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Barnett Newman and the Aesthetics of Totality

As he looked over his newly finished painting on January 29th 1948, what might Barnett Newman have thought? It was a modestly sized canvas (27in by 16in), covered in Indian red paint and cleaved in two by an electric stripe of light cadmium red, like some Technicolor lightning bolt come to set the world on fire. Do we picture Newman clad in that formal outfit he is so often photographed wearing: pants hiked up over his waist, sports jacket unbuttoned, white dress shirt and wide tie? Perhaps he sat for hours, as his friend Mark Rothko did, in a comfortable chair smoking endlessly while contemplating the newly finished *Onement I*. After all, it was his 43rd birthday.

Newman would come to regard *Onement I* as the turning point in his art: perhaps the exact moment when all his ruminating on both the need to paint and the question of what to paint merged into one perfect concrete presence to guide him forward. The English critic David Sylvester writes of Newman, “As Athena sprang fully formed from the brow of Zeus, so Newman the artist sprang fully formed from Newman the dreamer...Newman of course, did more than meditate during his years of preparation; he wrote. He wrote, it appears, in order to define for himself what had to be done.”¹ Indeed, Newman the artist could never have existed without Newman the dreamer. This essay will inquire into the aesthetic philosophy of Newman the dreamer and especially his assertion that the role of art is to make the Nietzschean task of living more bearable.

¹ David Sylvester, *About Modern Art, 2nd Edition* (Yale University Press, 2001) 322.

In his “Plasmic Image,” a collection of short statements from the mid 1940s, Newman writes that abstract art is not a thing to be loved because it is abstract, it is to be loved because of the means it possesses to communicate new ideas.² Before *Onement I* Newman had experimented with the bands that would later become known as “zips.” Yet these early paintings, with their tapered bands and canvases often divided into thirds, have the feeling of tense experimentation. There is roughness to the work, the same searching touch that Rothko had before his own breakthrough. The pooling of paint, thin in some areas, thick in others, different shades of the same color dominate the canvases; the “zip” is there *in nuce* but it is not yet focused. The later tightness and power that Newman would come to possess is only evident in infrequent flashes. He seems to be working out what he believed to be at the foundation of all art, “the handling of chaos.”³ *Onement I* bound Newman to his craft; it became a moral need:

...what it made me realize is that I was confronted for the first time with the thing that I did, whereas up until that moment I was able to remove myself from the act of painting, or from the painting itself. The painting was something that I was making, whereas somehow for the first time with this painting the painting itself had a life of its own in a way that I don't think the others did, as much.⁴

² Newman called the image “Plasmic” because he felt the new artist would give life to the abstract, converting the art’s plastic elements into what he called “mental plasma.” The ideas were to be made tangible.

³ From the “Plasmic Image” in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O’Neill (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1990) 139.

⁴ Newman, David Sylvester Interview, 256.

No longer separate, the painting became an extension of Newman, just as alive as he was. The act of painting was transformed from the simplicity of the action of making a painted work, into the creation of something that would not merely live in this world but *communicate* with it. *Onement I* gave Newman a sense of both who and where he was. It grounded him. The life it possessed linked him to the world. His intent was to move away from nature, to distance himself from the flaws he saw in the abstraction of European painters such as Kandinsky, flaws that, in his view, allowed for abstract shapes to be construed as objects from life. Newman believed that the goal of abstract painting should be to remove the painter from the presence of nature but not from that of life itself.

For Newman, the artist is an individual who delves into the mysteries of the world so they might then come to present the unknowable. Newman's vocal espousal of his vision led him to be characterized by his fellow Abstract Expressionists, according to Sylvester, as either the group's sage or fool. What Newman hunted after was a new artist, one who believed, as he did, that "the truth is a search for the hidden meanings of life. To practice it, art must become a metaphysical exercise. That is why the new painter is dissatisfied only to titillate our sensibilities. That is why he has no intention of giving us cut and dried journalist answers" ("The Plasmic Image," 145). The boldness of Newman's assertion is that the truth in painting is not a concrete thing but is instead a search for meaning and that such searching can be represented only in abstraction, a medium that does not trade on the easy susceptibility of our emotional arousal. Representational painting had ceased to be capable of showing the truth of the world's

problems. The role of the artist was to move beyond the visible and known world, to work with forms mysterious even to him, to invent new modes and symbols “that will have the living quality of creation” (“The Plasmic Image,” 140). Under Newman’s formulation, the artist must attempt “to wrest truth from the void,” for the void is incomprehensible, it is the graveyard of truth. Thus the artist must pull truth from its prison so that she might have the opportunity to search for those “hidden meanings” that life offers. Newman sought to present man’s connection to man as well as man’s relation to the absolute, by attempting to bestow living thought, the desire to know life’s mysteries, to the language of painting.⁵

Newman’s “new painter,” however, was of a decidedly American variety. In “The Sublime is Now,” perhaps his most influential though not necessarily his most accomplished essay, he argues that contemporary European artists are incapable of achieving sublimity because they continue to insist on living “inside the reality of sensation,” building artwork within a framework of plasticity based on Greek ideals of

⁵ Perhaps the best way to approach Newman’s conception of the absolute is if we turn to the German Romantic poet and playwright Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805). Schiller believed that man’s search for the absolute is a search not only for a grand truth about the nature of existence but a chance to recapture the unity man once possessed, both internal and in relation to one’s fellow man. He saw reason as the means to approach the absolute, for reason is there to direct us in the face of Nature’s devotion to the sensuous and the shortcomings of the imagination. It is reason, according to Schiller, that gives us a glass with which to peer into the absolute (Schiller, 43). This is not so different from Newman’s attempt to create an art of ethics and content by removing his own painting from a “reality of sensation.” Indeed, for Schiller writes in the Ninth Letter of *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, that “the pure moral impulse is directed towards the Absolute. For such an impulse time does not exist, and the future turns into the present from the moment that it is seen to develop with inevitable Necessity out of the present. In the eyes of a Reason which knows no limits, the Direction is at once the Destination, and the Way is completed from the moment it is trodden” (Schiller, 59). If we consider Newman’s desire to present to his viewer that viewer’s connection not only to her fellow man, but to the absolute as well then we can interpret Newman’s quest as one that seeks to engage with the same sense of immediate presentness that is alive in Schiller’s vision of man’s desire to come to know the absolute.

beauty. It was his belief that these artists were trapped under the crushing weight of their own history, a history that followed them wherever they went.⁶

Newman writes:

I believe that here in America, some of us, free from the weight of European culture, are finding the answer by completely denying that art has any concern with the problem of beauty and where to find it....We are asserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions....The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history ("The Sublime is Now," 173).

The European painter, the old painter, the painter forever burdened by history was constantly besieged by the crush of the past. It was impossible to be European, in Newman's opinion, and in some way not be incapable of dealing with the record of previous accomplishments that lurked around every bend. How could the sublime be

⁶ It is interesting to note that Donald Judd would make a similar claim in December 1963 when he wrote the "Kansas City Report" for *Arts Magazine's* Nationwide Reports section. Judd writes: "If you take an elementary course in art at a university, it is a survey of the history of art. It is considered normal to give the student a stiff dose of the past before he knows anything about the present. It is a confusing arrangement. The first fight almost every artist has is to get clear of old European art" (Judd, "Kansas City Report," 103). For Judd the "old European art" to get clear of was painting, for the rectangle of painting existed in his opinion as "an entity, one thing, and not the indefinable sum of a group of entities and references" (Judd, "Specific Objects," 182). Of course Newman wanted to fashion a "one thing," and Judd knew this. In fact Judd, oddly enough, supported this in Newman's work, it was the quality of wholeness that Judd viewed as vital. "Everything is specifically where it is," Judd writes, "This wholeness is...new and important....The openness of Newman's work is concomitant with chance and one person's knowledge; it doesn't claim more than anyone can know; it doesn't imply a social order. Newman is asserting his concerns and knowledge" (Judd, "Barnett Newman," 202).

achieved when there was already such a robust framework for artistic thought? What terror, or even awe, would the artist be able to muster when strict guidelines always loomed? Newman declares: “The failure of European art to achieve the sublime is due to this blind desire to exist inside the reality of sensation (the objective world, whether distorted or pure) and to build an art within a framework of pure plasticity (the Greek ideal of beauty, whether that plasticity be a romantic active surface or a classic stable one)” (“The Sublime is Now,” 173). In Sylvester’s opinion the fact that Newman lived 6000 miles away from European art history allowed him to deal with the likes of Giacometti and Matisse; he was able to learn the lessons they imparted and move on: “In the search for the absolute and commitment to the new,” Sylvester writes, “it was advantageous not to be European, not to be steeped in a tired culture” (Sylvester, 324). The European masters were the starting point for Newman, but their style of painting had ceased to address the world in which he lived and the answers he craved.⁷ Newman sought to free himself from “the nostalgic glasses of history,” glasses that tinted the world so the past was seen as glory and the present as failure.

The image Newman wanted to present could be seen only with unencumbered vision. The naked eye of the present was the only means of viewing his art, as the present is vastly more capable of terror than the past. The present is painful while past pain is but a ghost. It was this specter that haunted the Europeans. But in America, with a mere couple hundred years of history, Newman sought to make known the present.

And the present appears specifically as the “new.” Consequently, in his formulation the

⁷ Although Newman did regard the Surrealists as having opened the world’s eyes to the possibility of real tragedy.

sublime is the “new.”⁸ It is the terror of stepping forth from the protection of history and allowing the unknown, the ever-changing present, to potentially strike the artist dead.

The painting of the European masters did not possess the qualities of the sublime. Their work was representational and Newman, like Burke, believed that representational painting did not have the power to make the individual aware of the sublime.⁹ However where Newman departs from Burke is of major importance. Though Burke saw all painting as incapable of portraying the sublime, he had never witnessed true abstraction.¹⁰ Newman believed that abstract painting could have sublime qualities if the abstract marks were incapable of being mistaken for nature.

If we use Newman’s idea of the sublime and modify it to fit with Kant’s mature vision of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment* then we might begin to understand what Newman was attempting. For Kant, the sublime is that which surpasses our standard of sense, or to put it another way, that which drowns our imagination in the waters of the incalculable. The sublime succeeds because it overwhelms our senses, leaving our

⁸ It would appear that Newman’s conception of the sublime is not at all reconcilable with Edmund Burke’s. Yet Newman’s sublime can be viewed as a re-imagining of Burke’s. Burke describes the sublime as that which is “fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger...what is in any sort terrible...conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror...productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling,” and that strongest emotion is, for Burke, the fear of death (Burke, 39). Now if we think of Newman’s sublime as having a power like Burke’s, that is it has a two part function – making one aware of the pain that is living in the unpredictable present and calling for the death of an old form of art making – then we begin to see the particular type of sublimity that Newman sought to bring forth.

⁹ See the essay “Newman: The Instant” in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman* (Stanford University Press, 1991) 85.

¹⁰ Burke on painting: “When painters have attempted to give us clear representations of these very fanciful and terrible ideas [the terror of death, “incomprehensible darkness,” etc.], they have I think almost always failed; insomuch that I have been at a loss, in all the pictures I have seen of hell, whether the painter did not intend something ludicrous” (Burke, 63).

imagination to attempt to reconcile the magnitudes of the infinite, until reason comes to rescue the imagination from the abyss:

[What happens is that] our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination,] our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea. Yet this inadequacy itself is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have a supersensible power; and what is absolutely large is not an object of sense, but is the use that judgment makes naturally of certain objects so as to [arouse] this (feeling), and in contrast with that use any other use is small. Hence what is to be called sublime is not the object, but the attunement that the intellect [gets] through a certain presentation that occupies reflective judgment.¹¹

Newman desired a sublime that, while unable to be depicted, could be felt and somehow known through marks on canvas. He wanted to bring forth the sensation of the infinite and inestimable. Newman sought to make the viewer aware of himself in relation to the universe. Kant writes: “Nature is sublime in those of its appearances whose intuition carries with it the idea of their infinity. But the only way for this to occur is through the inadequacy of even the greatest effort of our imagination to estimate an object’s magnitude” (*Third Critique*, 112). Perhaps it was Newman’s desire to speak for our imagination when it had failed us, to show man’s relation to both magnitude and

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987) 106.

insignificance as we exist in the present. French postmodern theorist Jean-François

Lyotard writes:

When he [Newman] seeks sublimity in the here-and-now
he breaks with the eloquence of romantic art but he does
not reject its fundamental task, that of bearing pictorial or
otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible. The
inexpressible does not reside in an over there, in another
world, or another time, but in this: in that (something) happens.
In the determination of pictorial art, the indeterminate, the
'it happens' is the paint, the picture (Lyotard, 92-93).

Lyotard lights on a fundamental truth: that Newman did not seek to make apictorial paintings. If anything, Newman believed that his work was a new way of painting and drawing, a new draftsmanship for the post-WWII world. The inexpressible, as Lyotard observes, is not somewhere else, it is always present.

Newman sought to express the inexpressible, but he had come to the realization that the classic pictorial image did not permit him to accomplish the work he believed to be the artist's duty. European painters, in his estimation, no longer possessed the capacity to make the viewer self-aware while standing in front of the canvas. Instead, these painters were cursed to create images that were merely aesthetic. Beauty served as the culmination of their craft.¹² For Newman this was akin to the death of painting. His

¹² Oscar Wilde shares a similar dismay in his dialogue "The Critic as Artist." Wilde laments the shortcomings of the painter in relation to the poet, an artist who, in Wilde's opinion, uses "the whole sphere of feeling, the perfect cycle of thought." For Wilde the painter is bound to the finite qualities of his medium: "The painter is so far limited that it is only through the mask of the body that he can show us the mystery of the soul; only through conventional images that he can handle ideas; only through its physical

was a painter who felt that the shapes wielded, “must contain the plasmic entity that will carry his thought, the nucleus that will give life to the abstract, even abstruse ideas he is projecting” (“The Plasmic Image, 141).

If we return to *Onement I* it is apparent why Newman saw it as his breakthrough. There is no way to confuse the “zip” with an object in nature, it strikes through the canvas, severing art’s relationship with the sensuous and installing art, in Newman’s view, as an “expression of the mind.” If art is to be moral, that is if it is to promote an awareness of the self in relation to others, it cannot be bound to the senses, for the senses mislead and leave no place to lay responsibility for the actions they instigate. The senses activate desire and desire exists in neither a realm of morality nor plurality. Desire is about wanting, not about the moral, and under Newman’s conception of his new painter’s moral service, the want that is bred by the senses is involved strictly with the individual, not with society as a whole. Thus, by abandoning the sensuous the new painter embraces the art he produces as one built upon a foundation of moral responsibility. Since realism is bound to the senses, it gives the viewer an impression of the way things should be, how one would feel in that setting. Newman’s new painter removes himself from realism, but does not deny the intent behind it, that intent being subject matter. To deny subject matter would only force the painter to paint in a vacuum, to paint with no reason, and only as a response to something else. This would not be his new painter, as Newman writes in the

equivalents that he can deal with psychology. And how inadequately he does it then...” (Wilde, “The Critic as Artist,” 241). Wilde, like Burke, had not yet seen abstract painting, yet it is no stretch to imagine, in my opinion, that he would have found Newman’s aesthetic philosophy similar to his own. While Wilde’s aesthetic focused on the beautiful and Newman sought not to make beauty the thing, both men were involved in a search for art’s unifying power as a means to make the task of living at once both richer and easier.

Plasmic Image: “These men considered that the artistic problem was not whether they should or should not have subject matter; the problem was, What kind of subject matter” (“The Plasmic Image, 154).

In *Onement I* we see and experience the subject matter Newman intended. The painting confronts us. The viewer is granted an awareness of the present, of the self at the exact moment the painting is seen. The “zip” is the link. No one is transported to another place, the “zip” does not open a door to some other land.¹³ It is a transcendent experience, but one where the viewer ends up where he began. Yet the awareness of place is stronger. The knowledge of the self in relation to the world is more profound. The “zip” is the lightning flash of being human. To return to Lyotard: “If, then, there is any ‘subject-matter’, it is immediacy. It happens here and now. What [*quid*] happens comes later. The beginning is *that* there is...[*quod*]; the world, *what* there is” (Lyotard, 82). Newman sought to make the moment of looking most important. It was the here and now, the immediacy of the act of looking. By making a painting that offered transcendence without offering a new world, Newman granted the “there is” of which Lyotard spoke. “There is” is the moment where the viewer feels a relationship to the present and seeks to live in this reality, not step into another.

If Newman endeavored to teach his spectator anything it was not a message of this world then the fireworks, but of this world and the fireworks. The “zip” was not welcoming, not some nebulous inviting entryway to salvation. While Rothko wanted to flee this world, Newman could not imagine being anywhere else. Wounded and

¹³ As was Rothko’s intent with his three part paintings: the bottom and top bands acting as a doorway, with the center part being the entrance into another world that he might escape into.

awkward, Rothko was desperate to make a world that he could live in, where he would always feel at home. If he could have painted some magical painting that he could step through he would have. Newman took no part in this surrender. While both men were consumed with the idea of representing tragedy, Newman sought to make the tragedy that was intimately bound to life a reconcilable thing, to reveal it and destroy it, Rothko wanted to run away, dive into those clouds of color and be reborn again and again.¹⁴ He once said of his paintings, “I express my not-self.”¹⁵ In effect he was painting the symbol of Rothko as whole, what he wished he could be. A luring presence posing both inventive resource and hovering danger, it was a promise of a new life, weightless and free, but at the same time entirely alien an invitation to become something and someone else divorced from the pains of history.¹⁶ Newman in contrast believed that, “What has to be done is to discover the proper theme that will make contact with reality; what has to

¹⁴ Newman credits the Surrealists with prophesying our experience of modern tragedy. In his opinion, the art they produced was not the work of mad men, but was a “prophetic tableaux of what the world was to see as reality,” that reality and tragedy being World War II (“Surrealism and the War,” 95). Yet Newman also realized that tragedy must be combated, it must not be allowed to root itself into the world. In his essay “The New Sense of Fate” Newman takes a stand against our giving ourselves over to tragedy, declaring that man was given a new fate with the advent of the atom bomb and that it is the role of the artist to combat both tragedy and fate: “What we have now is a tragic rather than a terrifying situation....In this new tragedy that is playing itself out on a Greek-like stage under a new sense of fate that we have ourselves created, shall we artists make the same error as the Greek sculptors and play with an art of overrefinement, an art of quality, of sensibility of beauty? Let us rather like the Greek writers, tear the tragedy to shreds” (“The New Sense of Fate,” 169).

¹⁵ James E.B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko – A Biography* (The University of Chicago Press, 1998) 273-274.

¹⁶ Of his own paintings, Rothko declared: “I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on – and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted by my pictures shows that I *communicate* those basic human emotions....The people who weep before my paintings are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you [Selden Rodman], as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point” (Rothko, “Notes from a conversation with Selden Rodman, 1956,” 119-120). Rothko characterized painting as an act of breaking free from solitude and silence, “of breaching and stretching one’s arms again” (Rothko, “The Romantics Were Prompted,” 59). Newman, on the other hand, as we have seen, did not share the same self-pitying approach to painting that Rothko did. If anything, Newman’s aesthetic philosophy resided in a sense of the celebratory experience of the power of the image, not in the emotional weight of ecstasy and doom.

be discovered is a new subject matter” (“Painting and Prose,” 91). Unlike Rothko, Newman chose to deal with the present, while Rothko’s paintings provided a means to put to canvas the solitary quality of his internal journey, beckoning a single spectator to the painting, as psychoanalyst Hannah Segal writes, “evoking in the recipient of his art the same constellation of unconscious feelings that motivated him.”¹⁷ Rothko’s paintings allowed him a way out of the confines of his wounded mind and awkward body. He saw his art as an expression of tragedy. Thus his “not-self” becomes the symbolic representation of all his dreams waiting to be fulfilled, freed to wander and manifest itself in what the art critic Dore Ashton refers to as a “numinous floating world,” a place where all “his obstacles were left behind.”¹⁸ Rothko may have wished to express the tragic, but he wanted to walk through his paintings to a world where his “not-self” would be his real self.

It is impossible to imagine Newman having a “not-self.” Newman’s work was not made to save him or anyone else but to foster an awareness about what it means to be human in this world. There was no desire to escape, no dream of some place other than here. The creation of the painting was a moral need; the subject matter of his own self was of least importance. Newman writes, “It is not enough to use a large canvas and make a literary work encompass a wide and large theme, which is what most critics believe to be the definition of an epic. The subject matter of epics, it is true, is a large theme, but it must be a *moral* theme if the writer is at all to catch any part of the absolute” (“Painting and Prose,” 90). While this passage pertains to writing it can

¹⁷ Hanna Segal, *Dream, Phantasy and Art* (London: Routledge, 1991) 89.

¹⁸ Dore Ashton, *About Rothko* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) 105.

nonetheless be applied to Newman's own vision of painting. The idea of the epic needing to have a moral theme if it is at all capable of apprehending any part of the absolute, is intimately linked to Newman's belief that the new painter is to produce an image that is the "self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete." Newman desired a moral theme that revealed the absolute. The revelation that is self-evident is communicable with the spectator who is able to know the intent of the painter and be made aware of the truth at that single moment of viewing. For Rothko, the painting was also a moral issue, but the absolute could only be found by gaining entrance to a different world. In a way, the individual who is consumed by the richness of a Rothko painting chooses a life other than this one, where Newman forces the present to have all the meaning.

Sylvester writes that a Newman canvas presents us with a sustained experience of ourselves. We confront the reality of what and where we are:

Newman's art does not have to do with man's feelings when threatened by something in the air; it has to do with man's sense of himself. The painting gives a sense of being where we are which somehow makes us rejoice in being there (Sylvester, 327).

Sylvester is correct: Newman attempted to make the present more present. The painting silences the world, eliminating all distraction and commotion. The viewer is rooted to the spot, confronted with the vertical, whether it is the single central line in *Onement I* or the blood red stripe on the left side of a black canvas that defines *Joshua*. As the gaze fixes upon it, the straightness of Newman's "zip" draws the viewer in. The experience becomes one of wholeness, making that thin line the missing piece of the viewer's

existence. As Lyotard asserts, “The purpose of a painting by Newman is not to show that duration is in excess of consciousness, but to be the occurrence, the moment which has arrived” (Lyotard, 79). The viewer is aware of herself at the moment of looking. That is Newman’s subject matter: awareness of the self. If he had given the viewer the means to escape this world he would have failed at his task. Like Rothko, Newman wanted his painting to affect people, but he did not long, as Rothko did, to free his viewers from the weight of their lives. Both men hoped to give salvation, but Newman desired it be found in this world, while Rothko wanted to paint a new universe where all the wounded could feel whole.

In an interview with Sylvester from 1965, Newman remarked that he sought to give his viewer “a sense of place,” that the viewer should know where he was:

In that sense he relates to me when I made the painting because in that sense I was there...standing in front of one of my paintings you [Sylvester] had the sense of your own scale...this is what I have tried to do: that the onlooker in front of my painting knows that he’s there....I hope that my painting has the impact of giving someone, as it did me, the feeling of his own totality, of his own separateness, of his own individuality, and at the same time of his connection to others who are also separate....I think you can only feel others if you have some sense of your own being (*Selected Writings and Interviews*, 257).

That Newman rejected the episodic is an unequivocal fact in his painting. His art is not snippets of time or loosely connected sections of experience, instead each work is a

single event unburdened by temporality. One does not pick up where one last left off with Newman; one experiences one's connection to the work at that exact moment of seeing. Totality does not come in installments.

Perhaps Newman's greatest moral act in his art was the desire to give "the individual a feeling of his own individuality, and at the same time of his connection to others who are also separate."¹⁹ If the viewer were to look at a Newman painting and feel only one's self and no relation to others then Newman would have failed. This is what Barnett Newman, sage and fool, yearned to destroy. One cannot look at *Onement I* and think only of oneself in relation to one's self. The "zip" does give the viewer the sense of scale that Newman wished for. Standing before the painting spectators know they are not alone. One maintains one's individuality in front of these paintings. The spectator remains a self, still filled with one's own personal feelings and thoughts, but remains linked to the rest of society. With that simple, asymmetrical line, Newman tries to connect the world.

Newman makes us one among many; we come to know ourselves so that we might live among others. Again we return to the "zip," it is there to root the individual to

¹⁹ When Alexis de Tocqueville traveled through America in 1831, he observed that democracy, and specifically its American form, does not foster individuality, but instead breeds individualism: "Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends, so that after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself. Individualism proceeds from erroneous judgment more than from depraved feelings; it originates as much in deficiencies of mind as in perversity of heart" (Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America - Vol, II* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1990) 98). Individuality on the other hand, allows one to assert one's sense of self, to proclaim oneself as an individual, but still retain a commitment to one's fellow man. In contrast, individualism, as Tocqueville, argues, gives one no sense of one's own being, it merely clings to the basest desires and misplaced hungers, putting the individual at variance to the rest of society. We can think of Tocqueville's distinction when we look at Newman's work and thus be able to see the paintings as a testament to Newman's struggle to try to combat this destructive separation.

the collective, yet in that rooting Newman sets in motion the tearing to shreds of tragedy. For Newman's ideal artist is there to present to us not just the pain of living in the present, but to demonstrate that as a unity of individuals we have the capacity to be more than the tragic nature of the world in which we find ourselves. Newman's is an art of ethics and moral need: "I would say that if my painting were properly understood," Newman once remarked in an interview, "society would change" (Newman, 276). Each time we view a Newman we go on a journey of transcendence that ends where it began. What Newman imparts to the viewer is the lesson that there are no other worlds to travel to, no places to escape the difficulty that is life; the paintings tell us, "This is the world that matters." In Newman's sublime we feel the terror of selfhood, the gift of being an individual, and the realization that one cannot exist alone.

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