brushwork is unobtrusive because it is contained by broad areas of close-keyed colors of paint. Where de Kooning made a broad, bold stroke with white paint over red, Rothko might make a similar but less conspicuous stroke with red or red-orange paint over red. The terms that are typically used to describe Rothko’s pictures often discourage awareness of their gestural underpinnings; the shapes in his paintings are usually described as “rectangles,” and comparisons with the rigorously rectilinear art of Mondrian sometimes follow. But Rothko’s geometry was softened, ragged, and irregular, without the sharp precision or sense of absoluteness that characterized the neoplasticist aesthetic.

Rothko’s pictures are also often said to be comprised of “sheets” of color, a term suggesting flat and uniform surfaces, but closer study reveals modulations of color and a varied surface. More apt is the (also commonly used) term veils, evoking a quality of transparency and a sense of things only partially apprehended through an intervening screen. The veil is an age-old metaphor used from Plato through Hegel and Heidegger for the concept of truth as aleea or unveiling. Some surrealist artists used the term veiled to describe what they regarded as a desirable pictorial attribute: that of the indistinct image, half-buried and half-dislodged from the unconscious mind (because anything fully dislodged and distinct would, by definition, no longer be unconscious). The term transparency was also used to describe a surrealist desideratum; transparency meant getting “beyond the surface [to] embrace the whole.” So said Gordon Onslow-Ford, who further suggested in 1948 that “the new art may well take as rallying point—transparency.”

Some critics have observed of Rothko’s pictures that his rectangular areas are rendered in varying degrees of transparency, from gossamer sheerness to total opacity. Of itself, this effect—of forms emerging, coalescing, receding, and dissolving—may evoke natural cycles.

Automatism led Rothko to a way of making pictures that he practiced as long as he painted. But automatism was never merely a technical device for Rothko. It was a means of conjuring and realizing subjects by probing the unconscious, where the seeds of myth were supposedly stored. This is why Rothko was still extolling the Surrealists long after he overtly emulated them in his work— because they had “rediscovered mythical possibilities in everyday life.”

Myth and The Birth of Tragedy
Rothko was one of many artists who turned to mythological subjects in the early 1940s. He may even have taken a respite from painting around 1940 to devote himself to the study of myth. His first wife (Edith Sachar, whom he married in 1932) remembered lengthy discussions at their home in the early 1940s, revolving around the problem of subject matter and

Anna Chave, "Mythmaking," from Mark Rothko, pp. 77-91
involving Newman and Gottlieb, as well as other former cronies from The Ten. Gottlieb’s wife recalled that her husband and Rothko were both “extremely programmatic about their artistic direction and deliberately chose to concern themselves with myth so that they could break with what they considered stagnant in European tradition and with the provincial American past.”

Myth seemed to offer Rothko the subject matter he so badly wanted. But he found his subjects not in the anecdotal fabric of myth—in myth out of Bullfinch—but in myth as espoused by Nietzsche, as dramatized by Aeschylus, as mapped by Sir James George Frazer, as probed by Freud and Jung, and as reanimated or visualized by the surrealists.

Gottlieb began using themes from mythology at around the same time Rothko did, painting “pictographs” with such titles as Oedipus and Labyrinth. He organized his pictographs using grids, with a cryptic symbol or body part (eye, hand, face . . .) in each square compartment.

“Rothko and I temporarily came to an agreement on the question of subject matter,” Gottlieb later recalled.

We embarked on a series of paintings that attempted to use mythological subject matter, preferably from Greek mythology . . . Now this is not to say that we were very absorbed in mythology, although at that time a great many writers, more than painters, were absorbed in the idea of myth in relation to art. However, it seemed that if one wanted to get away from such things as the American Scene or social realism and perhaps cubism, this offered a possibility of a way out, and the hope was that given a subject matter that was different, perhaps some new approach to painting, a technical approach might also develop . . . Eventually, of course, we did not remain loyal to the idea of using mythology and ancient fables as subjects because it immediately became apparent that if you are dealing with the Oedipus myth, you’re involved with Freud, Surrealism, etc. In hindsight, in other words, Gottlieb regarded myth as a fortuitous link between the tentative essays of a young artist and the mature artist’s more pregnant way of working. Unlike Gottlieb, Rothko remained loyal to mythology and continued to believe in its relevance to his work. In a lecture at Pratt in 1958, he discussed the importance of myth to modern art, and in conversation with an art historian around 1959, he actually “defined his painting as something like a ‘mythical action.’” The significance of myth to Rothko’s mature art is hardly obvious. But a study of the relation between his mature paintings and his earlier work—especially the surrealist work with its sometimes overt mythological content—will help to illuminate the connections. Most critics have ignored the surrealist work (at least until recent years), but Rothko himself was not so dismissive of that period in his career: he faithfully kept and declined to edit his own sizable collection of his early pictures, and he was “a constant visitor to the fabulous museum of his own collections of his own work,” according to a studio assistant. A review of some of the holdings of that museum will help reveal how myth is an abiding factor in Rothko’s art: myth, that is, as “a concentrated image of the world, an em-
blem of appearance," to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche. Like various artists before him (William Blake, for instance), Rothko proposed not to illustrate but to make myth. The themes of myth that engaged him were fundamental ones, concerning the relation of the human being to the world and the cycle of life, "the human drama" or "tragedy," as he called it.

Rothko indicated to William Seitz that his approach to art was initially "reformed" through "a study of the dramatic themes of myth . . . and an early reading of Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy." Nietzsche had regarded the Greeks as "the chariot drivers of every subsequent culture" and considered Greek tragedy "the profoundest manifestation of Hellenic genius." The signal attainment of Greek tragedy, as Nietzsche saw it, was that it concerned itself directly and effectively with the crucial reality of death and assisted its audience in confronting the unbearable fact of its own mortality. Greek tragedy managed to console its audience by revealing that "the eternity of true being surviv[es] every phenomenal change"; though the individual must expire, life itself is eternal. The revelations afforded by Greek tragedy amounted to an assurance of the perpetuity of life and so to a kind of redemption: "Dare to lead the life of tragic man," Nietzsche urged, "and you will be redeemed."

Nietzsche's account of the birth of tragedy was also the story of its death, because modern science had effectually eliminated myth, which is indispensable to the creation and to the understanding of tragedy. As Nietzsche saw it, the "loss of myth, of a mythic home, the mythic womb" was responsible for the deracination of the modern person: "Man today, stripped of myth, stands famished among all his pasts and must dig frantically for roots, be it among the most remote antiquities." The loss of myth spells the end of art because "every culture that has lost myth has lost, by the same token, its natural, healthy creativity. Only a horizon ringed about with myths can unify a culture. . . . The images of myth must be the daemonic guardians, ubiquitous but unnoticed, presiding over the growth of the child's mind and interpreting to the mature man his life and struggles." Rothko shared with Nietzsche this vision of the crucial role played by daemonic guardians: "Without monsters and gods," the painter wrote, "art cannot enact our drama. . . . When they were abandoned as untenable superstitions, art sank into melancholy." In the face of that melancholy, however, Rothko shared Nietzsche's belief in the importance of miracles: "The most important tool the artist fashions, through constant practice, is faith in his ability to produce miracles when they are needed. Pictures must be miraculous." The miracles that Rothko hoped to produce were pictures that answered the same "eternally familiar needs" that Greek tragedy had answered, despite modern society's estrangement from myth, pictures that yielded a catharsis by responding to and assuaging the viewers' primal terror—their terror of mortality. To make such pic-
tories without a recognized cast of monsters and gods, meant finding new dramatic personae or a new visual rhetoric to take the place of the devalued one, and this is what Rothko set out to do. He did not make miracles happen in the end—he did not discover a visual mode with the capacity to reach across the social fabric as fully as Greek tragedy had done—but there is testimony suggesting that he eventually effected a kind of minor miracle. In his classic paintings, he created images that stirred the emotions of a sector of his society, at least, and that moved viewers to ponder the condition, the life and death, of the human spirit.

In some respects, The Birth of Tragedy is less a meditation on art per se than on the role of the artist and the experience of the audience, Stanley Cavell has observed. Nietzsche contended that “An audience of spectators, such as we know it, was unknown to the Greeks,” so strongly did they identify with the chorus; according to Cavell, “Nietzsche’s profoundest wish was to remove the audience from art”—audience in the sense of ‘those present whom the actors ignore’, those beyond the fourth wall. Deny that wall—that is, recognize those in attendance—and the audience vanishes.” Nietzsche formed an ideal of a public that participated in the drama and thereby experienced a catharsis that no aloof spectators could hope to undergo (in the same sense that analysands are debarred from being detached observers of their own emotional dramas if they hope to experience the therapeutic catharsis). The relations among artist, art, and public were a central concern for Rothko, as well. He longed to find a way to bridge the separation between art work and viewer, fostering a more immediate and intimate encounter; what he envisioned occurring in that encounter was nothing less than a “marriage” or a “religious experience.”

In the 1940s Rothko identified himself in Nietzscbean terms as a mythmaker whose paintings were characterized by tragedy and drama. He declared repeatedly that tragedy was essential to his art, using such emphatic phrases as: “Only that subject matter is valid which is tragic,” “the tragic concepts with which art must deal,” “the exhilarated tragic experience which for me is the only source book for art.” These phrases date from 1943 to 1945, a time when the word tragedy evoked first the state of world affairs and, only secondarily, a form of Greek drama. But Rothko and some of his contemporaries perceived their rehearsals of the themes of Greek tragedy as a valid and appropriate esthetic response to the tragedies unfolding around them. From their perspective, wrestling with the tragic themes of myth and reckoning with the raw contents of the unconscious mind, where those themes supposedly originated, was a potentially risky and courageous act: “Art is justified by its adventuring into unknown lands which can be traversed only by those who are willing to take the risks,” Rothko contended in 1943, in a formulation he had learned from the Surrealistics. In 1942 Breton asserted, “In art there is no great expedition which is not undertaken at the risk of one’s life. . . . each artist must set out on his own search for the Golden Fleece.”
same year Edward Renouf suggested, "An artist is an artist by virtue of his psychological veracity, and where hell yawns the artist looks into its jaws." 41

At the time of the Second World War, this is how Rothko and others in his circle saw themselves responding to the mandate for art with social content. In attempting to unleash in their art the primal forces lurking in the unconscious mind and in eliciting their subjects from those forces as privately experienced or as collectively transposed into myth, these artists could regard themselves as engaging in a socially munificent act, at their own not inconsiderable peril. Comparatively safe though they actually were during the war, the artists' representation of their project wishfully cast them as brave heroes facing terrible dangers and untold harm in the interests of dispensing a kind of healing and protection. Renouf claimed, citing Freud as his authority, that “art sublimates destructive impulses into cultural values—making the persistence in human nature of man's primordial and animal past a source of culturally productive power.” 42 Nietzsche had also counted art “an antidote to barbarism” and a “sorcerer expert in healing.” 43 Faced with the rending cataclysm of World War II, then, the New York School artists joined some of the surrealists in importing a concept from ancient and tribal cultures of art as an agent of mediation and healing.

The turn to mythology and the popularity of the notion of a universal mythic consciousness represented a kind of nostalgic impulse in a time of conflict and crisis—a summoning into modern times of a cherished vision of a long-lost, whole, and integral community with shared monsters and gods, shared beliefs and values. Terry Eagleton has emphasized the conservatism that animates this romanticizing of myth in an analysis of the impetus behind T. S. Eliot's use of myth, particularly in the Waste Land, which was greeted in its time as a daring effort. What Eliot hoped, as Eagleton acerbically put it, was that “the crisis of European society . . . might be resolved by turning one's back on history altogether and putting mythology in its place. Deep below finance capitalism lay the Fisher King, potent images of birth, death and resurrection in which human beings might discover a common identity. . . . His [Eliot's] scandalous avant-garde techniques were deployed for the most arrière-garde ends: they wrenched apart routine consciousness so as to revive in the reader a sense of common identity in the blood and guts.” 44

In The Myth of the Eternal Return, a study begun in 1945, the anthropologist Mircea Eliade cast the same phenomenon in a more understanding but no less salutary light. Noting that “the work of two of the most significant writers of our day—T. S. Eliot and James Joyce—is saturated with nostalgia for the myth of eternal repetition and, in the last analysis, for the abolition of time,” Eliade suggested: “As the terror of history grows worse, as existence becomes more and more precarious because of history, the positions of historicism will increasingly lose in prestige. And, at a moment when history could . . . wipe out the human
race in its entirety—it may be that we are witnessing a desperate attempt to prohibit the ‘events of history’ through a reintegration of human societies within the horizon (artificial, because decreed) of archetypes and their repetition.”

However dissimilar Rothko’s and Eliot’s politics may have been in general, this conservative aspect to the project Rothko set himself during the war remains, even as he painted his first comparatively modern-looking paintings. And the conservatism that Rothko and others in his circle manifested in their attempts to revive and reinstate myth was plainly related to the terror of history referred to by Eliade. These artists’ use of explicit mythological references and their tenure as self-identified myth-makers coincide precisely with the war years. But even in the late 1930s Rothko had believed strongly, almost as a kind of law, that the artist had to reach backward in order to move forward: “The return to the past comes about regularly even in the conscious life. . . . The renaissance went back to antiquity for the purpose of going forwards. . . . Rousseau preached the ‘return to nature’. Tolstoi, the revolutionary innovator, did actually go back to the primitive life, and without such retrogressions no great progressions are possible, and no fresh creation, however cleverly imagined, has any prospect of a future unless it has borrowed from the past.”

Political and social factors contributed to the interest of artists in mythology and Greek tragedy during the war, but Rothko’s preoccupation with myth and tragedy was more enduring than that of most of his contemporaries. He “continued to describe his . . . paintings as tragic dramas” until the end of his life, although his vision of tragedy changed somewhat with time. “As I have grown older,” Rothko told Peter Selz around 1961, “Shakespeare has come closer to me than Aeschylus, who meant so much to me in my youth. Shakespeare’s tragic concept embodies for me the full range of life from which the artist draws all his tragic material.”

As he grew older, further, Kierkegaard seems to have supplanted Nietzsche as Rothko’s preferred philosopher and interpreter of myth; Either/Or and Fear and Trembling are said to have particularly interested him. And Kierkegaard’s meditation on “The Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern,” in Either/Or may help explain Rothko’s shift away from Aeschylus:

In ancient tragedy the action itself has an epic moment in it; it is as much event as action. The reason for this naturally lies in the fact that the ancient world did not have subjectivity fully self-conscious and reflective. Even if the individual moved freely, he still rested in the substantial categories of state, family, and destiny. . . . In modern times, [by contrast] situation and character are really predominant. The tragic hero, conscious of himself as a subject, is fully reflective, and this reflection has not only reflected him out of every immediate relation to state, race, and destiny, but has often even reflected him out of his own preceding life. . . . Hence, modern tragedy has no epic foreground, no epic heritage. The hero stands and falls entirely on his own acts.
During the war Rothko and his peers had the heady but daunting sense of making art in an epochal, historical moment. They were drawn together by their need to devise a form of artistic activity with a scope commensurate with the scale of the time. The inescapable awareness of the exigencies of the human community moved many artists to form at least loose communities of their own, to pool their concerns, ideas, and efforts. That sense of membership in a community—the larger human community and a local community of artists—ebbed away soon after the war, replaced by the more familiar modern sensations of isolation and aimlessness. In the first few years following the war, when Rothko painted possibly some of his most diffuse or incoherent pictures, the circumstances and pressures under which he was working were substantially changed: the impinging of political and social events had sharply dissipated with the sense of community. In a statement made in 1945, the year the war ended, Rothko foresaw the direction his art would increasingly take—toward a focus on internal experience: “If previous abstractions paralleled the scientific and objective preoccupations of our times, ours are finding a pictorial equivalent for man's new knowledge and consciousness of his more complex inner self.” For Rothko, however, this interest in finding a metaphor for the complexities of the inner self was never a matter of expressing merely individual and private experiences or of abandoning a concern for the public but was instead a shift of strategy for the most direct and effective way to reach the public. The model for the inner self that Rothko began to look for, and that he effectually found in 1949, was still meant to be one with resonances for all viewers. It no longer looked to archaic mythologies as an instrument for attaining that hoped-for universality, however, but pioneered new instrumentalities instead.

Themes from the Oresteia
Rothko's way of confronting the enormity of political events in the early 1940s, through an art grounded in myth and Greek tragedy, may in retrospect seem an oblique and contrived one. But it was the most direct and meaningful solution he could find at the time to a virtually insoluble problem. And, for all its awkwardness, the solution was a considered one, worthy of closer examination through an analysis of the programs of specific pictures. In devising the programs for his mythological pictures, Rothko tended to favor broader themes—such as Gods and Birds or Ritual—to particular ones, which might well prove obscure to his viewers. When his chosen themes were specific, they came almost entirely from Greek mythology with only an occasional reference to Judeo-Christian legends—such as the Rites of Lilith and Gethsemane—and the odd reference to Egypt (Room in Karnak), Syria (Syrian Bull), and Oceana. The cast of specific mythological characters Rothko portrayed included Oedipus, Antigone, Iphigenia (Sacrifice of Iphigenia), Tantalus, Tiresias, Leda, Orison, Orpheus (Altar of Orpheus), The Furies, and Aurora (Vibrations
Sometime after the war Rothko decided that he did not want the specificity of reference afforded by any titles, however broad, and he abandoned titles altogether. But even “though he hesitates in titling his pictures,” as he reportedly told a critic in 1947, “they are all painted in terms of definite representation.” Only once did Rothko associate a picture with a particular text, indicating in his statement for an exhibition catalogue that *The Omen of the Eagle* of 1942 (pl. II) was inspired by “the Agamemnon Trilogy of Aeschylus;” the *Oresteia*. Rothko noted also on this occasion, in characteristically grand and ambiguous phrases, that the painting “involves a pantheism in which man, bird, beast and tree—the known as well as the knowable—merge into a single tragic idea.”

*The Omen of the Eagle* is composed hierarchically by rows or registers: a row of five fused heads (with the two at the right and left ends, respectively, locked together at the lips in a kiss) rests atop a row of two bald eagles with stylized feathers, which rests atop a row of several freeform columnades (set one behind the other, moving back into the distance), which rests in turn atop a cluster of dismembered hoofs and feet. This hierarchical stacking and merging of multifarious elements constitutes a kind of tablet-shaped totem pole, loosely patterned after the structure of the human body, with heads at the top, feet at the bottom, and the dangling tentaclelike forms in the register above the feet vaguely evocative of pendulous breasts or male genitalia. Rothko and his peers had taken up the surrealist practice of making hybrid, totemic personages, partly human, partly animal and vegetable. The concept of the totem was important to these self-consciously mythologizing artists, because they aspired to attain for their own art something akin to the vital position in the structure of beliefs occupied by the totemic objects of tribal societies. Totemic objects are not works of art in the Western sense but function in an essential way in community rituals and religious practices. As rendered by the tribal artist or carver, the totem is not only the sacred symbol or emblem of the tribe but also its venerable ancestor. “In totemism, man does not merely regard himself as a descendent of certain animal species,” Ernst Cassirer has observed. Rather, “A bond that is present and actual as well as genetic connects his whole physical and social existence with his totemic ancestors.”

In Greek mythology and Greek tragedy, birds and animals serve less as totems than as attributes of the gods or as omens and emblems of human and divine activities. Rothko’s title *The Omen of the Eagle* may have particular implications in this context. A review of the myths involved in the *Oresteia*, and a look at Rothko’s other images of those myths, are necessary, however, before the title’s significance can be effectively discussed. The *Oresteia* tells the story of the royal House of Atreus, whose family members were trapped for generations in a cycle of treachery, retaliation, and revenge. To condense a long and complicated story: when Atreus was cuckolded by his brother, Thyestes, he retaliated by having two of Thyestes’ children killed, cooked, and served to their father at a banquet. Repeatedly, the lives of innocent children were the price paid...
for vengeance in the saga of the House of Atreus. Atreus’ son Agamemnon sacrificed his own daughter Iphigenia to gain favorable winds for sailing to Troy with his brother, Menelaus, to recapture Menelaus’ abducted wife, Helen. The unfavorable winds that had delayed the brothers’ departure for Troy had been sent by the goddess Artemis, because the warriors had slaughtered an animal sacred to her, a hare—in fact, a pregnant hare. The slain fetal rabbits serve effectually as an emblem for the heritage of sacrificed or murdered children in the House of Atreus.

Rothko painted *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia* (fig. 19) around the time he painted *The Omen of the Eagle*. The figure at the left of the picture is most likely Iphigenia, a slim girl with long, pink legs clad in a short, shroudlike, black cape, with horizontal, white pinstripes scratched into the black. What may be Iphigenia’s moony face (above and slightly detached from the tip of the cone-shaped cape) recoils from a pair of long, disembodied arms that reach for her ominously from an unseen being standing outside and to the right of the pictured scene. Behind those fateful arms, a large, wide-eyed woman stands in profile facing Iphigenia. This woman, who might be the child’s mother, Clytaemestra, has a cape with a swirling pattern draped over her shoulders. The front of her body is nude, however, with her full bosom and the torn skin of her stomach and leg exposed. Her jagged silhouette may describe graphically, then, how her child—her own flesh and blood—has been ripped from her.

What I am calling the Iphigenia figure, the Clytaemestra figure, and the disembodied arms are the most prominent and intelligible elements of *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*. But there are other elements as well: a flesh-pink structure, the color of Iphigenia’s legs, joins Iphigenia and Clytaemestra at their legs or feet. This multilegged stand is also attached to what could be read as a large, schematically rendered masculine head, its brooding brow and nose visible in left-profile at the far left. This white, vaguely headlike shape is surrounded by what might be an elaborate red and green headress finished at the extreme left with a jagged edge. The abstract head-shape, which is turned away from the female figures, might stand for Agamemnon, the callous king who acquiesced to the killing of his daughter despite the “structure of kinship” uniting her with him and his wife.

The events in the *Oresteia* take place some years after the sacrifice of Iphigenia, but the tragedy’s doleful chorus remembers Agamemnon’s ruthless deed and even frames it verbally as a tableau. The chorus recalls how Iphigenia’s

supplications and her cries of father
were nothing, nor the child’s lamentation
to kings passioned for battle.

She struck the sacrificers with
the eyes’ arrows of pity,
lovely as in a painted scene.
Agamemnon's killing of Iphigenia had so enraged Clytaemestra that when her husband returned from battle she murdered him, assisted by her lover, Thyestes' son, Aegisthus. In an echoing and extension of prior events, in other words, Atreus' son, Agamemnon, is cuckolded and killed by the man whose siblings Atreus himself had killed to avenge their father's act of cuckoldry. Nor does the cycle of retribution end here; for Clytaemestra is murdered in turn by her own son, Orestes, in revenge for his father's death. (Rothko may have meant to invoke Clytaemestra's treachery and duplicity in the row of heads atop the Omen of the Eagle, as each of the sultry pair of closed eyes in the face located at the center of the row belong also to each of two faces turned in left and right profile, respectively, to kiss the round or open-eyed faces in profile at the ends of the row.)

Around 1943 Rothko painted The Horizontal Phantom (fig. 20), with a scene similar to that in The Sacrifice of Iphigenia. At the far right of The Horizontal Phantom stands an adolescent-looking Iphigenia-like figure with a small, round head, cone-shaped cape, and gangly legs. Close by to the left stands a matronly figure dressed in a patterned cape and high-heeled shoes, with a face consisting of a black circle surmounted by bobbed grey hair. Suspended in midair between the mother and daughterlike figures is the likeliest candidate for the horizontal phantom of the title: a long, colorless figure of death—its legs scissored apart, its arms akimbo, and its neck and head (formed like an extra attenuated limb)
cutting between the two women and so serving a comparable symbolic function to the fateful arms in The Sacrifice of Iphigenia. In electing not to name the characters in The Horizontal Phantom, Rothko purposely evoked a less specific story of death than in The Sacrifice of Iphigenia; if he still had the tales of the Oresteia in mind when he painted The Horizontal Phantom, however, the latter picture might be considered in relation to that story, if only in a conjectural way. Iphigenia, Clytemnestra, and the specter of death from The Sacrifice of Iphigenia might be associated with the similar groupings of figures in the foreground of The Horizontal Phantom. The latter trio would be huddled together on the dark shore of their homeland, and the blue and white striped islandlike area across the sea that stretches behind them could be read as Troy. On that distant plot of land is a small cluster of dismembered human appendages that could be seen as betokening the carnage of the Trojan War. In the blue and white striped sky at the top of the picture, an eagle-man—perhaps Agamemnon—flies from Troy toward home. Red flamelike shapes connect the eagle-king and his queen, just as in the Oresteia a chain of bonfires signaled to Clytemnestra that Agamemnon was returning home from battle. But regardless of whether the scene in The Horizontal Phantom relates in any specific way to the tales of the Oresteia, this picture can be read as depicting a family grouping: a mother and daughter with the specter of death interposed between them and an eagle man, a patriarchal figure, soaring through the sky from a distant island to the shore where the threesome is gathered.

The eagle-man in The Horizontal Phantom (fig. 20) recalls the two eagles in The Omen of the Eagle (pl. ii) and reintroduces the question of the eagle's significance. In the Oresteia, a "wild bird portent" signaled the onset of war, and the eagle is specifically associated with the warrior brothers, Agamemnon and Menelaus, when the chorus describes their battle cry:

Their cry of war went shrill from the heart,
as eagles stricken in agony
for young perished, high from the nest
eddy and circle
to bend and sweep of the wings' stroke, ∖
lost far below
the fledgelings, the nest, and the tendance.

It follows later in the trilogy that the surviving children of the murdered Agamemnon refer to themselves as "the eagle's brood" and "the orphaned children of the eagle father." In the Oresteia, then, the eagle signifies the patriarchal ruler and the warrior, fated to kill and to be killed in his turn. The association of eagles with warfare and power is traditional and well-known: "from the Far East to Northern Europe, the eagle is the bird associated with the gods of power and war." The world was
at war in 1942, when Rothko painted *The Omen of the Eagle*, and he may well have had the eagles in the national emblems of the United States and Germany in mind, in addition to the eagles in the *Oresteia*. The United States was embroiled in a modern-day, worldwide cycle of retribution, and the parallel with Greek tragedy was not lost on Rothko and his contemporaries. “After more than two thousand years we have finally arrived at the tragic position of the Greek,” wrote Barnett Newman in 1945. “Our tragedy is again a tragedy of action in the chaos that is society (it is interesting that this Greek idea is also a Hebraic concept), and no matter how heroic or innocent or moral our individual lives may be, this new fate hangs over us. We are living then through a Greek drama and each of us now stands like Oedipus and can by his acts or lack of action, in innocence, kill his father and desecrate his mother.”

Although some American artists tried earnestly to portray contemporary war scenes (at the risk of being outdone by photojournalists), Rothko, Newman, and others of their circle submerged themselves in the ancient epic of the Trojan War and in the remote dilemmas of Agamemnon, Oedipus, and their kin. This Nietzschean insistence on a return to Greek tragedy as the “fountainhead of art” (as Newman called it) is symptomatic of the desperation of these artists, who were searching urgently for a way to make a viable pictorial statement in the absence of an accepted rhetorical mode for doing so. Because circumstances of such epic proportions seemed to demand an epic art, an effort was mounted to resuscitate what is for Western culture the paragon of epic art forms. The example of Greek tragedy held appeal as well because it placed the suffering caused by war in a salutary light. The chorus in the *Oresteia* insists that suffering is elemental to aware human experience: “Justice so moves that those only learn / who suffer.” Suffering emerges as an indirect force for good, as the chorus repeatedly intones: “Sing sorrow, sorrow; but good win out in the end.” The *Oresteia* even ends on a positive note. After Orestes is absolved for the murder of his mother, the goddess Athene promises the citizenry that the cycle of treachery and revenge can be ended:

Such life I offer you, and it is yours to take.
Do good, receive good, and be honored as the good
are honored.

Rothko probably did not anticipate that viewers would read the *Oresteia* and examine *The Omen of the Eagle* in light of the text as I have done here; the fact that this was the only time he cited a literary source for a painting suggests that he did not expect viewers to read texts in order to understand his pictures. That Rothko did not designate texts for his subjects or make a habit of using specific subjects whose stories could readily be researched should not be taken to mean that he intended his pictures' subjects to remain a private matter that he alone understood,
however, even if that generally turned out to be the case. When Rothko was concocting a cast of fantastic performers, and using mythological titles, he imagined that the imagery he produced in his pictures stemmed from imagery traceable to the unconscious—his own and the collective unconscious. He hoped this would render his pictures accessible to all viewers on a profound preconscious or precognitive level. The "modern mythological painter must invent his types as he goes along," asserted Robert Goldwater in 1946, "And this he can do only in the very process of painting, when, as he simultaneously evolves his compositions and his subjects, he comes upon forms which through association and suggestion carry meaning in them. . . . And so his types are never fully developed, his myth or allegory never precisely articulated. . . . But just for this reason his picture carries connotations far beyond itself, and the work is rich with collected meanings."

This richness was precisely what Rothko aimed for in the pictures he was painting during the war. But his collected meanings were destined to remain hypothetical because the viewers—or the critics, in any case—generallypronounced themselves unaffected by these mythical meanings that they could not decipher. Eventually, Rothko acknowledged the difficulty of working with a concept of myth that did not engage beliefs or images held openly and in common, but given the absence of such an accepted mythological structure he felt initially that he had no alternative. In 1947 Rothko frankly admitted his envy of "the archaic artist;" who "was living in a more practical society than ours;" a society where "the urgency for transcendent experience was understood, and given an official status." Whereas the archaic artist could "create a group of intermediaries, monsters, hybrids, gods and demigods;" the modern artist did not have recourse to such a ready and colorful cast of characters. Rothko understood this in 1947—at which time he more or less banished his exotic surrealistic characters. At the same time he worried (as he had since the late 1930s) whether he or any other artist could continue to work without the benefit of such characters. He pondered whether the only option remaining to artists was simply to draw attention to this terrible lack or loss: "Without monsters and gods, art cannot enact our drama: art's most profound moments express this frustration. When they are abandoned as untenable superstitions, art sank into melancholy. It became fond of the dark, and enveloped its objects in the nostalgic intimations of a half-lit world."64

In 1947 Rothko wrote of the monsters and gods he had been impelled to abandon, and of the objects that remained only to be cloaked in a nostalgic half-light. This latter metaphor was premonitory of Rothko's eventual solution, his practice of veiling or disguising his objects or subjects to the point where they would be only dimly visible, recognizable as traces if at all. Whether such a practice still counts as a "mythical action," as Rothko claimed, depends on how mythology is defined. His own vision of the promise of mythology changed gradually over the
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Rothko was most sanguine about the role myth played in modern art during the war years; he saw himself then as part of a vigorous new movement, as one of "a small band of Myth Makers who emerged here during the war." Although Rothko alone used this name, Mythmaker, it applied equally in that period to Gorky, Pollock, Gottlieb, Newman, Baziotes, David Smith, David Hare, and others. Rothko outlined the Mythmakers’ position in a letter to the art editor of the New York Times in 1945: the Mythmakers “have no prejudices either for or against reality,” he explained. “Our paintings, like all myths, combine shreds of reality with what is considered 'unreal' and insist upon the validity of the merger.” Rothko perceived myth as a medium, in effect, that permitted a synthesis of the real and the unreal, the tangible and intangible, in a fuller, more authentic image of reality. To make myth was to make truths, not fictions or abstractions. From the Mythmakers’ standpoint, representational art could be considered realistic in only a superficial sense: “Certain people always say we should go back to nature,” Gottlieb commented. “I notice they never say we should go forward to nature. It seems to me they are more concerned that we should go back than about nature. If the models we use are the apparitions seen in a dream, or the recollection of our prehistoric past, is this less part of nature or realism than a cow in a field? I think not... To my mind, certain so-called abstraction is not abstraction at all. On the contrary, it is the realism of our time.” By Rothko’s account, the subject that the Mythmakers proposed to treat with this new, all-embracing realism was the inner being of the modern person; they were creating “a pictorial equivalent for man’s new knowledge and consciousness of his more complex inner self.”

To compose their metaphors for the inner self, the Mythmakers attempted to recombine old and new models: the models for the expression of inner states that they believed they had found in tribal and archaic art and the models concocted by the surrealists for imaging the finds they claimed to have made in ransacking the unconscious. But the proposition that art could be both new and primitive at the same time was greeted with skepticism by critics. And the artists were sometimes charged with playing esoteric games at the viewers’ expense by using (that is, copying) arcane symbols in their work. The critics, unaccustomed to subject matter that was encrypted or veiled, questioned the designated subjects of the Mythmakers’ art. And some critics insinuated that it was pretentious for the artists to affect mythological titles for such patently abstract pictures: “At best he is individually suggestive,” a New York Times reviewer said of some of Rothko’s surrealist pictures, “though titles such as Phal-