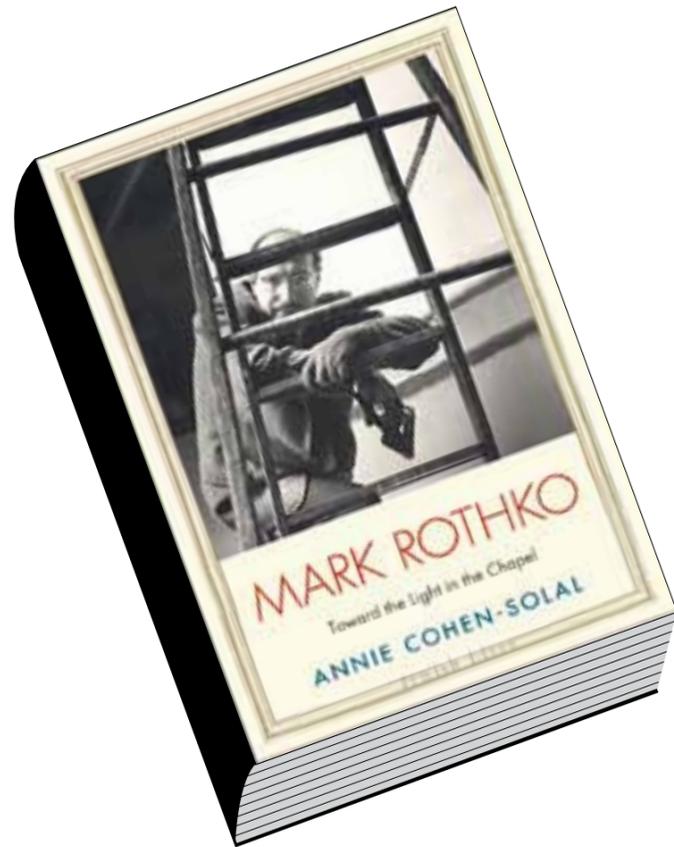


Echoes of experience

A sense of not belonging coloured an outsider's journey to the avant-garde, learns Tracey Warr



Mark Rothko: Toward the Light in the Chapel
By Annie Cohen-Solal
Yale University Press, 296pp, £18.99
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From the sorrow wrought by prejudice to envy to malice, the strong emotions that coloured Mark Rothko's life matched the depth and richness of his paintings. Annie Cohen-Solal's engrossing biography follows "the difficult identity journey" of "the avant-garde painter [and] the avant-garde Jew", re-examining his work in the historical contexts of both the pogroms in turn-of-the-century Russia and the golden age of capitalism in the US after the Second World War. In a valuable, detailed account of his life, as

well as a vivid portrait of early 20th-century Europe and America, Cohen-Solal convincingly argues that migration and exile influenced Rothko's pioneering abstract expressionist art.

He was born Marcus Rotkovich in 1903 in Dvinsk in the Russian Empire (now Latvia's second-largest city, Daugavpils), in the Pale of Settlement where some 5 million Jews were obliged to live. The youngest child of a German-speaking Jewish mother and a Lithuanian Jewish pharmacist father, he spent his early years as a Talmud Torah scholar. Jews were conscripted into the Russian army, and as Rotkovich's two elder brothers neared conscription age, their father decided to move the family to America. He went first in 1910, followed by the two young men, who crossed borders

concealed in a sledge. In 1913, 10-year-old Marcus, his mother and sister set out to join them in Portland, Oregon. Upon arrival in New York, they were given tags to wear that read: "I do not speak English."

By 1920, more than 2 million Jews fleeing Russia had entered Ellis Island's "golden door" to the US. Although Cohen-Solal's meticulous research reveals warm community support for newly arrived immigrants, the Rotkovichs lived in the poorer part of town, in marked contrast to their previous life. Marcus' father died not long after their arrival, and the boy soon shed his religious orthodoxy. At high school, indignant that Jewish pupils were excluded from the debating society, he wrote angry polemics for the school magazine. With no early training in art, he looked set instead for a career as a writer. Cohen-Solal offers a vivid picture of Marcus as a newspaper boy, standing on street corners shouting headlines about his former homeland: "Rasputin Dead! Revolution in Russia!"

In the face of domestic opposition and rising xenophobia, the US entered the First World War in 1917. In 1921, Rotkovich won a scholarship to Yale University, but he found himself doubly stigmatised as a "nebbish" Jew and a poor scholarship boy in an age when, as documents unearthed by Cohen-Solal show, the university's authorities were expressing disquiet at the high number of Jewish students. Once again, Rotkovich took to his pen, accusing Yale of valuing breeding over merit: "the whole institution is a lie and serves as a cloak of respectability for a social and athletic club". Disillusioned, "wounded by discrimination", he left without completing his degree, went to New York City and slept on relatives' sofas, doing odd jobs. Even if his indignation seems understandable, he comes across as a rather pompous young man. Friends described him as pugnacious, inherently tormented, "an inveterate crusader". "Nothing stimulated him more than a righteous fight", recalled the art historian and curator Katharine Kuh.

Six months before Rotkovich reached the US, the International Exhibition of Modern Art (known as the Armory Show) had introduced an astonished American public to avant-garde European artists including Marcel Duchamp and Georges Braque, drawing scandalised press coverage and unprecedented visitor numbers. Aged 23, Rotkovich visited a friend at the Art Students League of New York and discovered that radical, misunderstood artists were outcasts he could identify with. He attended classes and became friends with young experimental artists including Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell and Clyfford Still. He joined, argued with and left groups such as The Ten (which had nine members), The Artists' Union and The Club, and fulminated against the art world's system of privilege and prestige. Cohen-Solal's account vividly evokes the swirls and eddies of friendship, support, rivalry and resentment in this milieu.

In 1938, Rotkovich became a US citizen; in 1940, he changed his name to Mark Rothko. As Nazi troops marched across Europe, Paris ceded its place at the centre of the art world and New York began its transformation into the world capital of Modernism, bolstered by refugee artists and curators from Europe, including Piet Mondrian, Josef Albers, André Breton, Peggy Guggenheim and Max Ernst.

As Cohen-Solal documents, Rothko's developing career was inspired by Henri Matisse, Joan Miró and André Masson, and by encounters with Greek, Roman and Etruscan art on post-war trips to Europe. In 1948, he co-founded the Subjects of the Artist School, an informal, avowedly non-doctrinaire undertaking that, said one wry commentator, boasted five professors and five students. Rothko's relationships with critics and patrons were often fraught, and his first commission ended in a costly, acrimonious lawsuit. He and Gottlieb wrote to *The New York Times* decrying the critical reception afforded contemporary art, and he was one of the artists dubbed "The Irascibles", who attacked the Metropolitan Museum of Art for its lack of interest in "advanced" art. He refused to sell two works to the Whitney Museum of American Art because, he announced, he could not trust it to display them without distorting their meaning. Throughout his career, Rothko was particular about how his works were hung and lit, seeing them as immersive experiences for the viewer.

In 1958, he received a major commission for Mies van der Rohe's new Seagram Building in Manhattan. Rothko's work toured European cities and received a particularly warm reception in London, and he represented the US at the Venice Biennale. But he remained a polarising figure, and Cohen-Solal quotes from letters attacking his work, written around this time by his erstwhile friends, Still and Newman. Increasingly estranged from American capitalist values, Rothko considered buying a medieval chapel near St Ives in Cornwall to house his work. Convinced that the Seagram skyscraper's noisy, exclusive restaurant was not the right context for his paintings, he pulled out of the commission, returned the advance, and negotiated with the Tate Gallery to install the murals there instead. John and Dominique de Menil commissioned him to create pieces for a chapel in Houston, and Rothko finished these powerful, dark paintings, his last major works, in 1967. Curator Peter Selz wrote of Rothko's art: "These silent paintings with their enormous, beautiful, opaque surfaces...deal directly with human emotions, desires, relationships, for they are mirrors of our fantasies and serve as echoes of our experience."

By 1968, Rothko's health was declining, his heart disease exacerbated by heavy drinking and smoking, and in February 1970 he took his life. His children entered a 12-year legal battle with his estate's executors and the Marlborough Gallery, who would be found guilty of a conflict of interest branded "manifestly wrong and indeed shocking" by the presiding judge. Although James E. B. Breslin's 1993 volume has long been considered the standard biography, Cohen-Solal has benefited from the appearance in 2006 of two previously unpublished sets of writings by Rothko himself, *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art* and *Writings on Art*, and she has drawn on material in the archives of the Whitechapel Gallery in London. Her book is both a moving tribute to a great artist and a gripping story. Its strength lies in placing Rothko in the contexts of a Europe devastated by wars and anti-Jewish violence, and America's post-war cultural scene, and the light that Rothko's life sheds on both these tumultuous eras.

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THE AUTHOR



Annie Cohen-Solal was born in Algiers, "a harbour city, with the constant call of the sirens when ships went in and out: it was beautiful. I was constantly reminded of movements, travels and crossings; I am convinced that it deeply affected my childhood imagination. I felt that my culture was a non-stop shuffling and reshuffling of world cultures. And growing up during the Algerian war gave me a sense of the precariousness of all things."

In 1968, she was an

undergraduate in Paris; a genuine *soixante-huitard*. "I attended Nanterre the year the revolution broke out. I was part of the *Mouvement du 22 Mars* with Dany Cohn-Bendit. We thought it was outrageous that the Gaullist government never prepared anything for us, the post-war baby boomers. We were sent to ugly places in ugly *bidonvilles*, in a society of older people with no interest in youthful energies. Everything that should have been fostered or encouraged was strictly forbidden: creativity, freedom, imagination."

Cohen-Solal has held academic posts in Israel, France, Germany and the US. "I enjoyed the last two the most. In Berlin, it was a very democratic system in which teachers

were encouraged to innovate, with meetings that brought students, professors, employees together. I liked the 'porosity of borders between disciplines' in the US."

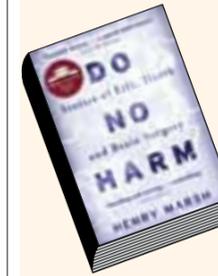
Why do Rothko's paintings remain so compelling? "Because they don't translate well into photographs, they force the viewer to communicate with them in real life. Sitting in front of a Rothko picture forces your retina to adapt to the different levels, to the depth of the colours, and you do not leave unchanged. You have to concentrate, to interact with the painting, which in turn becomes a mirror of your own emotions."

Karen Shook

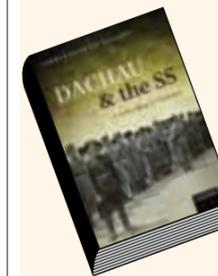
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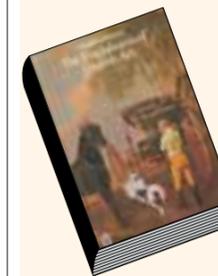
A weekly look over the shoulders of our scholar-reviewers



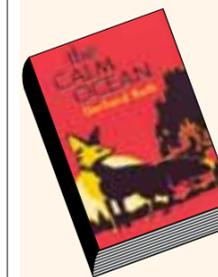
Sir David Bell, vice-chancellor of the University of Reading, is reading Henry Marsh's *Do No Harm: Stories of Life, Death and Brain Surgery* (Orion, 2014). "If someone is going to saw your head open, just hope it is the eminent neurosurgeon Henry Marsh, who writes powerfully here of his experiences. Probably insufferable and infuriating to work with, he still comes across as a man of deep insight and great compassion. Indeed, some of the most moving passages in the book are when he comes face to face with his 'mistakes'. Quite brilliant."



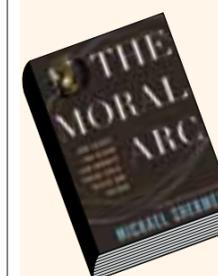
Neil Gregor, professor of modern European history, University of Southampton, has just read Christopher Dillon's *Dachau and the SS: A Schooling in Violence* (Oxford University Press, 2015). "An assiduously researched and intelligently argued book that takes our understanding of the camp personnel to a different level. Even in a crowded field such as this, it genuinely stands out – above all, perhaps, in its account of the dynamics of masculine identity creation and performance in Dachau, opening up new terrain on gender and murder in this context."



R.C. Richardson, emeritus professor of history, University of Winchester, is reading Nikolai Pevsner's *The Englishness of English Art* (Peregrine, 1956). "This classic study is now inevitably somewhat dated, and some of its quirky judgements appear uncomfortably conspicuous. But the author's observations on the distinctive features of English architecture as well as art – all the more penetrating, perhaps, coming from a refugee from Nazi Germany – stand out as clearly as ever, as do his secure mastery of detail and his skill in connecting art forms with poetry, philosophy and science."



Uwe Schütte, reader in German, Aston University, is reading Gerhard Roth's *The Calm Ocean* (Ariadne, 1993). "Often, literature slows things down to enable a closer look. With an almost painful immediacy, this novel allows readers to experience life in rural Austria in the late 1970s. The stunning beauty and richness of the natural environment provide a backdrop to various violent occurrences, as Roth lays bare fascism's hidden roots lurking beneath the idyll of country life."



Robert A. Segal, sixth century chair in religious studies, University of Aberdeen, is reading Michael Shermer's *The Moral Arc: How Science and Reason Lead Humanity toward Truth, Justice, and Freedom* (Henry Holt, 2015). "Shermer, the publisher of *Skeptic* magazine and a firm atheist, argues that science, not religion, has been responsible for what he deems the progressive spread of morality worldwide. By science, he means less scientific discoveries than reasoning and testing. He has disdain for the claim of clerics that secularisation is the cause of moral regress and that terrorists cannot be religious."