death in the idyll *et in Arcadia*: the "ultimate horizon" (*ultimo orizzonte*) is existential, it is the Horatian "ultimate line of all things" (*ultima linea rerum*) (*Epistles* I.16). The hedge confronts the poet's heart with the frightening landscape of his own finitude under the "confined view" of the idealized *feminine*, like a *screen* onto which he projects the tragic knowledge that death is always at work in the living (and loving) body but remains invisible, *sub limine*, as if obscured by all the colored things of the real world.

We should not be surprised that Leopardi's poem elicits the same "intimations of mortality" that Rothko made into an essential component of "tragic art, romantic art, etc." (2006, 125). Rothko's understanding of an abstract art that is both tragic and Romantic can be compared to what we could call Leopardi's *uncanny sublime*. "The romantics were prompted to seek exotic subjects and to travel to far off places," as the artist wrote in 1947, but they "failed to realize that, though the transcendental must involve the strange and unfamiliar, not everything strange and unfamiliar is transcendental" (2006, 58). On the one hand, Rothko uses the term "transcendental" in a Kantian sense (possibly via Clement Greenberg), implying that space and time are not "things in themselves" but "sensible forms of our intuition", as the philosopher defined them; accordingly, the "sublime" (*Erhabenes*) represents transcendental "boundlessness" in nature, where objects lose their form and senses turn to ideas (Rosenblum [1961] 1969, 353). On the other hand, the "strange and unfamiliar" element is obviously related to the Freudian "uncanny" (*Unheimliches*), thus to the return of a repressed, *homely* and haunting childhood memory: Leopardi's "screen memory" of the tower's nightly tolling is translated into the *camera obscura* of the first idyll (Camilletti 2013, 114–115), "where nearly / the heart gives in to fear".

"The familiar identity of things has to be pulverized in order to destroy the finite associations with which our society increasingly enshrouds every aspect of our environment", wrote Rothko in 1949 (2006, 59). Color is transcended in a poetics that disengages the forms of the imagined world from the "habituations" of our senses, and viewers drown in a "sea of sweetness" (*mare di dolcezza*), as Leopardi would say (2015, 17). In general, Rothko saw colors as "structural functions" of a tragic and Romantic poetics, rather than as emotional correlatives; with a Nietzschean tone of tragedy, he claimed that he wanted "to raise painting to the level of poignancy of music and poetry" (Breslin 1993, 174). In his large and unframed canvasses of the 1950s, the rational lines of drawing progressively disappear behind an immersive wall, with

a “failure of vision” that an American could have experienced in front of the Niagara Falls (DeLue 2008, 3–4). Perspective is replaced by a partition of translucent veils, *films* about viewers’ sensual experience of the world and their existential efforts to make sense of it, with the tragic *revelation* of being destined to a deeply human failure. The descriptive titles given to his classic paintings are deceptive, because they seem to imply that their subject is color and form, instead of reflection and longing. As the painter reiterated in 1956, he was “interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on,” and “if you are moved only by their color relationship, then you missed the point entirely” (2006, 119). Similarly, in his poem, Leopardi removes color to give prominence to the structural elements of its drama, creating a Romantic and tragic place.

Making a Place

In a 1943 letter to the *New York Times*, Rothko wrote that the subject of his mythological paintings was “tragic and timeless,” and against academicism he famously stated: “There is no such thing as good painting about nothing” (2006, 36)—or is there? In the 1950s, his paintings abandoned myth for *drama*, and his statement on tragic art shifted from subject to structure. In his classic paintings, as Christopher Rothko described them with reference to Aristotle’s *Poetics* (2015, 18–19), forms are suspended in a tragic tension of “pity and fear”: the surface becomes a communal ground of transcendence, a stage where viewers experience the “tragedy of the human condition” as their own. Rothko’s “tragic notion of the image”, as he clarified in his later years, is not achieved with “skull and bones” (2006, 127): it is “intimate and human” (74), abstract without losing touch with emotions, and structural without being formalistic. His first and ultimate tragic poet was Aeschylus, who enabled the chorus to express composed and moving meditations on history and existence, violence and death—mute and arresting “as in pictures” (*hos en graphais*), as we read of the sacrifice of Iphigenia in the *Agamemnon* (242; cfr. Breslin 1993, 166). The “image of human life, of its conditions”, as Leopardi noted of the windows seen from the outside and from below, is painted large and placed on the floor, revealing “the tragic irreconcilability of the basic violence which lies at the bottom of human existence and the daily life” (Breslin 1993, 358–359, 369).

We could say that the hedge in Leopardi’s first idyll functions like the tragic chorus as Schiller conceived it for *The Bride of Messina* (*Die Braut von Messina*, 1803), namely as a “living wall” (*lebendige Mauer*) that separates poetry from reality, creating a poetic place for the drama of visions and voices. This is a critical connection: around the time of *The Infinite*, Leopardi started (and left unfinished) the pastoral drama *Telesilla*. He later commented that the use of chorus in classic tragedies is the principal reason of their *charme*, because it conveys the sense of “indefiniteness” (*indefinito*) that is essential to poetic beauty, and it establishes a “connection on stage between the real world and the ideal and moral world” (2015, 1160–1162). Robert Lowell’s “imitation” of *The Infinite* (1962, 25) as a Pindaric ode seems quite apt in this context, precisely because of its choral use, and one is less surprised that he did not turn it into one of his many blank verse sonnets.

The concern with structural tragedy becomes apparent in Rothko’s understanding of the canvas as a space where the drama of vision “takes place” (2006, 144). In 1958, he was commissioned to produce a series of mural panels for the new headquarters of the Seagram distilling corporation in Manhattan, eventually destined to the Four Seasons restaurant—after all, as Leopardi maintained, “flavors” (*sapori*) can be “beautiful” more naturally than colors (2015, 863), so much so that their harmonic relations can be generalized as “taste,” and even a

shipwreck can be “sweet.” About a year into his work, in the summer of 1959, Rothko made a second trip to Europe. In Italy, he found historical sources for the sense of visual structure that he was pursuing. On the one hand, the crimson-tone range of his murals had a clear affinity with a Pompeian red. On the other hand, his pictorial vision found an “unconscious inspiration” in Michelangelo’s Laurentian Library in Florence, which he had first visited in 1950. The entrance to the Library is through a square vestibule, where a central staircase is surrounded by high facades with door-like tabernacles, each one spaced by half-recessed columns and surmounted by blind windows. After his second visit, Rothko declared that he wanted to achieve something similar with his murals, which should “make the viewers feel that they are trapped in a room where all doors and windows are bricked up” (Breslin 1993, 400). An oppressive and even *negative* view becomes an immersive and expressive structure of longing. In fact, the lower windows in Michelangelo’s vestibule are blind for structural reasons; natural light is diffused by a series of stained-glass clerestory windows, built at a later stage and placed very high, above the level of the adjacent reading room. Like the blind windows, these high stained-glass windows are not made to look outside, but to “animate” an inner space that is almost an embodiment of the experience of reading.

Rothko painted his murals and many of his classic works in a dark studio, where all but two north-facing windows were closed, so that the paintings could be seen under the even grey-blue shades of a northern light. Robert Motherwell was accurate in describing this studio as a “darkened movie set” (Breslin 1993, 3): what Rothko was painting, “with precision,” was a *film* “about nothing,” as Michelangelo Antonioni once remarked (Gilman 1962). In the end, Rothko did not see the series of murals as paintings: “I have made a place”, he claimed in 1959 (Ashton 1983, 155). Like the so-called House of the Tragic Poet in Pompeii, this is a space where the drama of a poetic shipwreck unfolds in silence “as in pictures”, resonating in a place where language is confronted with death, poetry with philosophy, blindness with double vision. Similarly, *The Infinite* is a place where one can experience the “intimate and human” nature of nothingness, because “the infinite is essentially the same as nothingness” (Leopardi 2015, 1824). A tragic northern light shines on the single stanza of the first Italian idyll of modern art, as in a studio where Romantic landscape painting is being turned inside out.

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