

# //“SOMEONE WHO DID NOT FORGET”<sup>1</sup>: THE RECEPTION OF ROBERT MOTHERWELL’S *ELEGIES TO THE SPANISH REPUBLIC* IN SPAIN<sup>2</sup>//

---

ELISABET GOULA SARDÀ  
UNIVERSITAT POMPEU FABRA

///

PALABRAS CLAVE: Arte abstracto, Expresionismo abstracto, Guerra Civil Española, McCarthysmo, Guerra Fría cultural.

RESUMEN: Entre 1949 y 1991 el artista norteamericano Robert Motherwell realizó más de 170 pinturas abstractas que constituyen la serie titulada *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*. A pesar del título de la serie, los estudios realizados sobre las *Elegies* se han interesado únicamente por los elementos formales de la obra, ignorando o negando la existencia de valores políticos en los cuadros. En este artículo se propone una nueva lectura de las *Elegies* que pone al descubierto su carácter político. Esta lectura es posible recuperando el estrecho vínculo de Motherwell con artistas españoles que vivieron la Guerra Civil y su influencia en el desarrollo de la serie. Además, las *Elegies* adquieren todo su significado político al ser contextualizadas en el período mccarthysta, cuando el gobierno estadounidense reconoció la dictadura franquista e inició una persecución contra los norteamericanos que apoyaron la República española.

KEYWORDS: Abstract Art, Abstract Expressionism, Spanish Civil War, McCarthyism, Cultural Cold War.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Motherwell, “A Personal Recollection”, in Dore Ashton (ed.) with Joan Banach, *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2007, p.349.

<sup>2</sup> This article is based on my research “L’impacte de la Guerra Civil espanyola en l’Escola de Nova York: una lectura política de les *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* de Robert Motherwell” (The Impact of the Spanish Civil War on the New York School: a Political Reading of Robert Motherwell’s *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*), which was presented at the Institut Universitari de Cultura de la Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona) in September 2006.

ABSTRACT: From 1949 to 1991 the American artist Robert Motherwell painted more than 170 abstract works that constitute the series *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*. Despite this title, the existing studies on the *Elegies* only focus on the formal features of the works, and they ignore or deny the presence of political values. In this article a new reading of the *Elegies* is proposed that emphasizes on its political aspects. This new reading is possible when we pay attention to the close relationship that Motherwell had with Spanish artists who lived the Civil War and the influence they had in Motherwell's series of paintings. Moreover, the *Elegies* attain all its political meaning if we put them in the context of McCarthyism, a period when the American Government recognized the Francoist dictatorship and undertook a persecution against the Americans that gave support to the Spanish Republic.

///

In 1949 Robert Motherwell (1915 – 1991) painted the first work in what was to become a long series of over 170 abstract paintings that he grouped together under the title of *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*. The dominant image of this series, in which large, intensely black masses are superimposed on a mainly white background, is still one of the most widely recognized and most studied themes of his entire *oeuvre*.

In 1958, for the first time, one of the *Elegies* travelled to Spain as part of the exhibition “New American Painting”, but the Franco regime authorities would not permit it to be shown. What do we know about the reception of the *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* in Spain? I think that this question will shed new light on one of the aspects of these paintings that has been most widely ignored by the critics: the particularly controversial matter of the political nature of Motherwell's series. I hope to demonstrate that there is a political reading to be found in *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* and that herein, to a considerable extent, lies their widely-acknowledged dramatic power.

An inquiry into Motherwell's interest in the Spanish situation and his close friendships with a number of Spanish artists who had lived through the drama of the Civil War (José Guerrero, Rafael Alberti and Antoni Tàpies, among them) discloses that Motherwell's appreciation of Spain was neither based on exotic fantasy and nor was it tinged with typical tourist-attraction clichés, as some studies of the *Elegies* suggest. On the contrary, he clearly understood the general political situation in Spain, the Civil War and the Franco regime and this understanding undoubtedly influenced his choice of title for the series. Moreover, exhaustive analysis of Motherwell's writings and the statements he made about the *Elegies* reveal that he never denied that political values were present in these works.

At the time of the Spanish Civil War, Motherwell was a student at Stanford University and in his writings he mentions how deeply impressed he was with a lecture given in San Francisco by André Malraux as part of his American tour seeking support for the Spanish republicans. His interest was also stimulated by the book *And Spain Sings: Fifty Loyalist Ballads*, a collection of songs and poems by Spanish writers (Alberti, Machado, Aleixandre among them) in support of the Republic, which he bought at the

time<sup>3</sup>. After his move to New York in 1940, Motherwell's contacts with people who had direct experience of the Spanish conflict intensified. Through Professor Meyer Schapiro, he met people from *Partisan Review* who had been actively involved in supporting the Spanish republicans. Motherwell's friendship with the painter Roberto Matta was also particularly influential in deepening his involvement with the Civil War. Matta had gone to live in Paris in 1934 but he had made several trips to visit relatives in Madrid where he met Rafael Alberti and Federico García Lorca, the latter of whom gave him a copy of his poem "*Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*"<sup>4</sup>. During the Civil War, Matta took part in the project of the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris Exposition of 1937, where he met many Spanish artists including Picasso and Joan Miró. Matta's acquaintance with these artists and his particular view of the Civil War, so marked by Lorca's murder, had a very direct effect on Motherwell.

Matta and Motherwell met in New York in 1940 and that summer they decided to travel to Mexico together<sup>5</sup>. This trip was a very important event in Motherwell's life because it was there, inspired by the land and culture and coached in the technique of psychic automatism by Matta and the surrealist painter and thinker Wolfgang Paalen, he began to paint as he had never done before. In Mexico, Motherwell quickly identified with the country's light and climate and the colors all around him, which he associated with the Mediterranean countries and, moreover, as Dore Ashton has noted<sup>6</sup>, with his Californian childhood. Again, Motherwell was impressed by a culture that exalted life even while death constantly hovered. The Mexican Revolution and the presence of the Spanish Civil War embodied in the numerous exiles that were then living in Mexico were highly significant factors in the mark this trip made on Motherwell's life. When he returned to New York, his memories of Mexico and the associated evocation of the Spanish Civil War were to become central themes in his work. In the early 1940s he produced several paintings based on the *Civil War*, and *Spanish Picture with Window* (1941), *Spanish Prison (Window)* (1943-44) and *Little Spanish Prison* (1943-44) are among his best-known works of the time.

Motherwell's interest in the Civil War is also manifest in his work to aid Spanish refugees. It is likely that after the 1940s he participated in some of the many campaigns that were organized from New York, although the only extant evidence is his support for the Spanish Refugee Aid Committee, which was created by Nancy MacDonald in 1952<sup>7</sup>. One important factor that should be taken into account is that the years that followed the Second World War were particularly difficult for people working to support the Spanish republicans from the United States. The Truman government's

<sup>3</sup> Motherwell remarks on this in "A Personal Recollection" (Ashton, 2007). The book *And Spain Sings: Fifty Loyalist Ballads*, was adapted by the American poets M. J. Benardete and Rolf Humphries and published in New York by Vanguard Press in 1937. Dore Ashton recalls that these songs were very popular at the time (interview with Dore Ashton, New York, 12 January 2006).

<sup>4</sup> It should be recalled that this poem was one of Motherwell's references when he painted the first *Elegies*. See "An interview with Robert Motherwell" by Barbaralee Diamonstein (Amasson, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> See "Interview with Brian Robertson, Addenda" (Terenzio, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Dore Ashton, New York, 12 January 2006.

<sup>7</sup> On the history of the Spanish Refugee Aid Committee, see MacDonald (1987).

clampdown on homegrown communism meant that former members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and the different organizations linked with the Spanish republican cause were suspect<sup>8</sup>. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began to monitor the activities of these groups, many of which were deemed communist and subversive. The Lincoln Brigade associations and even the Spanish Refugee Relief Committee, thanks to which Picasso's *Guernica* had been brought to New York in 1939, were among them. In 1950, with the outlawing of the Communist Party of the United States of America and the initiation of negotiations between the US government and the Franco dictatorship, the situation became even worse. The creation of the Spanish Refugee Aid Committee was by no means easy in these times, and a great deal of maneuvering was required to demonstrate that the organization was not communist.

With a structure that straddled the United States and Europe, its committee members included Pau Casals, Albert Camus, Mary McCarthy, Christopher Isherwood, John MacNair, Sonia Orwell, Hannah Arendt and many other eminent people. Testifying to Motherwell's support of the Committee are twenty letters between the painter and Nancy MacDonald or other members. Now in the Dedalus Foundation Collection<sup>9</sup>, the letters demonstrate that Motherwell made a number of contributions in the form of works especially painted for the Committee's campaigns. From the end of the 1960s through to the 1980s, his contributions were so regular that he was invited to form part of its advisory committee in 1983.

The criminalization of activities in support for the Spanish republicans during the McCarthy period is yet another major dimension of the political aspects of the *Elegies*. Recall that the first large-format works were painted in 1949 and, in 1950, the series was given the definitive name of *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* and, in that particular political context, Motherwell's insistence on using this title instead of any of the other options he had been thinking about is further evidence as to the political content of the works<sup>10</sup>:

Before my work had been personal and intimate, and even though the first version was a very small picture and a wholly unexpected one, I realized that what was different about it was that it was basically a monumental, public image. In reflecting how to call it, what I felt about publicly, it occurred to me that I cared deepest about the defeat of the Spanish Republic. By that time, in 1949, with the World War having ended, I felt that the earlier drama of the Spanish Republic was largely forgotten. The image fitted my sense that there ought to be an elegy (a funeral lament) for the original Republic (Ashton, 2007: 348).

<sup>8</sup> For an account of the persecution of individuals and organizations supporting Spanish republicans, see Carrol (1994).

<sup>9</sup> The Dedalus Foundation was created by Motherwell in order to manage his artistic legacy and to promote research in art.

<sup>10</sup> Recall that the first painting in the series was titled "At Five in the Afternoon", in homage to Lorca's poem "Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías". See the interview with Barbaralee Diamonstein (Ashton, 1982). Motherwell subsequently decided to change the title of the series, partly because he feared that it would not be comprehensible for an English-speaking public. See "Robert Motherwell: A Conversation at Lunch" (Eastman, 1963: 15). Thereafter Motherwell always defended *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* as the definitive title of the series.

Not only did Motherwell want to give this form to his lament about the fact that a cause that he considered just had been consigned to oblivion, but the main point is that this oblivion was not just the product of the passing of years but it was the result of the government's intention to recognize the Franco dictatorship and to clamp down on any activity in support of the Spanish republicans. Motherwell's lament was not produced as an abstract exercise in isolation from history but it was a gesture that was full of political meaning in the United States of the early 1950s. He was well aware of the political consequences of his paintings: "For years after the series began, I was often mistaken for a Stalinist though I think the logical political extension (...) of extreme modernist individualism, as of *native* American radicalism, is a kind of anarchism, a kind of conscience" (Arnasson, 1982: 229).

Motherwell made another significant gesture consistent with his early stance in 1958 when the United States Government organized the exhibition "New American Painting" in Madrid with the aim of showing the work of contemporary American painters in Europe. According to Dore Ashton<sup>11</sup>, the regime authorities in Spain refused to exhibit one of the *Elegies* that came with the show unless Motherwell changed the title as the condition for inclusion, but he preferred to decline the offer. It is not clear whether the painting was briefly exhibited before the censors banned it<sup>12</sup> but, in any case there is no doubt that the fact had its repercussions among Spanish artists, some of whom openly protested about the painting's being withdrawn<sup>13</sup>. The anecdote is truly significant in demonstrating the unequivocal political reading of the series, not only by the Franco authorities but also by the artists who criticized the regime, not to mention Motherwell, who declined to renounce the title of the series. It is therefore difficult to argue the case for the non-existence of political values in the *Elegies*, as most American critics have done.

It is highly possible that it was in Spain where the memory of the Civil War was very much alive that the political values expressed in the *Elegies* took on a heightened significance, which would also explain why Motherwell is held in such high esteem by many Spanish painters. It is particularly interesting to look at how Motherwell's work was received among the generation of Spanish artists who had gone through the Civil War, the harsh postwar years and, in some cases, exile. Their lives were profoundly marked by their experiences and it is not unreasonable to think that Motherwell's work, especially the *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, took on a highly emotional meaning for them. Notable among the artists with whom Motherwell established close ties are the poet

<sup>11</sup> Dore Ashton, "La vida del artista como banquete" (Ashton, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Miguel del Valle-Inclán, director of the library of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (National Museum Queen Sofia Art Centre) in Madrid says that Luis González Robles, head of Exhibitions in the Foreign Affairs Ministry at the time and hence in charge of the "New American Painting" exhibition, claimed that the Elegy had been exhibited and that Franco had seen it at the opening and was prompted to remark, "*Pues yo no veo la elegía por ninguna parte*" (Well, I don't see any elegy here). However, the work does not appear in the exhibition catalogue (Barr, 1958). It is probable that the painting was initially exhibited but subsequently withdrawn by the organizers.

<sup>13</sup> For example, the Spanish painter Antonio Saura protested at the *Elegy's* not being included (see Antonio Saura, "Un artista paradigmático para el siglo XX", *El País*, 18 July 1991).

Rafael Alberti and several Spanish Informalist painters, for example José Guerrero and Antoni Tàpies.

Motherwell engaged in a lively exchange with Alberti, this culminating in two artist's books that are among Motherwell's best-known graphic works. Although Motherwell had known about Alberti's poetry for many years because of Matta's friendship with the Spanish poet, it was not until 1967 that he decided to work on an illustrated version of the English version of Alberti's collection *A la pintura* (To Painting) because he saw the poems as reflecting the most profound emotions involved in the act of painting<sup>14</sup>. They had never met in person but the work on the book was the stimulus for a growing friendship by correspondence. Alberti, in exile, did not hide his excitement over Motherwell's project:

I am delighted that someone who has so dramatically felt our Spain should have chosen me for one of his works! This poet, so far from his homeland – 30 years of enforced absence – and depressed at times over so many disastrous events, is infinitely grateful. Believe me, I am truly moved and impatient to meet you.<sup>15</sup>

It was not until 1980 when the Madrid-based Fundación Juan March (Juan March Foundation) and the Catalan bank La Caixa organized Motherwell's first exhibition in Spain that the first meeting between painter and poet was possible. Like Alberti, many other Spanish artists were looking forward to seeing the works of an artist who had identified so strongly with Spain<sup>16</sup>.

In celebration of their first meeting, Alberti wrote the poem "*El negro Motherwell*" with its interplay between Motherwell's painting, Lorca's poetry and Alberti himself, the common thread being the identification of all three artists with the color black. Three years later, Motherwell finished the illustrations for the poem with a book of 24 plates reproducing some of the motifs that are most present in his work: his compact, chunky use of black and the moods shifting between high drama and mortal quietude. This collaboration between the two artists once again highlights the complexity of sentiments linking Motherwell to the theme of Spain.

Moreover, Motherwell's identification with different elements of the Spanish artistic tradition, along with his interest in Spain's political situation, meant that some connections he had with the Spanish Informalist artists were particularly close. During the Francoist dictatorship, when academism became the official art-form of the regime,

<sup>14</sup> See Robert Motherwell, "The Book's Beginnings" (McKendry, 1972). For the interested reader, Alberti's poems are now available in the award-winning English translation of Carolyn L. Tipton (Rafael Alberti, *To Painting*, Chicago, Northwestern University Press, Hydra Books, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Rafael Alberti to Robert Motherwell, 18 June 1969, Dedalus Foundation, New York (original in Spanish). Many other letters at the Dedalus Foundation archive testify this friendship.

<sup>16</sup> See Fundación Juan March press release, 25 April, 1980. The impact of this Motherwell's first exhibition in Spain is demonstrated in the considerable media coverage of the event and also the correspondence between Motherwell and a number of Spanish artists, for example Fernando Zóbel and Gustavo Torner, which is to be found in the Dedalus Foundation files. Official recognition of Motherwell's work came later when the Ministry of Culture of the socialist government awarded him its Fine Arts Medal in 1985.

the Informalist avant-garde was, in itself, a statement of opposition to the system<sup>17</sup>. The interesting point is that the shared features of abstract expressionism and Spanish Informalism offer a highly suggestive context for studying the political elements intrinsic to the series of paintings that comprise the *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*.

Personal connections were an essential part of this. One of the leading figures in Motherwell's acquaintance with the Spanish Informalist artists is the Granada-born painter José Guerrero who lived between Spain and New York, where he became well acquainted with the abstract expressionist painters. Guerrero, who had met Lorca shortly before the Civil War, was closely associated with the Spanish exiles in New York and played a major role in bridging the world of the Spain of the Civil War and exile and the artistic and cultural world of New York. Motherwell and Guerrero met in 1952 and immediately established a firm bond. For Motherwell, meeting a painter from Granada who had lived through the Civil War was very stimulating, but the empathy between the two artists was expressed in their art as well: the predominance of Mediterranean colors and the overwhelming presence of black are common elements in their paintings. One of Guerrero's best-known works, *La brecha de Víznar* (The Wound of Víznar, 1965), a reference to the village of Víznar not far from where Lorca was executed and buried in a mass grave, also links the art of both painters. This painting, which was reworked in several versions, was the first direct reference to Lorca in Guerrero's work. The colors, the dramatic feel of the work, besides referring to Lorca, have led to its frequently being compared with the *Elegies*<sup>18</sup> or with another of Motherwell's series, *Iberia*<sup>19</sup>. For Dore Ashton<sup>20</sup>, Guerrero's obsession with this work was akin to Motherwell's with the *Elegies*. In both cases, the painters had found a motif that expressed something "fundamental" or, in Motherwell's word, "archetypal"<sup>21</sup> and, in both cases, the works allude to terrible events of the Civil War, remembered in expressions of mourning and tragedy.

Finally, an equally interesting case that sheds light on the warm reception given to Motherwell's paintings among the Spanish Informalist painters is his friendship with the Catalan painter Antoni Tàpies. The latter's work is one of the clearest examples of the nature of political opposition among postwar Spanish avant-garde groups. Particularly affected by the harsh times of the postwar period, Tàpies has always spoken out for the power of political and social transformation in abstract art. In both his writings and his paintings, Tàpies has demonstrated how the significance of a work of art lies in its capacity for modifying the awareness of the viewer so that the basic task of the artist is "[...] to promote reflection, reveal, attract attention, throw light on reality and, in brief, to exalt everything that makes us freer and more perfect as human beings [...]."<sup>22</sup>

Tàpies' work sustains a remarkable equilibrium between his commitment to his times and society and his defense of the artist's autonomy and the independence of

<sup>17</sup> See Dolores Giménez-Blanco, "Significados del informalismo español" (Ashton, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> See Juan Manuel Bonet, "Guerrero. La pintura necesaria" (Bonet, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> See Dore Ashton, "José Guerrero" (Ashton, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> See Barbaralee Diamonstein (Arnasson, 1982: 228).

<sup>22</sup> Antoni Tàpies, "L'art d'avantguarda i l'esperit català" (Tàpies, 1996: 146).

creative and individual art, thus echoing some of Motherwell's ideas. Tàpies' position is more distinguished by his will to political action and Motherwell's position is more despairing, as is expressed in his doubt as to whether the modern artist can connect positively with his or her society. Nonetheless, there can be no question that, in both cases, the emphasis is on the quest for art that is not indifferent to the world but, on the contrary, that seeks to move it and shake it up. The fusion between aesthetic and ethical elements in a work of art is a major point of connection between Motherwell's and Tàpies' work and this ethical compatibility was a distinguishing feature of their relationship.

The two painters met in New York in the mid-1950s when Tàpies had an exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery<sup>23</sup>. They soon became friends so that whenever Tàpies came to New York they would continue confirming the affinities they had found in one another's work. Tàpies, when he saw Motherwell's monumental homage to the Spanish Republic, was deeply moved<sup>24</sup>. As one might expect in a painter who had been so marked by the Civil War, his response could be nothing but a deep feeling of empathy. The ensuing dialogue between the two men had a direct effect on the *Elegies*, this offering yet another prism for viewing the once-again highlighted political elements present in Motherwell's work. When the National Gallery of Washington decided to commission a large work from Motherwell in 1978, he decided to call it *Reconciliation Elegy*, partly thanks to a conversation with Tàpies:

The Washington painting was entitled *Reconciliation Elegy* for several reasons. Partly from a conversation the same year with the Spanish artist Tàpies *chez moi* about the new hopes for humanism in Spain – my *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* had been meant, on one level, as an elegy for the tragically missed opportunity of Spain to enter the liberal world in the 1930's. And for its tragic suffering then and for decades after (Carmean, 1980: 77).

This closeness between the two artists, which was to impinge on different aspects of their work, led to the comprehensive (and most important in Spain until now) retrospective exhibition of Motherwell's work, which was organized in 1996 by the Tàpies Foundation in Barcelona and the Reina Sofia Art Centre in Madrid, with Dore Ashton as curator. The exhibition highlighted the features of Motherwell's work that were most allied with the Spanish theme. By pure chance, the opening of the exhibition at the Tàpies Foundation coincided with the country's first official act of recognition of the International Brigades so that, sixty years after the outbreak of the Civil War, Barcelona was simultaneously hosting Motherwell and a good number of Americans who had most keenly felt the defeat of the Spanish Republic.

---

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 9 June, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

As for the importance of the *Elegies* for these Spanish artists, it is difficult to understand why, in all the different interpretations critics have offered of the series, none has focused on what the title really expresses: the fate of the Spanish Republic. One of the main reasons for the scant success of a reading that would seem so obvious is that the title was a second choice after the original one of *At Five in the Afternoon*. Hence many critics never went beyond seeing Lorca's poem as the essential, only reference for the series<sup>25</sup>. Again, Motherwell embarked on the series ten years after the Civil War ended, so that the paintings could not be seen as an immediate response to the conflict. However, it would seem that the most telling explanation lies in the abstract nature of the paintings, and the notion frequently found among mainstream American critics that a "political" work should be expressed in other styles, for example social realism. Hence it is very important to understand the political and cultural context in which the *Elegies* were painted (and in which critics were responding to them) in order to find an explanation for the dearth of interpretations that heed their political elements.

For many years, the main type of criticism of abstract expressionism was marked by a strictly formalist analysis of the movement, concentrating its endeavors on situating the new painting in post-war America within the framework of modern western painting. One of the most influential among the critics at the time, Clement Greenberg, set the terms of the debate about America's avant-garde artists by dealing solely with aesthetic matters and ruling out any political or social commitment in abstract expressionist art<sup>26</sup>. Nonetheless, as different studies began to show from the 1970s onwards<sup>27</sup>, this apparently apolitical analysis was paradoxically bearing political fruit in fitting neatly with the interests of the cultural Cold War that was then being ruthlessly waged by the United States Government. Given that art in the Soviet Union was highly politicized and strictly monitored by the totalitarian State, the line encouraged by the United States Government was that abstract expressionism was art produced by painters who worked in conditions of total freedom, without being bothered by political issues and who were even tolerated as "outsiders" *vis-à-vis* the other members of society. The communion of interests between the Government and the predominant terms in the discourse of critics writing about the New York School thus consolidated a completely "depoliticized" view of its painters, and this has endured through to the present day. This reading is also present in most analyses of the *Elegies*. It would be difficult to explain, otherwise, how it happened that, when Motherwell devoted his most famous series to two such momentous themes as the Spanish Republic and the Civil War, this fact should have been glossed over as merely anecdotal by almost all the critics.

Noteworthy at this point is the recent study by David Craven (1999) and the change of perspective it ushered in with the new light he casts on the relationship between abstract expressionism and politics in affirming the political commitment not

<sup>25</sup> The reference to Lorca's poem, which Motherwell himself recognises, appears in the most prominent studies of Motherwell's painting. See for example, E. A. Carmean, "Robert Motherwell: The Elegies to the Spanish Republic" (Carmean, 1978), Arnasson (1982) and Ashton (1996; 1983). However, the study that most insistently stresses the relationship is that of Robert C. Hobbs (1975).

<sup>26</sup> Two of his key articles along these lines are "Avant-garde and Kitsch", which was published in *Partisan Review* 6 (Fall 1939), and "American-Type Painting", *Partisan Review*, Volume 22, n° 2, (Spring 1955).

<sup>27</sup> Essential among these works are the writings of Max Kozloff (1973), Eva Cockcroft (1974), Serge Guilbaut (1983) and David and Cecile Shapiro (1989).

only of the New York School painters themselves but also of their artistic production. Craven proposes that the political nature of abstract expressionism is not to be found so much in the objective identification of a message or a political motif as in its very conception of creative and pictorial activity. His study is nothing less than a new framework within which to approach the *Elegies* and to assess their relationship with the Spanish Republic and the Civil War.

With this in mind, I should like to return to the series' title and how mainstream critics have steered clear of any political reading of it. In general, an oft-cited brief quote from Motherwell himself has been used to justify the exclusion of political considerations from analyses of the *Elegies*. He wrote in 1963 that, "The Spanish *Elegies* are not political but my private insistence that a terrible death happened that should not be forgot [sic]"<sup>28</sup>. This quote taken alone may imply that the series is not political by nature, but elsewhere Motherwell is very clear in indicating that the *Elegies* do indeed refer to a public event with a political nature: "The *Elegies* record private feelings nevertheless they are about a public event – and to me the event was political."<sup>29</sup>

From my point of view, Motherwell decided on *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* as the definitive title for the series because the archetypal image he had found conveyed, he believed, a public dimension, which means that even if the image expressed the artist's personal feelings (including his obsession about death, his personal identification with specific elements of Spanish culture, etcetera), these feelings were also related with his standpoint on his own times, with his being so moved by the tragedy of the Civil War and with his lament, his elegy, for a modernity in which human life seemed to be of ever-diminishing value. Motherwell clearly asserted this stance on more than one occasion:

Unlike the rest of my work, the *Elegies* are, for the most part, public statements. The *Elegies* reflect the internationalist in me, interested in the historical forces of the twentieth century, with strong feelings about the conflicting forces in it.<sup>30</sup>

Motherwell is not saying here that the *Elegies* constitute a political manifesto, or that they make any explicit visual reference to particular events of the Civil War, but that he was striving to give due emphasis to his feelings about the world in which it was his lot to live and he linked these feelings with one of the tragedies that had most marked his generation: the Spanish Civil War. This is the perspective from which one should understand Motherwell's declaration that the Spanish *Elegies* "are not political", by which he means that they do not contain a political manifesto but rather are his "private insistence" that something terrible had happened that "should not be forgot [sic]". There can be little doubt that Motherwell's plea that the Civil War should not be forgotten is an attitude that is, in itself, robustly political. Overlooking the fact that these feelings are also part of the theme of the *Elegies* prevents a complete reading of the

<sup>28</sup> See "Robert Motherwell: A Conversation at Lunch" (Eatsman, 1963: 19). Bradford R. Collins has reflected on this issue (1984: 95).

<sup>29</sup> Robert Motherwell, cited in E. A. Carmean, "Robert Motherwell: The *Elegies* to the Spanish Republic" (Carmean, 1980: 101).

<sup>30</sup> Robert Motherwell, cited in "With Robert Motherwell" (Ashton, 1983: 22).

complexity and richness of the elements that lie at the base of their force and power to move.

It is precisely in Robert Motherwell's own writings on art, the most complete of those produced by the New York School artists, that one finds a clearly stated aesthetic conception that is deeply concerned with the link between artist and society. In his well-known article, "The Modern Painter's World", which was published in 1944 (Motherwell, 1944), he directly reflected on the difficult relations between the artist and the modern world. Greatly influenced by the ideas of professor Meyer Schapiro, Motherwell suggested that, in the modern world dominated by the materialist values of capitalism and undergoing spiritual collapse due to the crisis of the traditional religions, the artist is increasingly pushed towards a marginal position, into a spiritual underground (Motherwell, 1944), a condemnation to permanent opposition to society. Confronted with a world whose values he or she cannot share, the artist's themes are evermore reduced to aesthetic motifs and his or her own ego. Hence the dilemma of the modern painter, as Motherwell saw it, was that of being in the uncomfortable position of being unable to connect positively with society and thus being obliged to engage in an exclusively aesthetic reflection that impoverishes his or her art.

It is important to note at this point that these arguments of Motherwell have frequently been used to justify the theory that holds that abstract expressionism was only concerned with the formal values of art. For some critics (Guilbaut, 1983; Carmean, 1978), "The Modern Painter's World" is the text that marks the end of the politically committed art of the 1930s, giving rise to a new kind of American art with purely aesthetic concerns.

However, confusing Motherwell's diagnosis of the situation of modern art with the presentation of an inescapable response to the problem would seem erroneous. Rather, what Motherwell is doing is to describe the dilemma facing the modern artist. This does not necessarily mean that he is advocating wholesale adoption of formalist art. I would suggest that it is precisely in this difficult equilibrium, this rather uncomfortable situation of a kind of art that does not wish to renounce either its wealth of aesthetic resources or its connection with the world in which it is produced, where we might find this often contradictory character of abstract expressionism. Motherwell's remarks, rather than demonstrating any despairing opting for formalism, confirm the contradiction of values, the internal struggle that is present in all his works. This difficult relationship of the modern artist with his or her society is a dilemma that runs through Motherwell's painting as an unresolved question, a cause of anguish that determines the conditions in which the artist is obliged to create.

The *Elegies* are the paintings in which Motherwell reflected most openly on this question. His response to Picasso's famous work *Guernica* in "The Modern Painter's World" sheds further light on this question. What is particularly relevant about the impact of this work on Motherwell is not so much the fact that formal connections between the two works do exist, but rather that *Guernica* raises for Motherwell all the predicaments pertaining to the modern artist's relationship with society. Motherwell says in his article that Picasso had tried to give public and monumental expression to his appalled indignation over the tragedy of the bombing of Guernica but, from the

moment in which the painter can no longer speak for his or her society or social class, this kind of expression risks failure: “*Guernica* hangs in uneasy equilibrium between now disappearing social values, i.e. moral indignation at the character of modern life – what Mondrian called the tragic, as opposed to the eternal and the formal” (Motherwell, 1944: 10-11). Motherwell’s reflections on *Guernica* offer a new standpoint from which to consider the *Elegies*, especially if one bears in mind its status as “public statement”, for which he also strove. Contradicting his own words as to the impossibility of finding a form of expression that would identify the artist with the world about him or her, Motherwell, like Picasso, risks producing art that is the bearer of other values going beyond the purely aesthetic.

Underlying the *Elegies*, therefore, is an artist’s desire to connect with his society, to express sentiments that are individual but that have a collective sense. Motherwell’s own writings offer an interesting reflection on the role of aesthetics in his work. Deeply influenced by existentialist philosophy at a time when it was enthusiastically embraced by New York’s artistic and intellectual circles<sup>31</sup>, Motherwell holds that abstract art does not disclose a set of formal decisions taken with the aim of creating an aesthetic object, but a set of moral decisions that point to the values and specific sentiments of the artist in relation to the world. In emphasizing these values, the work of art acquires an ethical dimension because it suggests a certain attitude (spiritual, moral) towards life. Still more interesting is the fact that, for Motherwell, such a moral stance is a form of rebellion against what the modern world represents:

But I think that the art that is called “art for art’s sake” has social implications. These might be summarized under the general notion of protest – of protest of what goes on, of protest against the suppression of feeling, above all protest to the falsifications of personal concrete experience. In many respects a negative position to be sure, but not without its pathos or a dumb, obstinate rebellion at how the world is presently organized (Terenzio, 1992: 78).

When we analyze Motherwell’s writings on art, we see that his great concern with the nexus between modern art and society clearly contradicts those who only wish to see a reflection on aesthetics in his work. While this does not mean that Motherwell saw social transformation as a direct aim of his work, it does show his conviction that in an increasingly dehumanized world, the artist, in engaging in truly creative activities that are faithful to human experience can contribute towards a recovery of humanist values, thereby constituting a motor of transformation.

To conclude, Motherwell says that the *Elegies* speak of Spain but they speak of more than Spain<sup>32</sup>. For him the Civil War is an example of a terrible injustice that became the symbol of the destiny of humanity in modern times. The lament, his elegy, is

<sup>31</sup> This question has been thoroughly discussed by Dore Ashton (1972; 1999). Nancy Jachec has also focused on this (1991).

<sup>32</sup> See “Robert Motherwell: A Conversation at Lunch” (Eastman, 1963).

in memory of a just cause that was brutally crushed, while at the same time he is issuing a warning about the future of a world that is daily ravaged by tragedy and death. The reference to the Spanish Civil War and defeat of the republican cause synthesizes for Motherwell this critique of the modern world. His statement that the *Elegies* speak of a terrible death that must not be forgotten<sup>33</sup> once again points to the powerful presence of his political stance in the works. A cry not to forget is always a cry to become involved in the present because, if there is any sense in remembering a tragedy, it is to try to prevent its recurrence: "Thus Reconciliation has multiple meanings...Reconciliation (hopefully) of the Spanish peoples, reconciliation with Death and Life...(...) The Reconciliation Elegy is not less for Spain, but is also for all mankind" (Carmean, 1980: 77).

Translation from the Catalan: Julie Wark ©

### ///REFERENCES///

- ARNASSON, H.H.; ASHTON, Dore. *Robert Motherwell*. 2nd edition. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. Publishers, 1982.
- ASHTON, Dore. *The New York School. A Cultural Reckoning*. New York: Viking Press, 1972.
- (ed.); BANACH, Joan. *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007.
- ; FLAM, Jack. *Robert Motherwell*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1983.
- (et. al.). *José Guerrero. La colección del Centro*. Granada: Diputación de Granada, 2000.
- (et. al.). *Motherwell*. Barcelona: Fundació Tàpies, 1996.
- (et. al.). *À rebours. La rebelión informalista 1939-1968*. Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1999.
- BARR, Alfred H. (et al.). *La nueva pintura americana*. Madrid: Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, 1958.
- BONET, Juan Manuel (et al.). *Guerrero*. Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 1994.
- CARMEAN, E. A.; RATHBONE, Eliza. *American Art at Mid-Century: The Subjects of the Artist*. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1978.
- (et. al.). *Robert Motherwell: The Reconciliation Elegy*. Ginebra: Skira, 1980.
- CARROL, Peter N. *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.
- CAWS, Mary Ann. *Robert Motherwell. What Art Holds*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
- . *Robert Motherwell. With Pen and Brush*. London: Reaktion Books, 2003.

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

- CHIPP, Herschel B. *El Guernica de Picasso. Historia. Transformaciones. Significado*. Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 1991.
- COCKROFT, Eva. "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War". *Artforum*, 12. New York: Artforum International Magazine, June 1974, pp 39-41.
- COLLINS, Bradford R. "The Fundamental Tragedy of the *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, or Robert Motherwell's Dilemma". *Arts Magazine*, 59. S.L.: Arts Magazine, September 1984, pp.94-97.
- CRAVEN, David. "Aesthetics and Ethics in the Writings of Robert Motherwell and Meyer Schapiro". *Archives of American Art Journal*, 36, 1. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1996, pp.25-32.
- . *Abstract Expressionism as a Cultural Critique. Dissent During the McCarthy Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- EASTMAN, Louise L. *An Exhibition of the Work of Robert Motherwell*. Northampton: Smith College Museum of Art, 1963.
- GOOSEN, Eugene C. "Robert Motherwell and the Seriousness of Subject". *Art International*. Lugano: Art International, January – February 1959, pp. 33-38.
- GREENBERG, Clement. *La pintura moderna y otros ensayos*. Madrid: Siruela, 2006.
- GUILBAUT, Serge. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- HOBBS, Robert C. *Motherwell's Concern with Death in Painting: An Investigation of His Elegies to the Spanish Republic, Including an Examination of His Philosophical and Methodological Considerations*. (doctoral thesis). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1975.
- JACHEC, Nancy. "The Space Between Art and Political Action: Abstract Expressionism and Ethical Choice in Postwar America 1945-1950". *Oxford Art Journal*, 14, 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp.18 – 29.
- KOZLOFF, Max. "American Painting during the Cold War". *Artforum*, 13. New York: Artforum International Magazine, May 1973, pp.43-54.
- LANDAU, Ellen G. (ed.). *Reading Abstract Expressionism. Context and Critique*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- MACDONALD, Nancy. *Homage to the Spanish Exiles. Voices from the Spanish Civil War*. New York: Insight Books, 1987.
- MATHEWS, Jane De Hart. "Art and Politics in American Cold War". *American Historical Review*, 81. Richmond: The University of Chicago Press, 1976, pp. 762 – 787.
- MATTISON, Robert Saltonstall. *Robert Motherwell. The Formative Years*. Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1987.
- MCKENDRY, John; MOTHERWELL, Robert; KELDER, Diane. *Robert Motherwell's A la Pintura. The Genesis of a Book*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972.
- MOTHERWELL, Robert. "The Modern Painter's World". *DYN*, 6. New York: DYN, 1944, pp. 9-14.
- ; REINHARDT, Ad. (ed.). *Modern Artists in America*. New York: Witteborn and Schultz, 1951.
- O'HARA, Frank. *Robert Motherwell*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1965.
- PLEYNET, Marcelin. *Robert Motherwell*. Paris: Edition Daniel Papierski, 1989.
- POLCARI, Stephen. *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

- SANDLER, Irving. *The Triumph of American Painting. A History of Abstract Expressionism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1970.
- SCHAPIRO, Meyer. *Modern Art 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Selected Papers*. New York: George Braziller, 1978.
- SEITZ, William. *Abstract Expressionism Painting in America: An Interpretation Based on the Work and Thought of Six Key Figures*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983.
- SHAPIRO, David; SHAPIRO, Cecile (ed.). *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- STONOR SAUNDERS, Frances. *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*. London: Granta Books, 2001.
- TÀPIES, Antoni. *L'experiència de l'art*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1996.
- TERENZIO, Stephanie (ed.). *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- VAN HENSBERGEN, Gijs. *Guernica. Autobiography of a Twentieth-Century Icon*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004.