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Oral history interview with Wallace Putnam, 1982 Aug. 13-20

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Wallace Putnam on August 13 and 20, 1982. The interview took place at the Ice House in Yorktown Heights, NY, and was conducted by Avis Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

AVIS BERMAN: …by Avis Berman at his house, at the Ice House in Yorktown Heights on July 13, 1982. Now, as I said, I'd like to start with some family background. You were born in 1899 in West Newton, Massachusetts. Is that right?

WALLACE PUTNAM: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: And what was your family like?

MR. PUTNAM: My father was 65 when I was born and died when I was 11 months old, so I didn't know him. My mother was only 35. It was a second marriage with him. He was head of a boys' school in Boston and the deacon of a church. One of his claims to fame is that he saw a sea serpent off his point of rocks. He built a house on the extreme point of Cape Ann, Pigeon Cove. I was taken there the first three or four years of my life. I think it may have something to do with my love of the ocean and painting the sea and seabirds. He died, as I say, when I was 11 Months. My mother had rather a hard life because she was a very simple…do you want to go into this?

MS. BERMAN: It's all right, yes.

MR. PUTNAM: My father was a gambler, a deacon in the church. But late in life he got interested in stocks, and everything he touched turned to gold until towards the end he got interested in a gold mine. He told his friends about it. There was no gold. And he, being a righteous man, had the feeling he should pay back his friends-he had gotten them into it and as a friendly thing. So he didn't have much money when he died. My mother had some from her father, but she was no businesswoman and it didn't last very long. She had been trained to music, as a music teacher, but that didn't work out. So she ended up going out sewing in my growing up days, every day. And it was very tight. Once I remember that she said, "You must return the milk bottles and get the deposit. I can't have my money tied up in milk bottles." Anyhow, she was a mother primarily, a loving mother, simple and innocent, naive. I had one sister three years older who went to college and became an actuary, finally, with the New York City Actuaries in New York. She's now living in a home up on Lyme Rock. We had been totally different, as different as could be. But now we call about every week or two and we're very dear friends. I became interested in art one day in grammar school about the seventh grade or eighth. I don't know just what age that would be. And for no reason I made a little drawing out the window of the building opposite and for no reason decided to be an artist. And I don't think I had any special talent. In general I don't think talent is so important as an interest. So in high school I was interested in art and the teacher was glad to have someone interested in art and gave me the run of the art room. I could come and go. She also took me to the Boston Museum and introduced me to the museum-a very helpful woman. I was interested in art but football was my main interest. I was the captain of the Brookline (I had moved to Brookline) High School and I rowed on the crew and played hockey. Athletics were my life. I feel that I was remarkably stupid until I was 19. I had no interest or awareness of life. So in Boston then after my year of art school in Boston, I went for six months to the Normal Art School in Boston which was primarily for teachers. This was immediately after the First World War in 1919. So when I was there, there were, I think six boys and about 600 girls. I didn't learn much. Incidentally, we went across town twice a week to a life class run by a teacher. There was something about her, and I feel this is true about all teachers. What is most important about them is, those teachers that have influenced me have been those to whom what they taught was important. And they were able to communicate their interest and the sense of the importance of this man. We went there and drawings of the students were on the wall, one by a man that became one of my best friends. He was a senior when I was a freshman in this Normal Art School. It was an incredibly remarkable drawing. But when you got there, you worked, really dug in. And I learned there more than I did at Normal all week. But then the next year I went for six months to the Boston Museum School. Incidentally, leaving high school I went to Harvard and was in an Army uniform for six months. It was an officers training sort of thing. But when the war ended, I immediately got out and went to art school.

MS. BERMAN: Were you drafted?

MR. PUTNAM: No. I was a thing of, let's say, you could go to school. I went to college regular but you were in uniform and drilled. The Museum School was as academic as any school in America I guess at that time. The

whole thing was "make it look like." I guess it was a long training. They let me into the portrait class with William James. He was the son of William James, I think. But at the end of six months, having had a year of art school, I thought I knew enough and rented a…. Am I going into too much detail? Because this can go on. Are you pleased with what I'm doing?

MS. BERMAN: Yes. I'm going to go back and ask you a few other questions.

MR. PUTNAM: Okay.

MS. BERMAN: It's perfectly all right. We want to know about Wallace Putnam as well as Mark Rothko.

MR. PUTNAM: I was just showing you those photographs. And one here I did immediately after I left the art school. I rented a little….

MS. BERMAN: Is this a self-portrait?

MR. PUTNAM: Yes, a self-portrait. I tipped the mirror forward so that the arm would be strong. And whole idea was my concentration, you see.

MS. BERMAN: It's quite radical.

MR. PUTNAM: The little model of a hand modeling the head of a woman up there.

MS. BERMAN: Uhhuh.

MR. PUTNAM: Anyhow, I rented this little hall bedroom and did this. The girl that I rented it from was interested in social things primarily. And she would have meetings. Those returning from having been conscientious objectors in the First World War would come and tell about their experiences and so forth. It was some what IWW. But I would sit there. I'm laughing because I'm really telling my life story. I've gone over this so much myself that I'm quite familiar with it. I've written it, as a matter of fact. But when I left art school, I went to this room on Boylston Street, this hall bedroom and painted this portrait. I worked in a pump factory afternoons, made $8 a week. And I paid $3, no, $5 for rent, $2 for food, I saved $3. And having saved $25, all that money, I quit my job and went up to North Reading, 20 miles north of Boston, to paint. A friend of mine had a shack, a hunting shack, with others. I went up in the middle of February. The night I arrived it went 24 degrees below zero. There were cracks like this between the boards and a potbellied stove that you wouldn't know it was there unless you had your hand on it. Lots of bedding because sometimes there were lots of men there. I piled so many on top of me, I couldn't turn over. I didn't know enough to put blankets under me to keep the air from coming through the mattress. Anyhow, this month there the only way I could keep warm was walking and chopping wood. I tried to paint. It was the basis for this theater performance I mentioned called "Wind in the Woods' for which I did the sets. Anyhow, it was the year before when I was going to art school that my mother took a house on St. Botolph Street and rented rooms. I had a room up on the top floor and this very good draftsman in art school lived in the next room. It was there that I had this terrific awakening. From being a football player suddenly the world on all levels hit me at once, all the problems. And I saw the hell of the world, of society, helped by Tolstoy who had taken a census in Moscow. He took a census and it horrified him, changed his life completely. His first book was *What Is to Be Done?* I took that over, swallowed it whole. I saw the world as hopelessly, hectically, horribly chaotic. As I saw it, it was human greed that spoiled everything in every field-"Me first." And I saw no possible hope. So when they talked about socialism and communism in that room a year later, I just didn't believe that was the answer because that's working on the same level as the trouble. The only hope that I have had since that time is a spiritual reawakening. I have no hope for communism or Republican, Democrat. This is all on the sick level. Greed spoils everything. And it isn't until individuals preach…a Putnam coming out now. I'll stop there. Anyhow, I did this painting. And I lived in the galleries, in the museums. I rubbed my nose against it, you see. I really learned by seeing how others do it and trying to do it myself. And then my sister got a job in Hartford with Travelers Insurance, and I went down there for three or four years. And Milton Avery was one of the young painters that I go to know. I met him. I was told that the thing for a young artist to do and also young Trinity College students was to get a job at the Travelers Insurance Company filing policies. So I went in and got a job, and the first person I met was Milton sitting on a stool filing policies. We did that. We'd worked for a while and quit to paint for half a year. He lived in East Hartford. I lived in West Hartford. He lived on the east side of the Connecticut (River). There were two other boys who were painters and we were friends. We might go sketching. And we finally had an exhibition together. We had an exhibition in the Athenaeum, I think. It was a big room in the public library. Each of us had a wall, and this is the catalogue.

MS. BERMAN: Let's see.

MR. PUTNAM: One of the artists, Owen Smith, made this wood cut. But Milton had the most work.

MS. BERMAN: He had 52.

MR. PUTNAM: What?

MS. BERMAN: It says he had 52 paintings.

MR. PUTNAM: Yes. 52. He was older than we were. As I always understood it, he was about six years older. But Mr. Werner, who writes for some Washington magazine on painters, he approached me to talk about Milton. He said that the Whitney Museum in their working out this catalogue had gone up to Oswego where he was born and found his birth certificate. He was much older than we said he was.

MS. BERMAN: Yes. He was born in 1885, not 1893.

MR. PUTNAM: Yes. That makes him a lot older than I.

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MR. PUTNAM: As I remember, this wasn't simply because he fell for Sally. I mean that would have been where it might have happened. But I understood that he was not the earlier age before that. Anyhow, we quit the Travelers and worked at the tire and rubber company, a stinking job. But we made more money. He, being somewhat older, was given the job of making the tire while I worked in a …it was some job. Anyhow, that's what we did for a living and we painted all the time. I began going to New York every month or so, at least three or four times, and I'd see the shows and come back and write them up. I became the art critic for the *Hartford Sunday Current*. But I got into it by…when Milton would have a show, if you paid for an inch of space in the newspapers, you could have an inch of writing. So I remember the first time we went to the post office and I tried to figure out something to say. I have these writings somewhere too. But that's how I got into writing, with early writing about Milton. It ended up with a big full page spread on the Morgan Collection of early American Furniture In '23 I read three books on modern art, and it was a real revelation. It turned me over completely. Milton, more than anyone I have ever met with or heard of, was an artist from the very beginning. He knew from the very beginning to rely on his intuition. And from the very beginning, his things had aesthetic quality-the composition and color and very free but right-unlike me who got into it from an illustrative angle. That is, it was Millet's farm life. I love nature. It was the nature aspect that he caught that excited me. That and Rembrandt's etchings of people, characterizations. I got into it from that side. And with the Boston training, it was making it "look like." So this was something totally different, these three books with their illustrations of Matisse, Picasso, Kandinsky, and what-not. So I must do something influenced by that. At the same time I suddenly awoke to the design qualities, the marvelous designs in Japanese prints. So the aesthetic side of painting is what I awoke to. What I was able to do then, it made me simplify my nature things, more stress on the design, the simplicity of the composition and so forth. Then I did some quite…there's one here, a couple here. The Japanese earthquake was in '25 and I did this. This is brilliant colors, oranges and reds, and it's supposed to be the earthquake. And this is the dragon that makes it, you see. And that's the volcano.

MS. BERMAN: That's very abstract for Hartford in 1925.

MR. PUTNAM: Yes it was. This is a beautiful…this made me happy one day when my mother, who had no sense or knowledge or interest in art, caught sight of this. "That's beautiful." It did have an exciting…. This is a crazy thing of the adolescent purism. This was shown in the Independent Art Exhibition in New York.

MS. BERMAN: The Society of Independent Artists.

MR. PUTNAM: Yes. And this was my show that I had in '25 in the same athenaeum where the other show was. It was up for a week. I decided I was wasting my money on a Sunday afternoon. I was going to stop the show but an Army officer came in and walked around. He looked at where I had the price list. He said, "I want to buy one of these two." He went out and came back with five $20 bills. This is it! That was big money!

MS. BERMAN: It certainly was.

MR. PUTNAM: I went home to my mother and sister and showed this money. Milton and I, a couple of days later, were on our way to New York.

MS. BERMAN: With great expectations.

MR. PUTNAM: We rented a room on the corner of 44th Street and Eighth Avenue. It was right around the corner form Times Square. Neither of us had any money. We'd go into Bickford's, one of the chain restaurants. He's see us come in at night-he'd yell "two bowls." We'd have a bowl of soup, and that was it pretty much. For breakfast we'd have whole wheat bread, toast; for lunch, the same thing. I lost 20 pounds that summer. And our other big expense was once in a while, Milton who knew vaudeville, was very up on vaudeville, would go over to the Palace which was the big vaudeville theater in the country to see if it was worth our quarter. For 25 cents you could get up in the top balcony. I'm going to confess again that Milton went over before, said it was worth our

money, and so we went over. And I was in line getting the tickets when he came over and pointed at my feet. He said, "Here's where I was this morning and someone picked up a roll of bills." I looked down to where he pointed and picked up a roll of bills. What I'm confessing is that I kept the five and gave him the one. He pointed it out. Anyhow, we walked in and out of theaters for months afterwards and never saw another nickel. There's some questions?

MS. BERMAN: Yes. I want to go back. You said something very interesting to me. You said that when you decided, thought about becoming an artist when you were in grammar school, you said that you didn't really have a talent. It was more of an interest. And you felt that it was more important for someone to have an interest than talent. Why is that?

MR. PUTNAM: Well, because a good part of it is simply the interest enough to keep you working. I mean there are talented people that when they feel like it, when they're with others that are painting, they can paint. But it takes really day-after-day work. And interestingly enough, the world doesn't want you to become an artist. It isn't interested at all and would rather you wouldn't. And so you have to fight for it. And that aspect of being interested and having the drive. Milton never would have become what he became I'm sure-that is, I'm confident-except for Sally. She supplied the drive to a large extent and also the worldly wisdom enough to deal with people. I'm quite sure that he couldn't have done it alone.

MS. BERMAN: He seemed to have an inner stamina of his own, though.

MR. PUTNAM: Yes, he did. But that extra push that one needs, I doubt if it was in him.

MS. BERMAN: She was remarkable. She really insulated him from everything.

MR. PUTNAM: They were both so dedicated. She was wonderful, her dedication from the very beginning. She felt he was the real thing. They had the baby and that was a family. I mean Milton helped. But she always made the living pretty much in the early days. She was very good a commercial art. The spots she did for the New York *Times* for many years were really little works of art. They were marvelous. They liked her so much that they'd go away for the summer and give someone else the job for the summer but she'd get it back. I've written too about their wedding. We should go into that. It was interesting rather that her mother and father didn't want her to marry. Here was an older man who was not Jewish. She decided to do it anyway. Her younger sister, Augusta, our happy moments during that first summer were when we'd go to Brooklyn to see Sally and her sister. So we met. First we went to New York and they sent us to the Brooklyn marriage bureau because she lived in Brooklyn. But it was a crazy little thing. It was set up on a little pedestal, the rings, "Blah, blah, blah, blah. Two dollars please." But after that we went to Charles restaurant, and had a celebration. Sally's sister bought Sally a new hat and I got him a new pair of shoes. They were off to Gloucester, where they met, for the summer. When they came back, they lived up on Broadway at the...I forget now what it's called, 65th and Broadway.

MS. BERMAN: Lincoln Arcade.

MR. PUTNAM: The lived in the Lincoln Arcade Annex on the south side. They had a long, narrow room, so long as this but only to where you're sitting, about, it might have been a little longer. Yes, it was a little longer, but narrow, with one window right on the elevated. They had elevated trains going by 15 feet away. You had to stop whenever they went by. But in no time, the place was filled with Milton's paintings-Central Park, Jones Beach, over on the Hudson. They were all good. Some of them would be very good today because he had this aesthetic sense and his wit, his way of seeing. I said to him about his work that he didn't have to see nature and make a drawing and then make art out of it. He saw it directly. It was art from the very beginning. He'd see it simply and get the form immediately.

MS. BERMAN: I want to ask you when you were in high school and you were first being encouraged, were you only drawing or were you drawing and painting and what were you ...?

MR. PUTNAM: I was doing portraits. I did the mother of a friend of mine. I saw this man 20 years ago. He offered it to me. Well, I didn't have the vision that I speak of that came suddenly when the modern art idea came to me.

MS. BERMAN: The teacher taking you to the galleries and museums, what sort of art were you seeing in Boston at the time?

MR. PUTNAM: Well, it was typically Boston art. I had a show somewhere in Boston.

MS. BERMAN: The Boston Tradition at the Whitney. I guess that's the way you'd put it.

MR. PUTNAM: Yes. I didn't see it. The idea was that they admired Vermeer very much. It was kind of based on that idea.

MS. BERMAN: Did you see some of the more vigorous old masters at all? Were you interested in that?

MR. PUTNAM: Sargent, I admired his technique. Once I stood aside in a little narrow hallway in a studio building to let him go by. Then there was a Boston snow painter named Aldro Hibbard who later functioned in Vermont. He was an athlete and baseball player and I admired him. He worked in Rockport where I spent the summer.

MS. BERMAN: When you went to the art schools and the Museum School, at the time were you satisfied with the idea that art was supposed to be something you had to make "look like?"

MR. PUTNAM: Yes, definitely. Very often, as I said, I had paintings that were derived from Rembrandt. Pretty, pretty things that would never have interested me in later years.

MS. BERMAN: Once you went to modern, as you say, did that cause trouble for you as an artist?

MR. PUTNAM: No.

MS. BERMAN: I mean not for you internally but with other people that you knew?

MR. PUTNAM: No. My mother was always…as I say, she was with me in any way because she had nothing against anything. I came to New York and somehow (I've forgotten how it happened) I got to know a man, he was an artist. I think it was through him possibly I got to know Katherine Dreier. She was always very supportive. I did two things for the show in the Brooklyn Museum. So in a way at this point I was more modern than the public was up to.

MS. BERMAN: That early abstraction you showed me with the dragon, although it is Japanese inspired, had a look of someone like Picabia to it.

MR. PUTNAM: Yes, well, I was full of everybody's work. I was aware of it and interested in it, including some of the early Americans-Karfiol.

MS. BERMAN: I'm interested how you got mixed up in the Societe Amamalia if you didn't talk a lot or mixed with Duchamp and Mrs. Dreier and all the people.

MR. PUTNAM: No, I was not a mixer. When I came to New York, I didn't have any money, just my $120. I was trying to do commercial work. My first commercial job was really at the top of a commercial man's career. I was doing samples of neckties, black and white, having done abstractions. I took them to the art department which was in the Altman's building. The man looked at them and almost bought one. I woke up in the middle of the night, got up a dawn, went down and drew the front of Altman's and spent a month or so rendering it. I took it down and he bought it for $125. It appeared also in the Sunday *Times*, a full page. But then, I got a job for one day in an advertising agency and quit. I couldn't take it. Then fortunately a cousin of mine called me. He was working for the New York *Sun* at night. He asked me if I wanted a temporary job; that one of his young men was in the hospital. Did I want to work for a couple of weeks? But the young man died and I worked for 25 years on the New York *Sun*. It was a meal ticket to paint days. Short hours, you could leave when the work was done, and it didn't take any creativity. Forget it. You didn't think of it until you came back. So it was my way of getting along while I was studying. It also took the pressure off of getting shows ready. So my first one man how in New York was not until I was 45 in 1945 which was a very good French gallery, the Bignou Gallery. I took the stuff under my arm. I think that was the first or second place I went. That was the first show.

MS. BERMAN: What was the job at the New York *Sun* then?

MR. PUTNAM: In the art department, advertising. So it was just touching up type, doing a little lettering, a little air brush, a little pasting in of type. It was boring work, but it paid enough.

MS. BERMAN: It didn't squeeze you out either. You said you never taught, did you?

MR. PUTNAM: No. The only time I taught was with an artist friend. He had the chance to go to…I can't think of the name of the place where….

[END OF SIDE 1]

MS. BERMAN: To ask you about Hartford, was there any kind of artistic community or people who were interested in art?

MR. PUTNAM: There was an art school there. Hartford Art School it was called. I went for a while because there was a model and you'd get the use of the model. Milton I think went to another art school. I'm quite sure he did. We had a few artist friends, people like that, our age too. But there wasn't a community I would say.

MS. BERMAN: Were there patrons or collectors?

MR. PUTNAM: Not that I was aware of. They weren't collecting what we were doing.

MS. BERMAN: You seemed to imply that most of your writing for the Hartford *Current* consisted of reviews of New York shows and not local activities.

MR. PUTNAM: Yes. One of the men connected with the Archives is interested. He called a couple of times about my material. I told him that I've just been so busy, lots of writing and painting, that I haven't had time to think of anything. But I don't feel that I'm in that same position now. I incline towards the Archives but I don't feel that I'm going to die immediately so I'm putting it off. But again, let's get back to you....

MS. BERMAN: Let's go to Mark Rothko for a little while. How did you meet him?

MR. PUTNAM: Well, there was this Opportunity Gallery show. That's the one that I wrote up. Having made a habit of writing Milton's shows, I went down there and wrote it up. I had never met Rothko or Gottlieb. There was a man named Dirk there too, and Karfiol was the artist they chose for that month. That's how my writing, I guess you heard, mentions these but climaxing on Milton, my friend, you see. And working for the *Sun*, I handed it to Henry McBride and asked him if he could use it. Surprisingly, he used it at the end of his article so it looked as though he had written it. And Rothko, years later, said that McBride had discovered him. I told him the story. But actually that was the first thing that helped Rothko, Gottlieb, and Milton, that Opportunity show, which was quite a wonderful thing. I forget when it was that I met Mark. I think it was probably through Milton because, at the time of the show, I don't think Milton knew Rothko. It must have been kind of out of that show that they met. And I remember going with Milton and Sally to Rothko's studio. He was married and lived on the east side with his first wife. We spent the evening. There was one thing I remember. Mark was speaking about the "myth" was dead and because of that it was necessary to be an abstractionist and to paint because the myth had lost its virtue. I feel and have felt for many years that that isn't so. The myth-the story of Jesus, of Hercules-they're all as valid now as they ever were or will be because it doesn't matter whether they were true or not. It's are they true to you. It's what they mean to you that's important. And these myths are about the essence of life, about the common search for values and truths and these heroes. So I'm constantly using myths and have been. But that was Rothko, about all I remember of that first meeting except I liked him.

MS. BERMAN: He was saying that myths were dead and you should paint abstractly in about 1928 or 1929?

MR. PUTNAM: Well, not abstractly but he was leading towards that because the myth was dead.

MS. BERMAN: I'm confused and I'm trying to find out when this was because later, it seems, sometime in the late '30's, he was painting those series on subways and then he began to say that these illustrative paintings aren't any good and we should start using myths. So this seems to be in contradiction. So I'm trying to see exactly when he said that.

MR. PUTNAM: That's right. Well, it might have been the myth that made him go in for the subway scenes, you see. And that not satisfying him, then he would turn to the myth. That's what I'm remembering because it was the main thing out of that evening. And in general, after I wrote about Milton and these three, I showed the writing to Katharine Kuh. She said I didn't know enough about Rothko to write about him. She corrected me which was perfectly valid because she knew him better than I. But we were always good friends and we talked and I feel respected each other. I would go to his studio occasionally in New York to see what he was doing and spent an evening with him and a painter friend of his who lives up in Provincetown who does these black silhouette paintings-it's rather typical of him, black and gold. Motherwell. We spent an evening with Mark and Motherwell. They both could talk. Mark came out here two or three times and spent the night once, I guess you heard. There is a story which I'll tell you. That was the time we went for a walk and the evening air was a little chilly. I gave him that big black hat to wear. I didn't dare wear it here. I could in the west but I couldn't wear it here, so I gave it to him. Clyfford Still. I lived on Cornelia Street, the top floor of an Italian tenement house. I carried coal five flights from the basement up to the top for a little kitchen stove that my wife had gotten to heat the place. The bathtub was on stilts in the kitchen. We had two apartments so we got a private toilet. It would have been for two apartments. My wife made it very cozy. It was when we were living here summers and we'd go in there in the winter. Once Rothko came down. He said, "I'd like you to meet an artist on the first floor," of the building I lived in. It was Clyfford Still who had this even smaller apartment .He was living alone. His family was still in San Francisco. It was very narrow because the front hall of the ground floor was there. He had been doing abstractions, great big canvases, and they were rolled up in a corner. He pulled them out and held them up six feet away from me, and that was my first view of abstractions. I confess that I didn't get it. Later my wife and I stayed in his apartment for a few weeks. He was teaching down in Florida, I think. We took care of their cat and their plants. A crazy Siamese cat. It would get across the room from you, look and hisses, and then tear at you and run.

MS. BERMAN: Is this Still's or Rothko's house?

MR. PUTNAM: This was Rothko's. But we lived with these abstractions, went to bed and woke up with them. Even that first evening we spent there, Connie and I both suddenly got the feel of them, liked and respected them. And through the years I would go to his studio to see what he was doing. Then in Gloucester we would see each other. As I see him, he was a very loving, essentially feeling man. He was loving and lovable. He liked to put on a rough show. I mean he liked to talk tough. He presented to me a softness. And I was full of my Oriental, religious view of things. I never attempted to talk to him about it because he didn't respond to it. I took it that it was his concern with the world which was from boyhood because of his parentage and finding the same ugliness and stupidity in the art world as in the world that made him so convinced that life wasn't worth living. He didn't have enough philosophy and he didn't read. He would talk existentialism. But when he trusted his feelings as he did earlier in the game and did these incredibly beautiful, colorful, light things. And then his head understood that the world wasn't any good. He convinced himself that it had to be black. I think it was that his head took over, and his head wasn't that good in the sense of understanding life. His show, the retrospective, the memorial show, in New York, was wonderful in showing his dedication. He was consistent in his struggle and accomplishment. His wife Mel, when she came to New York, she had the idea of marrying an artist. They had a good relationship. She was very helpful, making money in the early days, I believe. And it was his success that I think ruined him. Katharine Kuh said while he hated the art world, he was caught in it so that he would be aware of who sold what to whom. He was very interested in what happened to his own work and hated to sell. Mel, his wife, told Connie that she woke up once in the middle of the night and Rothko was walking the floor because he said he had a chance to sell something to the Whitney and he had no use for the Whitney. It was all…I forget now whether he ended up selling it. But he hated to sell to this…. He and Still had this hatred of the art world. Still taught at a university, hated the structure of the scholarly teachings, or the intrigues and all this. They were together on that. Then they both began drinking excessively, Mel and he.

MS. BERMAN: Just to go back to this latest story, you were saying that Rothko was walking the floor because he couldn't decide whether to sell this picture or not to the Whitney?

MR. PUTNAM: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Before when you mentioned that Rothko said the myth was dead, but to you, you felt it wasn't dead at all and you could make use of it, did you ever dispute him or argue with him about that?

MR. PUTNAM: No.

MS. BERMAN: Also, you said before that he was a feeling man and then when he began using his head and deciding that his art in a way should reflect the rotten state of the world and his head wasn't as good, did you ever get any evidence of this from the things that he said?

MR. PUTNAM: No. Rothko was a part of his time. I mean even today no one has any hope-Joyce, Beckett, all of the great ones. In that case, the thing is balanced by their great artistry. They are artists and that can balance anything, as it did with Rothko. But it would seem that what I stand for is something else. I had this vision that I was talking to Bonnard and Matisse and Tolstoy, and I saw the world as a hell. But at the same time I saw it as a hell…. I must have been a very late adolescent, 19, when this happened because it's the sort of thing adolescence means, I guess. I would wake up at dawn, get dressed as fast as I could to get out in the empty streets of Boston and walk without a thought in my head, just sensing the color and the beauty of life. Morning after morning I was ecstatic. I once went up to Fenway Park. I went over to the Hudson River and it was ice-covered. I stretched out on the ice and embraced the world. So I knew when I was 19 what was the hell and the glory that's behind this hell. The hell is simply our little ego way of seeing what's in front of us. Actually the universe is beyond words. The meaning of religion I guess is that it's humanly possible to move from seeing the world in personal terms and become like the great American Indians, the great Eskimos, the great Indonesians, those who have gone deepest and highest who have started the religions. They have seen a way, there is a potential, as it is we're half animal. We can't become completely human beings with Jesus. These men are examples, all the wonderful literature of the Bible, Jesus, medieval Christian leaders. All these things are talking about myths in a way, a becoming like other beings. So this has been my life. I've been searching all the Oriental religions, the American Indians to a degree, Christianity as Jesus taught it. And that's what I stand for and why, as I see it, my painting is young and I am, at 83, young. That's because people love my work. I mean most people-I feel that the art world hasn't seen my work. It has seen little snatches. I did a painting last week. Do you want to see it?

MS. BERMAN: Yes. Would you like to stop for another break, or would you like to finish?

MR. PUTNAM: It doesn't matter.

MS. BERMAN: Whatever you want. Why don't we look at it after we finish. I guess what I was going to ask you, what I was getting at which is more pedestrian, was did Rothko ever talk about the darkening of his palette?

MR. PUTNAM: About what?

MS. BERMAN: The darkening of his palette.

MR. PUTNAM: No, he didn't talk much that way. One thing he said when I was with him in his studio was that his paintings finally had the truth of nature. And I feel that it's true. His layer, typical three layer rectangle, so often can be recognized as beach, sea, and sky. Without any effort it rings true on that level I think. He did love nature. One of the times they were out here I took them down the road to people who had a lot of land. They liked Mark and they offered to sell him some. That night, maybe the next morning, he and his wife thought they might buy and build down there. But on the other hand, he loved the city, the people. I believe he needed them. I have wondered whether if he had lived in the country whether he would have ended the way he... The city, which is man-made, every bit of it is thought out and made. The only thing you see is the sky and the leaves on the trees and what man hasn't done. [Inaudible]

MS. BERMAN: You said before that Rothko came from a background of very socially conscious. Can you tell me what you know about that?

MR. PUTNAM: He told me he expected to be a union organizer as a boy because his parents were so…they came from Russia and that was their thing. He expected that that would be his life, the social…so he had it from the very beginning to see the sickness of the world. And he told me that he was apparently very brilliant in school and got a scholarship to go to Yale. Brilliant in school, anyhow he ended up bored with it all. Three months before he would have graduated, he came to New York to paint. Also, he said that he loved music more than painting. And he began to be a painter hoping to make music as emotional link between literature and art as music was to him. And that is what he did do. And I feel that he pushed the art of painting, as I see painting as a cross between literature and music, and he pushed painting towards music as far as it would go, trespassing a little on music's ground because music is especially able to feel moods. Literature is on the other side. And literature, before the modern movement took over, painting was way over on the side of literature, you see. The modern movement was a shift to the opposite extreme. What I think I'm doing is getting back to the middle where art, painting, can see even better than the other arts do, be itself, make immediate a vision, a dimension, an idea. Make it more immediate than words could do it or music. The words can do it but not with the…for instance, if we want to see something, clarify something, we make a poster, say, make a simple clear statement, or we draw a map of it if we want to make it a little more indicative.

MS. BERMAN: I wonder if Rothko knew Walter Pater's statement, "All art should aspire to the condition of music."

MR. PUTNAM: I don't know. I agree with that in a sense. And I feel it's the lack of music in the literary painting preceding that made it not great art.

MS. BERMAN: You say Rothko loved music. Did he have favorites?

MR. PUTNAM: Let's see. At one point it was Mozart.

MS. BERMAN: Do you happen to know when he was at Yale what triggered him, what made him decide that he would become a painter since he evidently, unlike you, hadn't drawn or been inspired earlier?

MR. PUTNAM: He just got fed up with school. I really don't know what…he came here and immediately began to be a painter. As I remember, he began painting right away. And very shortly after coming, he admired Milton. At Milton's memorial ceremony, he read a letter that he wrote particularly-and read it aloud-particularly to say how much Milton had influenced him. It was a nice gesture.

MS. BERMAN: I've read it. It's a beautiful eulogy. Did he ever talk about the Art Students League and what he learned there because he studied at the Art Students League with Max Weber? I was wondering if he ever talked about it.

MR. PUTNAM: A very super man whom I admired. He taught out at a Midwestern university a summer or two. He complained greatly about the students out there, how all they wanted to know was the success angle. They really bothered him because they were so much wanting to know how he succeeded.

MS. BERMAN: Did he laugh about it, or was he bitter about that feeling?

MR. PUTNAM: He didn't laugh. He was disgusted by it.

MS. BERMAN: Did Rothko say why he didn't become a union organizer or get involved in the social consciousness? Did he feel guilty about not doing it?

MR. PUTNAM: No. I think he thought that it was not for him.

MS. BERMAN: I'm interested in Yale. Did he feel as if he were maybe an outsider?

MR. PUTNAM: I got no sense of that. I think he was quite confident. He always had the air, a stance and so forth, of one very sure of himself. As long as he talked, as I say, his very stance suggests one that will tell people. I introduced him to Abe Birnbaum. They were very much alike. They had the same…they looked like bigger men than they were in the way they held themselves. He said, "He'll get along."

MS. BERMAN: That's what Birnbaum said?

MR. PUTNAM: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Did those two men become friends?

MR. PUTNAM: No. They just met there once, as far as I know. [Inaudible] We were sympathetic on this level that I speak of. Just shortly after I met him, I invited him to dinner. When it was over, he made a gesture at the table at the dirty dishes and the ashtray-that's it, that's life. This is life now. The miracle is right here. This isn't a glass; it's a god. Everything is utterly beyond words. He could talk. This little drawing of eggs is one of the great works of art because he [Inaudible].

MS. BERMAN: His drawings for the *New Yorker*, his covers were great.

MR. PUTNAM: They were great.

MS. BERMAN: Who were some of the artists that Rothko did admire?

MR. PUTNAM: Admire?

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MR. PUTNAM: Still. Gottlieb and de Kooning, Milton and so forth and Motherwell. He told me about the Club.

MS. BERMAN: Did he say anything about the Club in terms of talking or lectures or anything?

MR. PUTNAM: No.

MS. BERMAN: How about in the early years when you first met Rothko in the late '20's or early '30's, what other artists did he admire besides Avery?

MR. PUTNAM: [Inaudible]

MS. BERMAN: Did you know that Rothko was writing a book or a manuscript of an essay during this period in the early '30's? Katharine said that he was writing a book personally.

MR. PUTNAM: Is there a record of it?

MS. BERMAN: Well, people have mentioned it and they're looking for it but it seems to be lost.

MR. PUTNAM: No.

MS. BERMAN: You were in, of course, the famous exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, the Fantastic Art Dada and Surrealism. I was wondering if Rothko talked to you about that? That was before he was working on anything that might resemble surrealism.

MR. PUTNAM: [Inaudible]

MS. BERMAN: Did you talk about surrealism with Rothko?

MR. PUTNAM: No.

MS. BERMAN: How about Zen, since you were so interested in Zen?

MR. PUTNAM: [Inaudible] I wanted to talk to someone that I feel understands rather than….

[END OF TAPE]

July 20, 1982

AVIS BERMAN: Avis Berman talking to Wallace Putnam in his house at Yorktown Heights on July 20, 1982. We're going to pick up our conversation on Mark Rothko. I want to start in the early days when you did know Rothko. I was wondering if you ever remember an apartment that he had with a view of the el.

WALLACE PUTNAM: It could have been that apartment that I went to, but we went in the evening and mightn't necessarily have known that. But it was down…it sounds as though it could be. His wife was quite a beautiful woman, quite a lovely woman. But in all marriages, there's things that no one ever sees and so forth. I think in general she wasn't really interested in what he was doing. I think that could be the big difference. As I remember more and more, that was it-that was she was not in sympathy with what he was doing. I think that could have been the reason they split up.

MS. BERMAN: You're talking about Edith, his first wife?

MR. PUTNAM: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: She had a jewelry store and was selling jewelry I believe.

MR. PUTNAM: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: And I think she wanted Rothko to help sell it or make it.

MR. PUTNAM: Yes, could be.

MS. BERMAN: But you don't remember particularly ever seeing an el near where Rothko lived?

MR. PUTNAM: No. But, as I say, it was at night.

MS. BERMAN: I had briefly mentioned last week that he was writing a book having to do with art theories.

MR. PUTNAM: I never knew about that. Possibly, vaguely, but I had no connection with it.

MS. BERMAN: Does that surprise you, or does that square with the Rothko you knew that he'd be doing that?

MR. PUTNAM: Not too much. I know he was very concerned with what he was doing and its relation to the art world. I'm not surprised that it was never published because it takes a lot of work. I do feel…what was it? I forget now. It may come to me.

MS. BERMAN: Did he ever talk about, say, philosophy or psychoanalysis of Freud or Jung?

MR. PUTNAM: Not so much directly. As I indicated, he read and had to do with existentialism and there was some talk along those lines. I think that's as far as he got, let us say, in thought. He was a product of his time, and I think that's really why he killed himself, because that was in line with the existentialist position that life was…a very negative view of life. And, comparing that to my view, if I may, I see the world and saw it at 19 in as completely a negative view. I saw what they saw, the difference being that I had not only that, I say that as an ego, it is the ego that sees the ugliness. But there is a completely other view of the same goings on which sees the hell as a glory. Now I'm preaching, but it's my main, one of my main points in life. So, while his work got blacker and blacker, I've had more and more the realization of this other view of life which makes it all so miraculous, so wonderful, that we can only bow down before everything. And it carries over in my painting so that it's light and colorful, buoyant, and young and positive rather than negative.

MS. BERMAN: You said in the previous tape that Rothko talked existentialism but he was really more a man of feeling. I got the impression that you didn't think that his existentialism was sincere or very deep. Is that correct?

MR. PUTNAM: No. It was desperately sincere, I'm sure. He was a desperate man. He really felt things and felt the trouble of the world and felt the need for answers and to get out of it and to make the world better. What was the other question about his sincerity?

MS. BERMAN: Well, did you feel it was deep?

MR. PUTNAM: Well, no. And I think Katharine Kuh indicated too, she said he never read, that he didn't have a philosophic understanding and basis for living that could balance the negative view and the negative aspects of the art world and so forth. I think she's right.

MS. BERMAN: You also said previously that Rothko wanted his painting to ring true to nature or on this level of land, sea, and sky. And I was wondering, do you think that Rothko thought of his painting as being in a landscape tradition?

MR. PUTNAM: Would you say it again?

MS. BERMAN: We had just heard that Rothko said that he wanted his painting to ring true to nature.

MR. PUTNAM: Ring true to nature. Finally, he said, his work has to ring true to nature. As I understand him, he wasn't doing a Mondrian or something where it is completely cubes and squares and colors and so forth. He loved the ocean and went to the beach summers. I see without trying to quite usually in his scheme of three vertical triangles or triangles on top of each other, that basis of beach, sea, and sky. He never spoke of it that way. And I doubt if...I think he might have admitted it if the subject had come up. Because to me it is so clear, they are so true on that level-vast space but they can be picked up on this level of nature. What I think he meant by saying true to nature, that unlike Mondrian and so forth, his work did fit into the way nature works rather than the way mathematics and geometry and so forth work.

MS. BERMAN: I'm just going to return to the '30's very briefly again. Did Rothko, if you remember him ever using the word "troglodytes," cave dwellers, troglodytes? Did he ever talk about that?

MR. PUTNAM: I never heard the word before. That means cave dwellers?

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MR. PUTNAM: Never heard the word, and I never heard it from him.

MS. BERMAN: Do you remember when Rothko's painting started to change dramatically from the realistic paintings to the more mythological ones?

MR. PUTNAM: Well, actually I didn't see much of his early work. I didn't see much of him at that time. When I got to see his work more, it was into the marine mood paintings and the beginning of the later phase of color vibrations. Mark was a marvelous painter in the sense of sensitive, nervous, delicate sense of form. I mean these apparently simple rectangles, the edges of these things, he's always a painter. He's never a mechanical artist such as Leger or Kelly and the.... He was always very sensitive to the delicacies of where colors meet and they vibrate and sing. He was a musician in a very delicate way.

MS. BERMAN: Did you begin seeing more of him before or during World War II or after World War II? I'm just trying to date this slightly.

MR. PUTNAM: Well, I don't know how to date it really. Let's see. I could remember when he came down to see me on Cornelia Street. That would have been in the late '40's.

MS. BERMAN: What did Rothko say about Still except that he wanted you to see the paintings?

MR. PUTNAM: What did he say about Still?

MS. BERMAN: Right, besides....

MR. PUTNAM: Oh, when we first met?

MS. BERMAN: Uh-huh...

MR. PUTNAM: He didn't really say anything-"A fellow from the west." But he did indicate and it turned out very obviously that they were very sympathetic. I think Rothko was definitely influenced at the beginning. But in their relation to the art world, in their stand for values and not commercialism and so forth, they were supportive of each other. Still was much the stronger man. He was mad really in his stand and mad in his sense of his...what's the word...his dedication and feeling that his work was utterly unique. Still had his delicate side, too. I don't know whether I told you that we were out west in San Francisco where he lived, where he taught and lived, and he came to see me, came to see us there. He expressed interest in some water colors I was doing. I guess it was later, maybe the next winter, that we met him in New York. Anyhow, or maybe she photographed him out there. I forget. But she photographed him. Wait a minute, did she photograph his family?

MS. BERMAN: Consuela Canava definitely photographed Still.

MR. PUTNAM: Well, whether it was his family too. Anyhow, either the photographs of him were sent to his family or his family was sent to him, we got a lively, friendly, and appreciative letter thanking her for doing this. I liked and respected Still and his work means a lot to me. He was one of the very best. I did tell you about their coming out here?

MS. BERMAN: Still?

MR. PUTNAM: Yes. No, I didn't tell you?

MS. BERMAN: No.

MR. PUTNAM: Oh, this is amusing. I didn't think we even…I'm quite sure they didn't call first. Anyhow, a Jaguar drove in the drive here, Rothko was with him. Apparently they decided to visit. So they stopped the Jaguar here. It was a brand new sports car. Still had a little beret and a scarf that matched. It was an open car. Anyhow, we went out to look at the car and they demonstrated this and that. It was a beautiful piece of machinery and they appreciated that. Still, it was his baby. Finally the tool box. And here were all these beautiful tools lined up. Connie's remark was, "And it drives too?" Those words don't sound like exactly what she said, but that's the idea-"And it works too?" They didn't stay very long, but it was a little glimpse of them and of Still. Apparently he just loved machinery and good, fast cars.

MS. BERMAN: So you and Still did become neighborly after you were introduced?

MR. PUTNAM: Yes, through the years I'd see him occasionally and we'd write occasionally. I have a couple of letters. He was always very friendly and for him rather supportive in liking my things. It's funny how artists get very…well they're so involved with their work. These are their babies, these are their children, and they're inclined to dismiss the world pretty much. Milton [Avery] and Still, so far as I know, their work was their life. Still did have this vision of the ugliness and discourtesy of the way the world works. Milton, that didn't seem to touch him nor did the other side of wealth and power and going places and cars. I have heard that he loved his car. I heard this somewhere. I know he did to a degree. But they said he was always, he would be cleaning it and so forth. And Milton never read except detective stories. And I know they read, Sally and he read and loved van Gogh's letters to his brother. But it's so much of a job to become a real painter that it does take about everything. You have to dismiss. You have to work almost every day all day and night. Milton did.

MS. BERMAN: When you saw these first abstractions of Still's, were they large paintings?

MR. PUTNAM: Yes. They were eight by five at least. They were rolled up in a corner of this tiny room and they stood, oh no, maybe seven or eight feet and four or five feet wide. He'd unroll them and hold them up in front of us. They were dark and the room was dark and they were six feet away.

MS. BERMAN: Were you surprised by the size? Was that an unusual sort of thing to see in those days?

MR. PUTNAM: Yes, it was.

MS. BERMAN: Was Rothko painting such large paintings then?

MR. PUTNAM: Beginning to. I told you how we had three weeks, as I remember, in Rothko's studio on 54th Street, just west of Sixth Avenue. He lived right under the Modern Museum. He had a job teaching down in Texas I think. Somehow it came about that we went in, gave us a chance to get to the city I guess, and took care of his cat, a wild Siamese (it was utterly wild), and the plants. And it gave us a chance to be in the city. So we lived, woke up, and went to bed with these large Rothkos. It was wonderful.

MS. BERMAN: What did the studio look like that you stayed in?

MR. PUTNAM: Where I'm speaking of?

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MR. PUTNAM: This wasn't his studio. He must have painted somewhere else. This was his apartment. I had been to his studio too. I forget now where that was. It was up near Columbus Circle, if I remember, a good studio.

MS. BERMAN: Did you ever see him paint?

MR. PUTNAM: No.

MS. BERMAN: Well, anyway, in this apartment he had, how did he have his paintings hung?

MR. PUTNAM: In the apartment?

MS. BERMAN: Yes, where you stayed.

MR. PUTNAM: If I remember, there was this wall. He would hang a painting, the size, according to the space. He had plenty to hang.

MS. BERMAN: Were they the latest works?

MR. PUTNAM: Some of them surely. There were a couple of the older marine mood paintings.

MS. BERMAN: I was just wondering, since he had such definite ideas about how he wanted his work shown, if he

had them pushed together, if he had spaces, if they were all…?

MR. PUTNAM: He would have hanged them carefully, I'm sure of that.

MS. BERMAN: Did you ever see…this would have been I guess from the 1930's. Did you know that Rothko had made sculptures of driftwood?

MR. PUTNAM: No. I never found that out.

MS. BERMAN: Had you ever heard of them at all!

MR. PUTNAM: No.

MS. BERMAN: He must have gotten rid of them by then. I think he took the trouble to hide some of his early souvenirs. Just to go back to Rothko and Still for a couple of minutes, these were two very powerful painters who you knew. Were you influenced by them at all in your own work?

MR. PUTNAM: I was influenced very much by the abstract expressionists generally. I was influenced, I was aware of everything that was happening in general, in a general way. I wasn't a part of it, but I was aware of it. What the abstract expressionists generally meant to me was what I was working on aside from them. That is, my interest in Oriental art and philosophy and religion, I had from that source gotten a realization of the importance of the creative state of mind for creativity. This is very much to the fore, and then most of the art of Asia is this thing of a spontaneous life to the fore, and then most of the art of Asia is this thing of a spontaneous life to the stroke which indicates a certain state of mind of freedom, of directness, of listening and working from a source in oneself other than the planning, thinking, intellectual mind. So abstract expressionists rather intensified a direction that I was also receiving from the Orient, from Zen and so forth. I might say too…turn it off just a second.

[RECORDER OFF]

In speaking of getting it form an Oriental source as well as from the abstract expressionist source, this necessity for a certain state of mind for creativity, I got to know Kenzo Okado, who was one of Betty's best artists, Betty Parsons. He came out here. He had friends out here and he stopped by. He took it on himself to kind of help me in this direction we're speaking of. He asked for a piece of paper and a brush and ink. But the paper I gave him… he sat down as a Japanese would before a piece of paper and collected his mind for a moment, that is, a sort of meditative clearing of his mind. Then he picked up the brush and put on the fist stroke. He was going to letter something. But the ink didn't take on the paper. It just spread and bubbled. That stopped him for a moment, but he kept doing it and ended up with three characters as I remember. The best translation I've had of it is "No wish, no idea." And this I took to mean that that was indicative of the state of mind for creativity. One should approach a work of art with nothing in mind and let it come from the whole self rather than from the ego center. I remember also his speaking of a painting should be a part of life. This is as I remember it. The suggestion was, as I take it, this business of framing. One of the biggest differences of modern art and art of other centuries, earlier centuries in the west, is that the big gold frame is gone. What that did was isolate the picture. The frame was a window through which you looked at a scene. Whereas this gold frame doesn't work-modern painters much prefer no frame or a little molding-because, as Okado was speaking, things should melt with life. It shouldn't be…the forms and shapes in the canvas should…as you look at the painting. It shouldn't be the different from looking at the life out of the window or looking at any corner of the room. But to get back to the abstract expressionists, and I speak generally, I was interested most especially in this attitude of mind. I definitely had my feelings of liking some painters, respecting their work more than others and so forth. It might be interesting along the line of this starting to work with no image and no intellect, rather influenced by the abstract expressionists. For three years I approached the canvas with no image in mind, and I began painting rather casually, just color, brush work. But someplace in the work I would see something relating to the sea, to water, and light on water. And that would be the key for me to continue painting and end up with a composition of formal relationships which had been pulled together rather with a bird or two. These three years I painted noting but sea and birds. But I didn't start out with any image at all or even with the idea of painting the sea and birds. I'd start out with painting. This continued until finally I had the feeling, God, I don't want to paint birds and sea all my life. And I went up to the pond and saw an iris, a purple iris. It was so beautiful that I made a sketch, a crayon sketch of it, and came down and made a painting from that. It was successful. And that started whole new ways of working so that now I have many, many ways of starting a canvas. But the idea of approaching a canvas fresh, if I'm working from a sketch, I don't want it to be too perfect an aesthetic image because I wouldn't want to have any sense of copying it. I'd want it to be free. Sometimes they'd come just for something I've read or seen or dreamed. And sometimes flowers I paint directly from nature. They're the only thing that I work directly from nature. But at that time in the early '60's, and on…it would be about in the '60's that I began that way. And it was the influence of the abstract expressionists and the influence of the Orient that got me going in that direction. It is now a key point in my work, the state of mind of creativity.

MS. BERMAN: I want to backtrack a little bit to the late '30's again. Were you aware of the group that of artists that Rothko was in called The Ten.

MR. PUTNAM: That was just before the Eighth Street Club, wasn't it? The Eighth Street Ten…also there was a group calling themselves Abstract Artists.

MS. BERMAN: Right. This was a parallel group of the…I know you're talking about the Abstract Artists…I'm getting the name wrong.

MR. PUTNAM: That was different.

MS. BERMAN: Right. But this was….

MR. PUTNAM: Contemporary really?

MS. BERMAN: Yes. Were you aware of this group, The Ten?

MR. PUTNAM: Aware of it, but that's all.

MS. BERMAN: I was wondering if you were ever invited to become a part of The Ten?

MR. PUTNAM: No. I worked at night, as I told you. And that kept me isolated quite a bit. I didn't have time for socializing. Most artists socialized in the evenings. With Milton it was a matter of sketch classes and so forth in the evening. So I was rather isolated because I was too busy painting all day and working at night.

MS. BERMAN: I'd like to talk about the relationship between you and Avery and Mark Rothko before Rothko came into his key image in the late '40s. I'd like to know if you knew what Milton Avery thought of Mark Rothko while he was still developing.

MR. PUTNAM: A little while ago I was speaking about this thing of artists-their work is their life and so forth. I feel it was quite a gesture when Clyfford spoke well of my work. And Milton, intimately as I knew him, well, in all the time I knew him, I never heard him enthuse about any other artist's work which is quite unlike me. I get to see a show of Bonnard and just rave about it and tell everybody about it-they must see it. But Milton would look at things and apparently he was interested in it insofar as it meant something to his own work. I remember Milton way back in Hartford. Someone showed work for Milton to criticize or react to. Milton's reaction was, "Do another one." I remember one day in the early days here at the Ice House, it must have been in the '40's, Milton and Sally came out with Picasso and March.

MS. BERMAN: Do you mean their dog?

[LAUGHTER]

Just for the record.

MR. PUTNAM: Yes. And Matisse met them, my Irish Setter. And Milton took Connie aside kind of or told her when I wasn't around that "gee, that was a good one" of mine, you see. But that was a very rare occasion. The same would be true of Rothko. I don't remember him enthusing about anybody else's work. Nor much reaction for or against an interest in my work. Rothko did buy a copy of my portfolio of lithographs. This is when he was making a lot of money, and it may have been kind of a gesture.

MS. BERMAN: You said, by the way, that Rothko said he treated you gently. What do you think he meant by that?

MR. PUTNAM: I've always wondered. But the only thing I can gather is that he talked tough and liked to talk tough and….

[END OF SIDE 1]

…been more critical or…. He liked to talk and discuss and argue. We spent quite an interesting evening with him and Motherwell once. They're both good talkers, and Rothko liked to talk. What he meant, I think, maybe was… well, I don't like to argue. I think that's kind of what he meant. But then I was very gentle with him too because I didn't want…I felt it was kind of useless to go into my picture's life as more an Oriental religious, philosophical view. So we respected each other's positions. I think that was kind of what it was.

MS. BERMAN: Do you remember what you and Motherwell and Rothko talked about when you were together?

MR. PUTNAM: No, I don't. It was just a kind of interesting evening.

MS. BERMAN: When you first met Rothko, did you think he had talent or staying power? What was your impression of him, not as a person, as an artist?

MR. PUTNAM: I did like his painting in the Opportunity Gallery show, one of the best. I did like him and I liked his work and respected it. In his memorial show, I was very interested in those early ones and felt they had power and were valid.

MS. BERMAN: Later when you told Rothko that you and not McBride was responsible for his discovery, how did he react to that?

MR. PUTNAM: I think he just dismissed it.

MS. BERMAN: I'd like to ask you a question about McBride. I guess you must have gotten to know him over the years.

MR. PUTNAM: Not well. He moved on a very sophisticated level, poised; and I was just a boy in the art room. He was friendly. And, as I said, he's the one that told me to take the *Manhattan Manners* to Stieglitz and he certainly wouldn't have done that if he hadn't liked it. I would see him occasionally on the street or coming through the *Sun*. I got out of the elevator. There was a big show somewhere (I forget) of modern work, that is abstract. It was when abstract work as at its height. It was pretty hard for me, those early years where I was so completely out of it. Anyhow, I got out of the Subway with McBride. So we walked to this exhibition that was in some building (I forget) where it was a big show of all modern work and so forth. I think it was modern work. I didn't have a ticket. It was an opening or something. I probably would have had difficulty in getting in except that McBride came in with me and he sort of ushered me in.

MS. BERMAN: I was wondering if you were ever able to contribute any other reviews through his column, or was that the only one you ever did?

MR. PUTNAM: It was just that personal thing of wanting to help Milton that made me do that.

MS. BERMAN: I was wondering if you ever were able to get McBride to look at Milton Avery's work again or anything?

MR. PUTNAM: Oh, no. I didn't know him that well.

MS. BERMAN: So you were just able to steer him once, in other words?

MR. PUTNAM: McBride, I respected his writing. He was one of the few art writers that could write and that I could read because they were subtle and witty.

MS. BERMAN: I want to talk about the late works on paper which you mentioned that you saw. You said that in your manuscript, *The Three Heroes* in the published article. Evidently, you saw them first the summer of 1968?

MR. PUTNAM: Started them?

MS. BERMAN: No, no. You saw Rothko's works, the late ones.

MR. PUTNAM: Oh, you're speaking of Rothko.

MS. BERMAN: Uh-huh.

MR. PUTNAM: And you wanted to know…what do you want to know about them?

MS. BERMAN: Well, I guess you saw them first in the summer of 1968?

MR. PUTNAM: I guess so. It would be a couple years before he died, or a year. When did he die?

MS. BERMAN: The winter of 1970.

MR. PUTNAM: Well, it was '68 or '9.

MS. BERMAN: And did he continue to work on them once he was home or was that just something he worked on in the summer?

MR. PUTNAM: He was working on the big mural at the end, or towards the end. I think that was kind of a summer thing.

MS. BERMAN: Just to keep now to the small works on paper, did you discuss them or did he want your opinion

about them? What happened when you saw them?

MR. PUTNAM: Well, he would like a reaction surely. Every artist would like a reaction. I referred to them in that article I think, I'm not sure, as true but tired Rothkos.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MR. PUTNAM: They were very dark, gray, but they were still Rothkos.

MS. BERMAN: Did he seem to think that they were tired? Was he worried about them?

MR. PUTNAM: No. They were what he was doing. An artist has to feel that what he's doing is worth doing.

MS. BERMAN: Do you think that he was excited about them, or do you think that he was…?

MR. PUTNAM: No, I don't think he was excited about them. I think he knew that, inside, knew that they weren't his best works.

MS. BERMAN: Do you think he was doing also more colorful works on paper at the same time?

MR. PUTNAM: Oh, no. His last years were all very, all black. That's all that he could…I would like to see the paintings down in the chapel in Houston. I saw them in the studio; I told you, I think, in the late afternoon. I'd come in. I think I had my *Moby Dick* book or some book of mine to show him that I had just finished. I think there was someone else in the place. Anyhow, I couldn't really see them well enough and I was so concerned with myself that I couldn't feel them. But I would love to see…I saw a show only a few years ago at the Pace Gallery of his-of things I had never seen that I was just so delighted with. They were special. I never saw anything else-there was a certain form. I think they were mostly horizontal and rather suggestive of an archaic world. I can't describe it. But I remember feeling that they were very good Rothkos.

MS. BERMAN: Did he ever talk with you how he felt in these little works on paper about the white border. Was he going to keep it or crop it?

MR. PUTNAM: No.

MS. BERMAN: Do you think he had plans to work those little works on paper up into big paintings?

MR. PUTNAM: No, I don't think he ever would work that way. It was a very immediate, fresh thing. I feel that they're a result of kind of the moment, the day. On the other hand, I think I asked him once how he got his inspiration, if that's the word. And, as I remember, he said, "Well, you move from one canvas to another," That is you've been working out something in a canvas-color relationships and forms-and that rather leads into something else. Having done that, you have a feeling to do something else. I think that could be true. As I remember it, that's what he indicated.

MS. BERMAN: Do you think that he was working on things simultaneously and that helped him?

MR. PUTNAM: I think quite often you don't get it complete and you do have to have it around and work on it. I think in that sense he would be working on more than one at a time.

MS. BERMAN: But you think that he believed in a fluid sense of progression?

MR. PUTNAM: Well, I think he believed in being open and responsive to whatever comes. But as part of that would be this thing of having done this sort of thing yesterday. I mean you don't want to repeat it. So there's that thing of doing something else, and it will lead into something like that, you see.

MS. BERMAN: Did you feel that Rothko was interested in the idea of actually painting in series? Do you think that he maybe got tired of just doing, say…?

MR. PUTNAM: Well, he did so many series, didn't he? The one at Harvard. I guess that's the one that was for the restaurant, wasn't it? It finally went to Harvard.

MS. BERMAN: Well, I think the Four Seasons murals went to the Tate Gallery eventually. But I was wondering…of course, the murals are different than easel painting anyway. But I was wondering if he had just gotten tired of doing one single easel painting and then doing another one, whether he wanted to consciously work in a series.

MR. PUTNAM: Well, I don't know. It could work that way. It is interesting to work that way.

MS. BERMAN: Do you think when he was working on these gray works on paper that you saw at the end if you

felt that he had a sense of being trapped by his limitations? Did he feel he was blocked?

MR. PUTNAM: I think he knew that he was trapped in his living relationships. And he must have suspected it in his work, I feel, because he was really trapped at the end.

MS. BERMAN: You titled your original manuscript *Three Heroes*. And I was wondering in what are the ways that Rothko was most heroic as far as you were concerned.

MR. PUTNAM: What interested me in doing it and why I did that was to see the differences and recognize how each of them were heroes. By "heroes" I kind of mean men who have struggled and come through to some level of life and action that was unusual, that they faced life and struggled and come through to something. Rothko did do that. He was always from the beginning aware of the ugliness and stupidity and cruelty of the world and he wanted to do something about it. And when he got in with the art world, he saw the same crassness and banality and ambitions and everything else. I was especially impressed with the memorial exhibition. As I went around the room, I was impressed with the dedication, this real search for values and for truths, and the accomplishment that his life attained to from those paintings. And I do feel that the work balanced the way his life ended. That is...oh, I don't know.

MS. BERMAN: Do you think that Rothko, if he ever had the sense, did he lose it, or did he realize how much he accomplished during his lifetime?

MR. PUTNAM: He must have to a large extent I think. But Katharine Kuh points out how essentially insecure he was. He had the attitude and the stance of one who is very sure of himself and what he's doing. But Katharine Kuh says that he was terribly dependent on Still. He was very hurt and unhappy about the fact that Still had broken off. This is from Katharine Kuh.

MS. BERMAN: Who were some of the other artists that you know that Rothko was friendly with besides the ones that we've mentioned like Avery and Still? Who were some of the other ones?

MR. PUTNAM: Well, I knew Gottlieb, never too intimately. And Newman, Barney Newman, not too intimately. But there were many that I didn't know, because, as I say, I worked nights and painted days. There may be others that don't come to me now that I knew.

MS. BERMAN: Did Rothko ever mention the plans for the Foundation?

MR. PUTNAM: I think he mentioned it, but that's about all.

MS. BERMAN: I was just wondering, since this seemed to be an important statement, I'm going to read it, this is what you mentioned, if we might be able to pin down at all when Rothko told you this. He said, "The myth is dead, the old stories having lost appeal, credibility. There are no loved, widely known themes for the painter today."

MR. PUTNAM: Just read that last....

MS. BERMAN: Certainly. Rothko said to you, "The myth is dead. The old stories have lost their appeal and credibility. There are no loved, widely known themes for the painter today."

MR. PUTNAM: Widely known and accepted, you might add. And you want to know anything more I could think of about that line?

MS. BERMAN: Well, I guess I wanted to know when you thought he may have uttered that.

MR. PUTNAM: Well, it was surely back in the '30's. I think he was using it, although abstraction hadn't come in, I mean to the extent that it did. I think it referred to his feeling that art had to move in the direction of abstraction. I think that was the point.

MS. BERMAN: I guess that's just about everything I wanted to ask you about Rothko. I wanted to ask you one or two more questions about yourself. One is straightforward; one is not so straightforward. Are you any relation to the Revolutionary War hero, Israel Putnam?

MR. PUTNAM: Yes. My mother said that he was my fourth great-grandfather. My aunt looked it up somewhere and she said that she found out that I was, rather, from Israel's brother. I've never taken the trouble to investigate it. I was going to the Cape one summer and we went on the road from Hartford to Providence and stopped because my wife saw an antique shop. I get pretty quickly bored and walked a little ways and saw a sign, a street sign, Wolf's Den Lane. I knew that Putnam had had an encounter with a wolf and went in. Sure enough, there's a cave with bronze plaque, "Israel Putnam (so-an-so)." It was before the revolution when he was a young man, a farmer, and a wolf, a she wolf was bothering his and the neighbors' sheep to the extent they set

a day they'd go out and get her. They traveled all over the landscape. Finally she holed up in this cave, but nobody wanted to go in. The black man, a servant, kind of, he didn't want to go in, and none of the others. So Israel took it upon himself and he went in. They tied a rope to his ankle and he went in and he sees the light of her eyes. He has a torch. Then he goes in again with his gun and shoots her. It was supposed to be a very heroic act. Anyhow, that was the basis for a series of paintings that I did called *She Wolfe Pictographs*. It's of 19 paintings. As in all my series work and writings generally, what I'm talking about is the myth. I may have spoken of this to you the other day. The myth of how we get from where we are to where…to our potential. So this 19 paintings tell that myth. But there are pictures of Franklin and George Washington and Lincoln. Most of them are American heroes but ending up with Gandhi and so forth. But that's the reason for that title because this adventure is a going in to our cave.

MS. BERMAN: Yes, it's quite an archetypal sort of story.

MR. PUTNAM: What?

MS. BERMAN: It is. It's an archetypal story of a young man testing, going inward, and facing the eyes.

MR. PUTNAM: That's right.

MS. BERMAN: This actually leads me to my second question. You mentioned you'd been busy writing lately and I wanted to know what you were working on now.

MR. PUTNAM: Well, right now I've written an article on modern art. Here is an article on my remembrance of how and why I did the crazy things to the paintings of 1937. I pick them up one by one-there were 33 of them-and remember back to how I did them. And I can get back to a surprising extent. In '37 it was all an intuitive feeling thing. I was working largely from a sense of form, a sense of "with this, I need something here; I needed this to build this aesthetic object." But I realize now in looking back how true they are on the level of myths. I was telling the same story in them. And looking at them now, I was able to enumerate them, one to thirty-three. And in this writing I have gone into each one and interpreted what I only felt then, interpret in words what I only felt then. This is the one that Robert Pincus Witten is to…I wrote this for him thinking it might be meaningful in his reacting to these things to know how I reacted. But it's a question what he will…. There is this book that you haven't seen that I have worked on. You might turn that off.

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MS. BERMAN: I wanted to know what you found that were some of the special satisfactions of writing that perhaps you couldn't attain in painting and drawing.

MR. PUTNAM: Well, I think it goes back to the fact that I've been searching all my life for a way of salvation. That is, as I see it, this world, human society, is in a desperate situation. And I saw it in 1919 and now with the atom bomb-so far as reasonableness is concerned, I see no reasonable hope for mankind. But I have seen and more and more realize that the way we view life as this disaster through our world that we live in that sees things all cut up into pieces, people are separate from each other. We're separate from the earth and from the stars. The truth is that that is a falsehood. That is only the way we react to it as an ego, and this ego is mistaken in thinking that it is separate from others. Actually, it is a universe, a one turning. Anyhow, since 19 I've been trying to find a way of life and a view of life that would keep me from doing what Rothko did. And I have found such a way. It's an old way and it's universal. And all the religious and all the wise men have more or less had this universal view of life. The religions are different, philosophies are different because of different environments, different parts of the world, different ages, different cultural, different racial elements, and so forth. But the whole essential wisdom, the perennial wisdom is that there is a way, a way to move and grow and become what we truly are.

[END OF TAPE]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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