

# **THE SUBLIME IN ROTHKO, NEWMAN AND STILL**

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# **The Sublime in Rothko, Newman, and Still**



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**Ph.D. Art History**  
**11/15/97**

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## THE SUBLIME IN ROTHKO, NEWMAN, AND STILL

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An important body of literature has accumulated (both primary and secondary sources) which necessitates that Rothko, Newman, and Still be placed in the tradition of the sublime. In attempting this task, a background is established by a detailed summary of classical theory of the sublime in Longinus, Burke, Kant, and Nietzsche, followed by detailed summaries of major recent sublimicist theory by Weiskel, Crowther, Lyotard, and Ferguson. Also, key ideas of Sartre and Jung are treated in order to round out the proper ideational context for a sublimicist analysis of these three painters. From this foundation, a working theory of the sublime is developed. Next, the painters' crucial theoretic statements are analyzed for their relevance to the sublime, and their programs and specific works are characterized in relation to theory of the sublime, and in relation to their treatments in criticism.

The last two chapters treat two crucial contexts in which Rothko, Newman, and Still are situated: the historically accumulated American tradition of the sublime in art and literature; and the general European context of modernism and postmodernism. Throughout the study, it is argued that various kinds of transcendence validate a set of various major modes of the sublime: the ideational, religious, moral, Burkean-Gothic, Kantian, Nietzschean, romantic, existential, Jungian-mythic, ontological, noble, and the sublime of light/color, along with negative modes such as the comic, the ironic, the counter, the mock, and the merely rhetorical. It is argued, finally, that sublimicism will continue to be attractive for conservative, moderate, and radical points of view, that theory of the sublime has on-going power and validity into the future, and that between positive and negative modes, the positive will probably continue to dominate.

## **Preface**

I wish to record my deep appreciation for the officers of the University of St. Andrews who gave me the opportunity to come from Kentucky to pursue the research doctorate in Scotland. I also wish to thank Dr. Paul Crowther for his most kind and most intelligent direction of my studies, for opening to me the great richness and value of the concept of the sublime, and for encouraging me to investigate the sublimicist vision at the heart of American abstract expressionism. I wish, too, to thank Dr. Matthew Rampley for his valuable suggestions which improved the content, focus, and wording of my study, and to thank similarly my St. Andrews committee.

I wish also to add thanks to my parents, William Eugene McMahon and Dorothy Phipps McMahon, for their strong support and encouragement. And I wish to record my gratitude to Dawn Waddel, who watched over my progress and helped me in many ways.

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## Introduction

There are good reasons to attempt a detailed study of the sublime in Rothko, Newman, and Still. In 1961 Robert Rosenblum, fourteen years before completing his Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, published a brief essay entitled "The abstract sublime," in which he claimed that Rothko, Newman, Still, and Pollock were inheritors of the traditions of the sublime as established by Longinus, Burke, Reynolds, Kant, Diderot, and Delacroix, and that in the early nineteenth century, "the Sublime provided a flexible semantic container for the murky new Romantic experiences of awe, terror, boundlessness and divinity."<sup>1</sup> Of a Rothko painting Rosenblum declares: "Like the mystic trinity of sky, water and earth that, in Friedrich and Turner, appears to emanate from an unseen source, the floating, horizontal tiers of veiled light in the Rothko seem to conceal a total remote presence that we can only intuit and never fully grasp. These infinite, glowing voids carry us beyond reason to the sublime."<sup>2</sup> Rosenblum observes that painters may approach the sublime through either a calm and static mode or a turbulent dynamic mode; that the scale of large paintings can contribute to the sublime effect; that Newman sought a horizon orientation suggesting infinity; that Newman's Vir Heroicus Sublimis puts us before a terrifying yet exhilarating void; that a new myth concept is in the air because the large canvases of Newman, Still, Rothko, and Pollock "might well be interpreted as a post-World-War-II myth of Genesis"; and that now, the sublime subjects of the romantic era are given a new treatment: "today, such supernatural experiences are conveyed through the abstract medium of paint alone."<sup>3</sup> Rosenblum concludes, "In its heroic search for a private myth to embody the sublime power of the supernatural, the art of Still, Rothko, Pollock and

Newman should remind us once more that the disturbing heritage of the Romantics has not yet been exhausted."<sup>4</sup> These directions opened by Rosenblum are indeed crucial for understanding the abstract expressionists, and a strong tradition has developed to group Rothko, Newman, and Still into a set, leaving out Pollock partly due to closer personal relations between the three, and due also to Pollock's having moved away from abstraction in his late works.

Two years after Rosenblum's article, Lawrence Alloway published in 1963 his more incisive treatment, "The American Sublime," focused on Rothko, Newman, and Still and the abstract style they all developed in the late forties. Alloway properly observes that Newman's ideograph concept applied to all three painters, necessitating that any mythical content would now have to be some kind of "deposit of myth" on the minimal abstract forms (which were no longer signs) whose meanings could best be approached "with the aesthetics of the sublime." Alloway treats Newman's essay of 1948 "The Sublime is Now," probably the central text demanding that Rothko, Newman, and Still be connected to theory of the sublime. We know that in preparing his statement, Newman reviewed the concept of the sublime in Longinus, Burke, and Kant, using their differentiation between the sublime and the beautiful to support his claim that the abstract expressionists had set aside beauty to seek the exaltation of sublime subjects, as they also set aside memory, nostalgia, and older myths to reach a contemporary base in which the content of a new mythical treatment was to be the existential self, with its contemporary feelings.<sup>5</sup>

Alloway correctly observes that several features of Burke's theory of the sublime (such as the value of strong emotion, dark colors, terror, great size, voids, and silence) should be connected to the three painters, but beyond any specific correspondences to the eighteenth century was the deeper relation--the "sublime as powerful domination, sublime as absolute emotion, sublime as exaltation." Alloway adds, again shrewdly, that the new American sublime will see the artist himself as hero in a new moral drama seriously instrumental, will reflect humanized values, will produce minimal abstract works as a total unity rather than a collection of parts, all this in search of sublime presences that are unknown, shrouded in mystery, making each painting "the image of a higher, hidden reality." Alloway further recognizes that in this

abstract American sublime light and color will be agencies for sublime content in the manner of "Neo-Platonic and medieval mystics," and that Rothko may have been influenced by Bonnard's use of strong light, redirecting the light toward the sublime by using "veils" for the mystery, as recommended by the Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola. Thus Alloway clearly understands that the past is "one half of a dialogue with the present," and that we should pursue the dialogue between the abstract expressionists and the eighteenth century theory of the sublime—that "Common to both images is the concept of the sublime as part of an expansive, or transcendent, move."<sup>6</sup>

Alloway perceptively points to issues that still need to be pursued in detail.

The directions struck in these essays by Newman, Rosenblum, and Alloway have been building toward a general recognition that Rothko, Newman, and Still cannot be properly understood until they are located in the historically accumulated literature of the sublime, as well as the context of their own epoch. And of course our perspectives on the theory of the sublime continue to expand with prominent studies in the last quarter of the twentieth century, studies which create new contexts and raise new problems for the interpretation of abstract expressionism. Consequently, my study will treat the role of theories of the sublime in the formation of the artistic vision of Rothko, Newman, and Still, and, equally important, will give critical consideration to a variety of contemporary notions of the sublime in relation to the interpretation of the works of these three painters. Almost all art historians and critics who have treated Rothko, Newman, and Still emphasize that their art and thought were deeply influenced by Nietzsche, by Sartrean existentialism, and by new myth theory popularized in the works of Jung. As a general rule these interpreters do not give detailed attention to Nietzsche, Sartre, and Jung, and do not perceive how their concepts bear on the experience of the sublime. What we find in the criticism is mostly casual remarks in passing. For instance Robert Motherwell, who produced a companion article with Newman on the sublime, did not say more about the matter than to call the sublime "the exalted, the noble, the lofty," and to declare that "Perhaps . . . painting becomes Sublime when the artist transcends his personal anguish, when he projects in the midst of a shrieking world an expression of living and its end that is silent and ordered."<sup>7</sup> In other casual remarks Motherwell declares that he and the other abstract expressionists

saw a mysticism in abstraction, an effort “to wed oneself to the universe” by crossing a void; that a course he taught at Hunter College had an existential center; that modern art is strongly ethical with a sense of enemies, traitors, and heroes; that the abstract expressionists transformed the automatic gestures of surrealism into something “plastic, mysterious, and sublime”; that Jung’s theory was for them “a useful concept”; that they could not produce a clear manifesto because of “the existential doubt and the anxiety that we all felt”; and that the painters were influenced by Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce’s Ulysses.<sup>8</sup> These casual remarks all suggest directions needing a fuller treatment. The same holds for important studies such as Dore Ashton’s The New York School and Stephen Polcari’s Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience. Ashton observes that “for a time, Newman, Rothko, and Still formed a distinct trio,” and she devotes whole chapters to the strong influence of existentialism and of Jungian and myth theory. Yet in these chapters her insights, while valid, are rather casual. With Sartre, for instance, she does not go much beyond generalizations about his emphasis on subjectivity, freedom, and moral responsibility; and with Jung, she does not give a detailed treatment, but points to general features such as his being more comprehensive than Freud and his stress on psychic depth, primordial insights, and bringing the dark unconscious into the light of rational awareness. She also mentions in broadest terms the major influence on Rothko, Newman, and Still from Nietzsche’s concept of Apollonian and Dionysian.<sup>9</sup>

In his insightful study, Polcari notes the importance of myth theory in Jung and others (such as Nietzsche, Fraser, Joyce, and Eliot) and observes that abstract expressionism was “an art of historical and mytho-religious character addressing the spiritual life of the West”; that these painters sought a redeeming vision; that their ideas attached “to the pattern of dynamic historic continuums” and to “heroic mythic pattern and ancient ritual”; that they avoided domination by politics; that they liked metamorphosis and had their own geometrism; that they found “the personal in the universal”; that the whole of modernism impinged on them; that they responded to Jung’s archetype theory, spirituality, and emphasis on imagery; and that they were deeply influenced by Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy.<sup>10</sup> Polcari does not have space to give the needed details about Jung’s critique of Christianity or Nietzsche’s theory of the

sublime, so that, again, one finds crucial directions to follow, couched in the broadest general terms, but needing a more thorough elaboration.

In deciding which more recent theorists of the sublime to consider as shedding light on the issues raised by Rothko, Newman, and Still in their sublime subjects, the writer, in a rather wide-ranging project, must make a selection that seems reasonable. Two scholars who cannot be omitted are Francois Lyotard and Paul Crowther, due to the sustained and detailed attention they have given to the theory of the sublime. Lyotard and Crowther both extend the insights of Kant, but in different ways. Thomas Weiskel should be added in that his study of the sublime pays special attention to its negative manifestations, which he tries to connect to Freudian thought and to semiotics. And Frances Ferguson would make a helpful addition because she represents those who emphasize rhetoric as a subversive feature of language which undermines any positive transcendence in the sublime experience. These four contemporary theorists will help to provide a sense of the complex way in which recent aesthetic theory has elevated the sublime, once again, to the apex of aesthetic speculation. A fifth contemporary theorist of the sublime, Slavoj Žižek, has earned the right to be considered, and I will introduce his paradigm in my last chapter.

One of the important disputes centers upon the idea of transcendence. In some classical theory of the sublime, there must be a genuine crossing of a threshold onto higher spiritual or metaphysical ground, an authentic ascent to a higher reality accompanied by the positive feelings of awe and exaltation. Yet—touched by modern philosophic scepticism and by various theories of language as a subversive self-referential zone of arbitrary word games and touched by the peculiar semantic ambiguities and fadings asserted by Derrida—a considerable set of modern interpreters of art and literature feel compelled to deny the reality of any postulated area of metaphysical or spiritual transcendence. Rothko, Newman, and Still believed that their openness to spiritual absolutes resembled that of primitive artists. They believed that they were making a kind of primitive new beginning, and their challenge was to find in existential subjectivity a basis for treating the eternal, to find in personal passions a way to treat universal modes of feeling, to find in minimal abstract forms a direct route to eternal ideas that would carry a mythic aura and yet be separated from nature and natural forms. They required transcendence in a new key, touched by secularized spirituality

and a modern existential and tragic coloration.

Another strongly disputed area is the presence or absence of a necessary bonding between aesthetics and morality, the ancient fight dramatized by Plato, and continuing in the twentieth century to mark the debates about the sublime. There are moral components in the theory of the sublime of Longinus, stronger ones in Kant, and interesting ones in Nietzsche. Crowther and Lyotard carry forward the speculation on the ethical in relation to the sublime. In general, Crowther utilizes Kant, Merleau-Ponty, and a reciprocity principle to create an affirmative, flexible, and comprehensive modern critical aesthetics in which the sublime plays an important role, while Lyotard directs his interest (in a less affirmative manner) toward a general defense of philosophic thinking as a presentation of the unrepresentable, thus locating serious thought in the domain of the sublime. Crowther's paradigm includes the essential but rare understanding that criticism itself has an ethical core. This is not to imply that I will develop any kind of moral theory or try to indicate any right way to connect the moral and the aesthetic. I will merely point to places where the issue has come up in the writings that I utilize. Americans in general have displayed a strong national interest in morality and civic virtue, and it is not surprising that Rothko, Newman, and Still declare strong moral contents in their art programs.

Since the particular aesthetic and ideational programs of Rothko, Newman, and Still developed in the stream of American history, it would shed light on their art if it could be located in the general American tradition of sublimicism, a concept treated early by Poe and a term used by Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, and others. Indeed, the American literati and artists would have been cognizant of the emergence of theory of the sublime from European foundations. And even when American writers and painters did not manifest a strong conscious theory of the sublime (as in the case of Melville, Whitman, and Dickinson), the vocabulary of the sublime offers a satisfactory way to analyze their grand art programs and transcendental thrustings. The American sublime standing behind the abstract expressionists was manifested strongly both in literature and in painting, and both vectors need to be considered, even if in a summary manner.

Obviously there was a second major context for Rothko, Newman, and Still--the general European rise of modernism and the first moves toward postmodernism. These three painters worked in the forties, fifties, and sixties, when high modernism

was powerful, and when the various negative and disruptive impulses of postmodern sensibility were also receiving much attention. It will not be easy to make sharp distinctions between a modernist and postmodernist frame of mind, and not easy to separate the two temperaments in the works of Rothko, Newman, and Still, and it is far beyond the scope of this study to make any fully satisfying effort to solve problems which many of our best minds are now grappling with and arguing about. It would be very helpful for books to appear which lead to a consensus as to the core principles that define modern and postmodern, and perhaps such studies will come. So far the debate seems to suggest two schools: that the postmodern is a radical rejection of modernism, or that the disruptive postmodern vector is the radical moment which launches most of the modernist visions of the twentieth century. But even though this issue, with the vast literature treating it, cannot be a major subject for this limited consideration of three painters, it is, nonetheless, a very important item in the general European cultural fabric which influenced these Americans, and therefore some brief comments can be helpful in illuminating their works.

All of these considerations, then, suggest a reasonable way for this study of Rothko, Newman, and Still to proceed: part one offering a chapter going beyond the typical and rather casual generalizations about the historically accumulating theory of the sublime to offer a detailed explanation of the crucial ideas in Longinus, Burke, Kant, and Nietzsche; a chapter on recent theory from Weiskel, Crowther, Lyotard, and Ferguson; and a chapter giving the needed detail about the strong background and indirectly sublimicist thought of Sartre and Jung. Then part two, presenting a chapter each on Rothko, Newman, and Still emphasizing their own specific statements relevant to their sublime subjects (keeping in mind the treatments of the major theorists) and then applying the accumulated perspectives on the sublime to several specific works of each artist; and for part three, one chapter treating briefly the American literary and painterly tradition for sublimicist aims and projects, and a second brief chapter making some tentative remarks about the general European emergence of modernist and postmodernist sensibilities as these bear on the interpretation of Rothko, Newman, and Still.

There is a general line of argument which this study develops, mounted on the following premises: that the experience of the sublime is both authentic and universal as

an experience of deep content, of wonderment, and of transcendence; that various experiential and ideational orientations make for a wide variety of kinds of transcendence and thus a wide variety in modes of sublimity; that in the analysis of art the full range of the accumulated historical and relevant vocabulary should be employed; that moral vectors tend to accompany much of the creating and interpreting of art and all human choices in general; that historical and cultural origins and backgrounds constitute an essential aspect of adequate art analysis; and that art works, as a rule, are sensory forms which carry symbolic meaning and can adumbrate general world-views.

In more specific terms, I will argue that there is permanent on-going value to key ideas about the sublime in the noble concepts of Longinus, the darker concepts of Burke, the reason-enhancing concepts of Kant, and the culturally centered concepts of Nietzsche, and that these classical theorists of the sublime had an important influence on Rothko, Newman, and Still. I will argue that Weiskel's contemporary theory of the sublime contains useful ingredients, but is weakened by yielding too much ground to Freud, to postmodern anti-idealism, and to modern scepticism and negativity. I will suggest a possible weakness in Ferguson's sublimest theory on the grounds that she concedes too much to the idea that all cultural values and issues are arbitrary linguistic constructions, and concedes too much to the idea that genuine sublime transcendence is discredited because the concept of the autonomous rational self is discredited. Ferguson comes too close to postulating a merely rhetorical sublime. I will show general approval of Paul Crowther's flexible, many-faceted, eclectic, and philosophically optimistic reciprocity paradigm which builds from Kant, Merleau-Ponty, and others. However I will raise some questions about Crowther involving hierarchy of values and duration of forms. I will show approval for Lyotard's use of Kant to make the whole project of philosophy sublime, and approval also for his understanding of the centrality of the moral sublime, yet raise questions about the peculiar paralysis of his negativized point of view, joined to the paralysis engendered by his theory that pluralistic speech communities sabotage all trans-cultural and universalist claims, and also raise questions about his belief that the dominant ideological narratives of the West (which strongly shaped Rothko, Newman, and Still) are now evaporating. The balancing of the seminal theories of Longinus, Burke, Kant, and Nietzsche with the contemporary theorists to the interpretation of the three chosen painters. Also, I will argue that Sartre and Jung--

as they formulate existential and mythic modes of transcendence--activate new possibilities for sublime transcendence, and also exert a crucial general influence on the ideational programs of Rothko, Newman, and Still.

Using these broad cultural resources, I will derive a working theory of the sublime focused on the concept of a variety of sublimicist modes; on the need for shock, astonishment, and check; on the potential sublimity of raw ideas; and on the crossing of a genuine threshold onto higher ground--recognizing also that such positive modes of the sublime are accompanied by more negative and tentative modes, and the more negative and postmodern impulses should be given their due.

Also in specific terms, I will carefully weigh the relevant statements of Rothko, Newman, and Still as they work out their sense of sublime subjects. I will locate them chiefly in the ideational sublime (joined to other modes), will emphasize the portal motif in Rothko, the verticality and deeper religiosity in Newman, and the stronger individualistic existential stance of Still, correlated to his zig-zag lines. Along the way I will pay considerable attention to the insights of numerous scholars, and judge these against the norms of my own theoretical alignments.

In the last part of my study I will try to treat, in summary fashion, some of the obvious highlights in the American historical tradition of the sublime as it has been manifested in major writers and major painters. I will follow this with a brief chapter on the emergence of European modernism and postmodernism (though of course Americans have played a major role in these developments). I will emphasize the difficulty, at the moment, of making clear distinctions between what is modern and what is postmodern, and here I will introduce Zizek, because he offers not just important theorizing about the sublime, but also a good test case for showing that modern and postmodern values often seem to complement each other, rather than making for neat and clear contradictions. These last two chapters suggest the broader cultural contexts whose presence is felt in the works of Rothko, Newman, and Still.

Finally, I will offer a brief and general conclusion which ends with some speculations on the future of the sublime. Obviously these foundations for my study have implications for what would and would not be acceptable as a general aesthetic theory, though I have not tried to produce one, but rather to treat a limited group of tasks and problems. It will be obvious that at many points in my study, I am

working with such extremely complex issues that I must resort to oversimplification in order to gain some effect of direction, coherence, and point of view. Some of the writers treated (such as Kant, Nietzsche, Ferguson, Lyotard, and Zizek) are difficult to understand, and in many cases the relevant literature is impossibly large to absorb. I will try to remind my readers from time to time of the flaw of oversimplification. And obviously I have some biases that should be confessed, since they will be apparent. I think that it was wise of Rothko, Newman, and Still to strive for a positive, affirmative center, and to try for universalized meanings, and not to give up a concern for transcendental entities and moral and religious values. I do not think that the main stream of Western thought and value can or should be swept aside and made obsolete. I think that both Plato and Zeno, like Rothko, Newman, and Still, will remain permanently influential into the future, and that science will continue to discover genuine logical truth about what is. At major points I have recorded major aspects of the sceptical, negative, disruptive vectors which have steadily gained force in the academies of Europe, Asia, and America. I have hoped to show an awareness of current deep divisions in art and thought. But I confess to a belief perhaps impossible to justify that in a general way, the affirmative and universally meaningful visions and categories will maintain their traditional hold, even though I am not prepared to make a philosophic defense of such a view, and even if I were, it is not needed in order to make a search for what seems to be affirmative in theory of the sublime and in the works of these three painters. I will certainly not ignore the darker, disruptive elements, but I am confident that Rothko, Newman, and Still would themselves not object to one's emphasizing their positive values. In broadest terms, I try to defend the authenticity and value of sublime transcendence, the need for historical perspective, and the quest for the sublime in Rothko, Newman, and Still through the ideographic art symbol. Obviously these biases and preferences demonstrate, in the spirit of Nietzsche's perspectivism, that my perspective is a limited one, and that others will approach this same body of material from different points of view, and will reach different conclusions.

PART ONE

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BACKGROUND THEORISTS OF THE SUBLIME

### One - Four Seminal Theorists of the Sublime

Rothko, Newman, and Still are known to have made important use of Nietzsche's general philosophy and theories of the sublime advanced in the works of Longinus, Burke, and Nietzsche, while Kant was a lesser influence. Burke and Nietzsche may properly be seen as thinkers who emphasized the existential component of the sublime experience, the component related most strongly to the programs of these three creators of abstract expressionism. For background, it seems reasonable to treat Longinus, Burke, and Nietzsche in some detail, followed by a brief summary of Kant's theory. Single treatises of Longinus, Burke, and Kant provide the essential documents, while for Nietzsche the whole of his philosophic program must be sketched, because that whole is perceived as a grand sublime enterprise.

A. O. Prickard, in the introduction to his translation of Longinus on the Sublime, observes that in Greek criticism, the treatise of Longinus enjoys a lofty position shared only with Aristotle's Poetics.<sup>1</sup> Focusing chiefly but not entirely on the literary sublime, Longinus begins by declaring that the sublime is "an eminence and excellence in language," and the sublime soaring is seen in "a lightning flash."<sup>2</sup> The idea of a sudden flash of awesome apprehension has become an almost universally accepted sublime trait, though the flash may come in a stately mode as well as a turbulent one, as Longinus later makes clear. At this point Longinus states that the sublime cannot be presented as wildly irrational, but must be invested with the dignity of orderly method.<sup>3</sup>

Longinus describes the sublime in terms such as "great" and "surpassingly good" (thus touching on a moral aspect), and he offers this crucial passage: "The soul is raised by true sublimity, it gains a proud step upwards, it is filled with joy and exultation, as

though itself had produced what it hears."<sup>4</sup> Not only does Longinus make clear a moral instrumentalism in this upward gain for the soul, he also comes intriguingly close to Kant, a foreshadowing of Kant, in this pointing to a subjective sense of inner creative power. In another prefiguring of Kant, Longinus makes the important point that the encounter with the sublime "gives much food for fresh reflection."<sup>5</sup> One of the richest components in Kant's theory is that sublime experiences yield an enormous stimulation to the whole intellectual life. Rothko, Newman, and Still (unlike the younger painters who followed them) retain at the core of their programs not only the exalted Longinian sublime, but also the Longinian and Kantian emphasis on enhancement of intellect, and this is especially true of Newman. Longinus additionally anticipates Kant in claiming that the sublime "pleases always, and pleases all."<sup>6</sup> Kant stressed universal assent as a condition for aesthetic judgments.

One of the most important of Longinus's assumptions is that of five sources for a sublime style for some natural genius, there stands "First and most potent the faculty of grasping great conceptions," and often just a bare idea "moves our wonder, because the thought is very great."<sup>7</sup> Such a thesis should rank high in any full theory of the sublime.

Interestingly (because he connects the sublime to intense joy), Longinus, while finding strong passions one source of the sublime, rules out (in a move pointing toward Nietzsche) pity, grief, and fear as suitable passions. And in a comment anticipating Kant's sublimity of the noble, Longinus asserts that there is often "sublimity without passion."<sup>8</sup>

In another important insight, Longinus observes that in Homer the violent warfare passages and cosmic destruction passages are often sublime, yet even more sublime than words is the silence of Ajax in the Lower World.<sup>9</sup> This insight of Longinus points toward the element of the sublime that theorists have associated with emptiness, the void, the abyss, and with the silent gazer in paintings by Friedrich. Longinus also locates sublimity in noble old testament passages, singling out (in a manner relevant to many painters) the creation motif in the phrase "Let there be light."<sup>10</sup>

Longinus offers a shrewd awareness of significant form through his observation

that one feature of the sublime appears when the artistic genius, from some given area, chooses "the most vital of the included elements" and makes these "by mutual superposition, form as it were a single body."<sup>11</sup> Such a principle is highly relevant to the mature sense of wholeness and proportion achieved in the styles of Rothko, Newman, and Still. Longinus adds that this sublime effect becomes most powerful when the harmonized form reflects the ideational content.<sup>12</sup> It often does in abstract expressionist works.

A rather neglected passage in Longinus declares that a serial repetition can build sublimity, an effect analogous to a series of great waves.<sup>13</sup> This principle may be applied not only to internal features of paintings and to a series of paintings, but also to the very strong desire of Rothko, Newman, and Still that their works be shown in a carefully controlled serial manner in a special room, or in the case of Still, a special museum. Serial impact may be considered in the Rothko room at the Tate Gallery, in the Rothko chapel panels at Rice University, and in Newman's room at the National Gallery in Washington. Repetition of themes in musical works would be relevant, and in literature, an example might be a sonnet cycle.

Longinus observes again that strong sublime passions are raised by Homer's dramatic action-packed stories of the gods, but that Plato offers a second more calm and rational mode of the sublime, and there is a calm and reasoned historical sublime in the narratives of Thucydides.<sup>14</sup> Clearly Longinus has in mind that the sweep of historical forces and movements can offer sublime subjects. This concept has not been invented by modernist thinkers. The calm and noble sublime in Plato's passages receives high status from Longinus, who declares that Plato competes against Homer for the crown.<sup>15</sup> The noble sublime contrasts to the passionate. Plato's splendid rhetoric of course is made powerful by the sublime ideas being conveyed. In a brilliant passage highly relevant to the profound moral, aesthetic, and ideational seriousness of the Rothko, Newman, and Still, Longinus pins down the essential attitude for an artist of the sublime: "If I write this, in what spirit will future ages hear me?"<sup>16</sup> Among philosophers, this attitude is uniquely powerful in Nietzsche.

Relating to the special painterly vocabulary created by the abstract expressionists,

Longinus emphasizes that bold creations of the imagination can be sublime.<sup>17</sup> Longinus notes that a sublime figure of speech may seem so natural and apt that the sublime elevation is unnoticed, and his analogy comes from painting, when the dark elements seem less conspicuous than the light, so that we get a “veiled” effect.<sup>18</sup> In abstract expressionism there is considerable veiling of the sublime in dark colors.

Additionally, Longinus asserts that the live emotional intensity of question and answer exchanges can be used in art for sharpening the passions of sublime encounters.<sup>19</sup> There is evidence that the abstract expressionists painters sought this very kind of living dialogue between painting and viewer, a dialogue in which each interrogates the other. Obviously such a question and answer exchange may be seen as one of the vivifying features of all paintings. It seems that little attention has been given to this insight from Longinus, and little attention also to the rich comment that sublimity can be generated by surprising leaps from the one to the many or the many to one, and also by thrusting the past into the present. These principles are useful in analyzing the sublime in Rothko, Newman, and Still because these painters have a strong sense of the one behind the many, and their version of neo-primitivism (touched by their sense of bonding to primitive painters, and by the past-present bonding of Jungian archetypes) brings the past into the present. Generally speaking, these profound and sudden thrustings described by Longinus would meet Kant’s requirement of some dynamical or mathematical apprehension too rugged or complex to be held in any single clear image.

Rothko, Newman, and Still displayed a high, ethical, and dignified seriousness about their programs, which may be connected to the Longinian precept that the strength of the sublime increases as dignity in rhetoric increases, a dignity principle raised extremely high by Kant, for whom our greatest sublime dignity lies in legislating universal moral rules, which are binding if validated by one of the several Kantian versions of the categorical imperative. Generally speaking, painters coming after Rothko, Newman, and Still (like poets coming after Frost, Crane, Stevens, Yeats, Hopkins, and Eliot) were much less committed to transcendence, height, dignity, nobility, and sublimity.

In a comment highly relevant to the metaphorical symbols in abstract expressionism, Longinus claims that daring metaphors called out by strong passion can

reach the sublime, though Longinus observes in an earlier passage that such a single device will not be effective unless part of a larger purpose and suitable occasion, and in a later passage he adds simile and hyperbole as promising devices.<sup>20</sup> Most scholars would label as hyperbole the claims of Nietzsche, Newman, and Still that their works can change the whole world.

Longinus grounds his theory of the sublime in universal psychological constants, claiming that nature does not intend for mankind to be ignoble, and has implanted in all people “an invincible and eternal love of that which is great and . . . more divine.”<sup>21</sup> In a manner similar to Plotinus, Longinus declares that in men of greatest genius, “sublimity raises them almost to the intellectual greatness of God.” Finally, pointing again toward Kant, Longinus observes that the inner human world of imagination and mind holds greater scope for the sublime than does the physical universe.<sup>22</sup> Most of these features of the sublime as given in this great seminal work of Longinus will be incorporated later into my own working theory of the sublime, and will be used to explicate the works of Rothko, Newman, and Still.

Edmund Burke’s bodily and existential theory also yields classical explanatory principles, which he gathered into his Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.<sup>23</sup> Burke’s paradigm of sublimity holds special interest in that he tried to ground it in the best scientific psychological theory available to him. Burke’s treatise was published in 1756. The psychology then dominant was a calculus of pleasure and pain. In the introductory essay to his treatise (called “On Taste”), making it clear that he assumes universal psychological traits, Burke declares that the pleasure-pain logic of the senses is the same in all people, and so is the logic of the imagination, “since the imagination is only the representation of the senses.”<sup>24</sup> Burke adds that in addition to the immediate pleasures and pains derived from natural objects, there is an added pleasure “perceived from the resemblance which the imitation has to the original”<sup>25</sup>; furthermore, “The mind of man has naturally a far greater alacrity and satisfaction in tracing resemblances than in searching for differences: because by making resemblances we produce new images; we unite, we create, we enlarge our stock; but in making distinctions we offer no food at all to the imagination.”<sup>26</sup> For

Burke all people have an equal gift for taste, but they do not have equal knowledge, and elevation in taste depends upon gaining the proper superior knowledge.<sup>27</sup> Yet "So far then as taste belongs to the imagination, its principle is the same in all men," though the degree of emotional response varies greatly, depending on giving or not giving close attention to the object, and depending also on greater or less "natural sensibility."<sup>28</sup> Pursuing his theme of psychological universals, Burke observes: "Love, grief, fear, anger, joy, all these passions have, in their turns, affected every mind; and they do not affect it in an arbitrary or casual manner, but upon certain, natural, and uniform principles."<sup>29</sup> But when we move beyond elementary passions into the more complex realm of character, action, virtues, and vices, then judgment comes into play, and judgment "is improved by attention, and by the habit of reasoning." Burke adds that this more complex zone contains most of the objects on which taste is brought to bear.<sup>30</sup> As proof for the education and improvement of taste, Burke notes that "Men of the best taste, by consideration, come frequently to change these early and precipitate judgments."<sup>31</sup>

The most important things to understand in Burke's argument are that he has a strongly empirical sort of bodily orientation, that he combines pleasure/pain psychology with faculty psychology, that he seeks a grounding in psychological universals, and that he allows for the emergence of superior critical and evaluative insights, based on combinations of natural gifts and higher education. From this general foundation, he launches a careful analysis of sublimity and beauty. Burke begins by declaring that pleasure and pain are positive emotions, that one is not simply the negating of the other, and that there is a large indifferent emotional state when we feel neither pleasure nor pain.<sup>32</sup> Burke offers the term "delight" as "the sensation which accompanies the removal of pain or danger."<sup>33</sup> Burke divides passions into two modes: those related to self-preservation, and those involving social relations. The strongest of all passions, Burke declares, are those related to self-preservation, those of pain and danger. This leads him to his preliminary definition of the sublime: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a

source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure.”<sup>34</sup>

Burke’s point is that to be stabbed by another makes a greater impact than to be kissed. After adding that the idea of death is the strongest of all passions, Burke makes a crucial point: “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful.”<sup>35</sup> It is important to note that Burke does include more than terror, since he names things “analogous to terror,” but does not elaborate. Burke’s conceptual scheme is complex, and its central insights have major permanent value. Just as paintings of the crucified Christ and plots of Greek tragedy offer death at a distance, so do the works of Rothko, Newman, and Still treat sublime themes of pain and death at a certain distance.

Burke next moves into a detailed treatment of the sublime. He asserts that the passion caused by encountering the sublime in nature is an astonishment that paralyzes the soul, circumventing operations of reason: “astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect.”<sup>36</sup> Kant will later make more of respect, and will not allow reason to be circumvented. Offering a thesis that later theorists will find too narrow, Burke declares: “Indeed, terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime.”<sup>37</sup> Following the terror theme—and suggesting ways to interpret Rothko, Newman, and Still—Burke adds that terror is increased by some obscurity and darkness, a principle utilized by many religions, and by Milton in description of death as “dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree.”<sup>38</sup> Burke observes that things which strike the mind as having greatness “make some sort of approach towards infinity,” which is prevented if we see clear boundaries.<sup>39</sup> Burke’s stress on infinity might suggest Kant’s mathematical sublime, and the obscurity principle might relate to the fuzzy edges in abstract expressionist work. Indeed, the hard edges of Noland, Kelly, and the early Stella may be designed in part to declare their moving away from the theme of outer sublime mysteries (though

the thesis that Noland, Kelly, and Stella are decorative and devoid of deeper subject matter is not correct).

In another important move, Burke applies the obscurity principle to ideas: "A clear idea is therefore a name for a little idea."<sup>40</sup> As an example of sublime obscurity in a grand idea, Burke cites a passage in which Job confronts in fear and trembling a night-time obscure supernatural being: "an image was before mine eyes, there was silence, and I heard a voice, --Shall mortal man be more just than God?"<sup>41</sup> The sublimity of great but obscure ideas has not received its due as a principle for interpreting art, even though such a principle is recognized by Longinus, Burke, Kant, and Nietzsche. Later it will be shown that this principle establishes an important bond between abstract expressionism and the realms of metaphysics and science. Interestingly, Burke declares that paintings of hell are not successful because they make the obscure too clear.<sup>42</sup>

Pointing toward Kant's dynamical sublime, Burke states, "Besides those things which directly suggest the idea of danger . . . I know of nothing sublime, which is not some modification of power."<sup>43</sup> There is a mathematical sublime in the works of Rothko, Newman, and Still as they manipulate certain motifs of distant horizons and extensions beyond the picture frame, but most of their sublimity dealings involve the dynamical sublime of forces and powers. We should not forget that a strong idea is a strong force. After commenting on the potentially sublime and dangerous force of bulls, horses, tigers, lions, wolves, commanders, and kings, Burke notes that our instinctive sense of God centers on His destructive power for which we feel "a sacred and reverential awe."<sup>44</sup> While Burke does not state that awe and reverence are defining traits of the sublime, he does imply it.

Burke moves to important new ground, locating the sublime in states of emptiness and privation, states such as vacuity, darkness, solitude, and silence.<sup>45</sup> Later in this study, such states will be connected to the spiritual condition of modernist life as reflected in Jungian thought and in the thought of Rothko, Newman, and Still (and also central to Heidegger's theory of modernist art, which centers on privation of Being). Also suggesting abstract expressionist style, Burke notes that vast size is sublime, that verticals are more sublime than horizontals, and jagged surfaces more sublime than

smooth, this being related to his general theory that beauty is calming while the sublime is disturbing. Burke declares that the idea of infinity yields “delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime”; also, infinity can be suggested by serial progressions.<sup>46</sup>

In another passage whose value has not been appreciated enough, Burke observes that difficulty, when great, can be sublime.<sup>47</sup> Certainly this Burkian insight should be connected to the difficulty of abstract art; the difficulty of philosophic, mathematical, and scientific systems; and the difficulty of writers such as Eliot, Hart Crane, Hopkins, Joyce, Dickinson, Faulkner, and Wallace Stevens. Usually when there is a great difficulty, there will exist, in Kantian terms, an inability to perceive something in the harmony of a single image, and therefore a turning to reason for some bridging concept. There will be the shock of a disruption that needs to be reconciled. Burke’s shrewd insight into the sublimity of things difficult should receive more attention. Burke’s own phrase is telling: “When any work seems to have required immense force and labor to effect it.”<sup>48</sup> Burke’s example is Stonehenge.

Next, Burke names magnificence as a source of the sublime, using the synonyms of “grand” and “grandeur,” and tying magnificence to some rich profusion as in the “starry heaven.”<sup>49</sup> Then Burke singles out light and darkness as sources of the sublime, along with the colors revealed by light. Relevant to major paintings is Burke’s claim that mere colored objects in light would not be sufficient, and some additional “circumstances” are required for the elevation to sublimity. Burke also names rapid transitions from light to dark or dark to light as possibly sublime, “But darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light,” when the artist reaches “the power of a well-managed darkness,”<sup>50</sup> a principle relevant to Rothko, Newman, and Still, and also relevant is Burke’s observation that Milton properly surrounds divinity with darkness, as in Milton’s striking line about deity which Burke quotes and underlines for emphasis: “Dark with excessive light thy skirts appear.” Here Burke reveals his own appreciation for the sublime impact of paradox: “And this is not the only instance wherein the opposite extremes operate equally in favour of the sublime, which in all things abhors mediocrity.”<sup>51</sup> At a later stage this study will utilize bondings of paradox

in the explication of sublimity in abstract expressionist artifacts.

Burke claims that in sublime architecture, there should be strong inside dimness by day and perhaps strong light by night, to arouse the strongest passions. In the colors Burke nominates for sublime potential, he predictably favors black, brown, and deep purple, and yet in an interesting remark that can be connected to Newman's Vir Heroicus Sublimis and other works, he states that though red is apparently an unsuitable and cheerful color, a "strong red" can carry sublimity.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, in some passages not relevant to painting, Burke discusses sublime possibilities in the domains of sound, taste, and smell, following this with a brief conclusion to his treatise on the sublime by stressing that "the sublime is an idea belonging to self-preservation; that it is therefore one of the most affecting we have; that its strongest emotion is an emotion of distress."<sup>53</sup> One reason which justifies our rejection of the narrowness in Burke's theory lies in the fact that frequently his own examples do not involve self-preservation, anxious fear, or pain, such as his examples of starry skies, vertical lines, seriality, and red colors. However if we confronted Burke with this point of view, he certainly would look for a way to find an existential bodily connection to fear, pain, and death.

Moving into a discussion of the beautiful, Burke continues to shed light on the sublime. First he rejects various candidates as touchstones for beauty, including formal measure and proportion, which Burke sets aside as being too rationally studied, noting that women have more beauty than men even though proportions are the same, and noting that British taste was in process of rejecting the crisp proportion and harmony of formal gardens and clipped hedges.<sup>54</sup> Concluding therefore that beauty must reside in certain general qualities, Burke sets up a series of contrasts: beauty has small size, the sublime large; beauty has slow smooth curves, the sublime jagged and sharp angles; beauty has bright and light colors, the sublime darker ones; beauty is delicate, the sublime massive and rugged.<sup>55</sup>

Turning to a consideration of a suitable efficient cause for beauty and sublimity, Burke once again presents an important enlargement of his paradigm which has not been sufficiently appreciated. Repeating his basic claim that terror is a general basis for the sublime, Burke adds that "many things from which we cannot probably apprehend

any danger, have a similar effect, because they operate in a similar manner.”<sup>56</sup> From this enlargement, it seems reasonable to extrapolate a Burkian sanction for the sublimity of any sudden astonishment provoking strong passion, wonder, and awe, and deriving from grand and rugged qualities. Burke declares specifically that the strongest sublime experience calls for astonishment, and a somewhat weaker sublime encounter would call for awe, then reverence, then respect.<sup>57</sup> Whether Burke would sanction it or not, such an enlargement is necessary. Burke would insist, however, on some element of pain, but Burke himself enlarges this principle to include spiritual and mental pain.<sup>58</sup> By way of summary (and after stressing that the delight in the sublime requires that we not stand in actual danger of death), Burke offers a neat definition of the sublime: “a sort of delightful horror; a sort of tranquility tinged with terror.”<sup>59</sup> While Burke does not mention it, his theory would justify the claim that the muted terror might well be supplied by our constant general sense of mortality, which, as existential philosophers have stressed, engenders (along with the burden of enormous responsibility) a constant sense of dread behind each moment of freely chosen action. The first fact for an existent is the terrible brevity of existence. The point is that we might either reject Burke’s excessive stress on terror and pain, or we might (encouraged by Burke) expand these categories so broadly that they avoid damaging narrowness. Burke’s own final summation is helpful: “the sublime and beautiful are built on principles very different, and . . . their affections are as different: the great has terror for its basis; which, when it is modified, causes the emotion in the mind which I have called astonishment; the beautiful is founded more on mere positive pleasure, and excites in the soul that feeling which is called love.”<sup>60</sup>

The final section of Burke’s treatise focuses on the manifestation of beauty and sublimity in words, and here Burke stresses the existential psychological universal of sympathy: words can reach the sublime (not by direct pointing as in painting) by a secondary route of revealing how people feel about sublime things, which moves us, due to sympathy. Burke adds that sublimity in ideas can emerge through powerful combinations of words, Burke’s example being the two nouns in the phrase “the angel of the Lord.”<sup>61</sup> Burke’s principle is relevant to painting in that as soon as we verbalize

the meaning of paintings, it is often the case that we will combine noun concepts in certain reciprocally strengthened patterns of rugged polarity. The two terms of the construction of symbol and metaphor allow the effect Burke has in mind, whether the metaphor is poetic or painterly.<sup>62</sup>

In the early pages of his The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art, Paul Crowther observes that Kant crucially broadens the theory of the sublime, accepting Burke's terrifying sublime but adding modes such as the noble sublime and the splendid sublime, and also moving beyond Burke's physiological and external causation pattern into the wider and richer realm of subjective intent, which allows Kant to locate sublimity not just in nature, but in areas such as friendship, understanding, and morality.<sup>63</sup> Most of Burke's insights into the sublime will be carried over into a working theory of the sublime to lay a foundation for this study of Rothko, Newman, and Still.<sup>64</sup>

One distinctive aspect of Nietzsche's speculations on the sublime lies in the fact that his entire project is called aesthetic in essence and his entire project may be seen as sublime in essence. This project calls for the use of artistic fictions to produce a total and radical decentering and recentering of Western society, thought, art, and values. The basic pattern for Nietzsche's merging of thought and value into art is laid down in The Birth of Tragedy, but these concepts must be supplemented by proclamations found in The Will to Power, The Joyful Wisdom, and Twilight of the Idols. One key statement defining Nietzsche's whole project as lying in the domain of the sublime comes rather early in The Birth of Tragedy. Nietzsche has declared that the original Greek chorus consisted of satyrs, half human and half goat, who represent the original state of Dionysian nature: powerful, cruel, destructive, wild, aggressive—a world in which we perceive the pointless absurdity of life. Yet these horrors and this sense of absurdity are not tolerable to the human spirit; therefore "art approaches as a saving and healing enchantress; she alone is able to transform these nauseating reflections on the awfulness or absurdity of existence into representations wherewith it is possible to live: these are the representations of the sublime as the artistic subjugation of the awful, and the comic as the artistic delivery from the nausea of the absurd."<sup>65</sup> Thus for Nietzsche the general terribleness of the state of nature must be encountered and overcome in a

sublime transaction achieved through art; consequently all major art is sublime when it offers order, meaning, and positive value through its saving fictions. Nietzsche is not far away from Kant in that the Nietzschean state of nature would be the kind of boundless and destructive power which must, in Kant's view, deliver its destabilizing shock and then be overcome (for Kant by the intervention of reason, for Nietzsche by the intervention of artistic will and imagination). It is also the case that Nietzsche's vast, turbulent state of nature would be, as Kant's theory calls for, a condition of force and power which could not be encompassed by any clear image of the imagination. From Kant's point of view, "state of nature" would be the concept of reason which allows us to subdue and handle in discourse the otherwise ungraspable entity.

To understand Nietzsche's sense of the sublime, one must obviously trace the origin and shape of those "representations" of the sublime which make it possible for mankind to live in hope rather than despair. The Birth of Tragedy lays out this origin and shape. Before condensing the narrative of origins that Nietzsche creates (with the risk of oversimplification) a few generalizations may be helpful in setting the stage. For Nietzsche the deepest insights lie not in philosophy or science, but in art. Art (which Kant would base on aesthetic ideas) comes first in the evolution of culture, and first and last, supplies the visions, values, beliefs, and world-metaphors which might establish unity and purpose for individuals and societies. Art can do this, in Nietzsche's system, when it effectively blends myth and tragic vision. For the Greeks (the first people to triumph greatly over life) the first satyr chorus was the first major art step toward the union of myth and tragic vision. A tragic sense is mandatory because real life is full of pain, suffering, paradox, death, and nihilism. But the creative human will is a will for positive joy and purposivity. It will not accept any negative vision; it will through powerful instincts create fictions of order and make them socially effective by weaving them into works of art. The art fictions will be taken as genuine and true beliefs. When the saving and plausible fictions are lodged in myth and simultaneously lodged in art, the will to life and power has prevailed, the horror and meaninglessness have been transformed into an exalted social vision: the sublime has exerted its harmonizing power. Kant and Schopenhauer encouraged Nietzsche to center his vision in subjectivity. The reason that Nietzsche gives everything to art is simple: he assumes that philosophy, science, and religion are themselves artistic fictions designed to generate

effective cultural coherence. Such a framework of thought explains Nietzsche's famous remark early in The Birth of Tragedy: "the existence of the world is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon."<sup>66</sup> For Nietzsche, a successful nation, culture, race, religion, scientific system, philosophic system, age, or individual should all be seen as constructed works of art generated in subjective freedom by the will to power as it tries to make a world suitable for instinctive needs and for mastery of life. The pre-Socratic Greek world is his model.

The narrative that fleshes out Nietzsche's concept of the sublime is the general story of his aesthetic theory, given in The Birth of Tragedy. At the dawn of a race or culture, art sets about its task to supply that race or culture with its essential consoling spiritual and metaphysical vision. In Nietzsche's analysis, art has two great powers to draw on, two great powers that give the will its transforming zeal. These powers are named in Nietzsche's famous terms, Dionysian and Apollonian.

The Dionysian force is the wild, jubilant, singing sense of a Primal One as the ground of all being; it is the frenzied, orgiastic, pre-rational, non-moral intoxication that people feel when they are united with the primal maternal heart of nature, when they merge with all plants and animals, all joyously bonded together in the Primal Unity. Their own individual will has lost itself in the universal will to life. All sense of individual separateness has been flooded out, all awareness is gone of discrete persons or objects. The veil of the illusion of individuation has been torn aside, and we feel joyously afloat on the dark, mysterious, ineffable ground of existence. We are one with the universe because we have become one with the original principle.<sup>67</sup>

The Greek deity who is the best art symbol for this orgiastic spring-time Mardi-Gras exuberance is Dionysus, the outlaw God of wine, drunkenness, and ecstatic inspiration who walked up Mt. Olympus and demanded to be worshiped. Nietzsche calls Olympus the "magic mountain" which teaches these lessons.<sup>68</sup> He points to one legend in which Dionysus is dismembered by the Titans, concluding that this legend symbolizes the annihilation of the individual. The legend implies that Dionysus will be gloriously reborn, and this symbolizes that the Dionysiac force is eternal and eternally triumphant.<sup>69</sup>

Since the Dionysiac trance takes us far back to primitive origins, it is not

constrained by later creations of religion or morality; therefore it is stained with the lust, cruelty, rape, and killing which were prominent Ur-features of life, before civilization emerged. Nietzsche believes all people remain capable of bursting all bonds of law and morality to indulge this ancient wild side.

The Dionysian state is there, waiting for the artist to use it. This state, closely related to drunkenness, finds its most powerful symbolic expression in music. Unlike sculpture and painting, music is not clear to vision, is obscure and irrationally powerful, like the will itself, and is not essentially moral in its mode. Music appears very early at the dawn of a culture, and it is the first art resource of Nietzsche's savior-artist as he begins to construct a vision of cultural values. Nietzsche makes this comment about the Dionysian basis of art: "we have the mystery doctrine of tragedy: the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of all existing things, the consideration of individuation as the primal sense of evil, and art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken, as the augury of a restored oneness."<sup>70</sup> Then Nietzsche adds that when, as in the early satyr chorus, the artist utilizes music, it is music which supplies the crucial power to "invest myths with a new and profound significance."<sup>71</sup> Music is an idealization (like all art), not an imitation, and it allows the voice of Dionysus to be heard and idealized. Nietzsche declares his acceptance of Schopenhauer view that music "is not a copy of the phenomenon, but a direct copy of the will itself," and as idealization, music brings the metaphysical into the physical.<sup>72</sup> From this perspective, Nietzsche awards to music a major role in the conquest of life by the coming of art's sublime transfiguration: the "capacity of music to give birth to myth," to "tragic myth," which "speaks of Dionysian knowledge in symbols."<sup>73</sup>

However, the Dionysiac force alone in the early artists cannot create forms of order because it is inherently disorderly. The Dionysiac ecstasy must collaborate with its peer, an antithetical instinct for form, coherence, and universal meaning, a force Nietzsche calls Apollonian,<sup>74</sup> after the Greek god Apollo, god not of artistic inspiration but of artistic design, god of light, reason, healing, morality; and god of all measured restraint and limit.

Just as Dionysus is suggested by the physiological state of drunkenness, Apollo is suggested by the physiological state of dreaming. Art will supply a middle world of

vivid illusions that carry meaning. In the dream life of primitive man, the dreamers encountered a world of vivid illusions, a world in which they saw separate and radiant people, creatures, and forms, bathed in some mysterious light, and therefore encountered as spiritual and idealized forms different from the forms of nature.<sup>75</sup> The Apollonian artist takes his cue from dreams. Dreams teach the artist that the will can create new forms, different from natural forms, new forms that are crisp and individuated, and that seem more than real because they are imbued with radiant meaning and value.<sup>76</sup>

Thus the primitive Apollonian artist studies dreams and finds his sense of strategy. And he already has music, whose form is also different from nature. Thus, for Nietzsche, it is an easy step for the primitive artist like Homer to invent stories of imagined heroic warriors and queens, to sketch clear portraits of possible gods on Mt. Olympus, to envision landscapes and actions that, like dreams, are vivid and clear.<sup>77</sup> The early artist also quickly adds dance, which is such a primitive instinct. Though dance is strongly Dionysiac, its formal patterns reflect Apollo.

The worship of Dionysus has begun, and the ceremony is an art performance clouded in the darkness of pre-history. The first ceremony was simple: in some public place, using music and dance, a group of satyr figures announce the coming of the god Dionysus, whose bursting vitality and immortality are offered to the believers. The satyrs are half human and half goat, artistic symbols created by the will to life, symbols designed to carry some affirmation and positive joy, and to launch, in Nietzsche's scheme, the conquest of life by the sublime.

However, the early Dionysiac ceremonies could not come into their full unifying power until the god is enhanced by myth. Nietzsche does not really speculate on why it must be myth, but he might have connected myth to the human sense of the arrow of time, which would make human experience read like a narrative. In any case, myth gives the early artist just what he needs. He can combine it with music and dance, he can give the gods distinct individual lives as creations separate from mother nature, he can give them experiences in a measured world of rocks, trees, weapons, food, and unfolding episodes, and, above all, he can invest the mythical narratives with a compelling cluster of cultural values and meanings, thereby giving a whole people a

sense of identity. In short, the artists create myth so that a struggling culture can discover what it is. There are no preordained paradigms for any culture. The shaping artistic impulses are generated in subjective artistic freedom. The artists follow their instincts as they fabricate a national character through their symbolic manipulation of music, dance, and myth. And of course the other arts can emerge and add their values, such as sculpture, architecture, and painting, but these emerge later and are more Apollonian in their clarity and measure. To repeat Nietzsche's phrase, these metaphysical symbolic forms "are the representations of the sublime as the artistic subjugation of the awful."

In Nietzsche's story of the rise of Greek art, the Greek artists had some good luck. Any culture could produce music, dance, and religious myth. But not any culture could produce Greek tragedy. Fortunately the legends of Dionysus are rich in suffering and death, and have a tragic cast. The satyr chorus is already present with singing and dancing. Nietzsche calls the satyrs "sublime and godlike."<sup>78</sup> Then other actors are added to the chorus, and the Greek artists now have dialogue, plus plot lines from the myths, and the primitive drama festivals in honor of Dionysus evolve toward the perfected Greek tragedy in the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles. They created sublime art forms in the presence of which--in spite of the horror, suffering, and death--the citizens did not feel despair, but rather an elevated and surging affirmation of life. They were led to feel that the suffering, pain, cruelty, and death were necessary and morally justified, and they were led to feel that all the annihilation of persons, creatures, and things, and all the paradoxes and puzzles of life, are justified in the illusion of a meaningful universe. To them, in Nietzsche's story, life was justified as an aesthetic phenomenon, and since the consolation depended on metaphysical meanings, Greek art and drama helped to call out the metaphysical passions of Greek philosophy.

Nietzsche emphasizes that the early satyr chorus, dominant in the original performances, continues as the dominant element in the perfected high tragedies. The music, choral speaking, and dancing of the sophisticated chorus retain the true soul of the drama, the ancient sense of Primal Unity which points to Dionysus. The chorus is the chief agency through which the audience feels the Dionysiac escape from individuation. The audience merges with the chorus to create "one great sublime chorus

of dancing and singing satyrs.”<sup>79</sup>

While Nietzsche always gives priority to the Dionysian power, there is a sense in which the Apollonian power was, for the Greeks, their dominant passion, because in Nietzsche’s view the Greek genius is essentially located in their search for reason, form, limit, order, and measure, reflected in the cult of Apollo and in the clean lines of Greek sculpture and Doric columns. Nietzsche’s own words best explain his concept of the balance between the two powers. At one point late in The Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche seems to give the victory to Apollo: “What can the healing magic of Apollo not accomplish when it can even excite in us the illusion that the Dionysian is actually in the service of the Apollonian, the effects of which it is capable of enhancing; yes, that music is essentially the representative art for an Apollonian substance?”<sup>80</sup> However, Nietzsche adds that this seeming victory of Apollo is an illusion:

The drama, which, by the aid of music, spreads out before us with such inwardly illumined distinctness in all its movements and figures, that we imagine we see the texture unfolding on the loom as the shuttle flies to and fro,—attains as a whole an effect which transcends all Apollonian artistic effects. In the collective effect of tragedy, the Dionysian gets the upper hand once more; tragedy ends with a sound which could never emanate from the realm of Apollonian art. And the Apollonian illusion is thereby found to be what it is,—the assiduous veiling during the performance of tragedy of the intrinsically Dionysian effect: which, however, is so powerful, that it finally forces the Apollonian drama itself into a sphere where it begins to talk with Dionysian wisdom, and even denies itself and its Apollonian conspicuousness. Thus then the intricate relation of the Apollonian and Dionysian in tragedy must really be symbolized by a fraternal union of the two deities, Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo; Apollo, however, finally speaks the language of Dionysus; and so the highest goal of tragedy and of art in general is attained.<sup>81</sup>

Thus Greek tragedy is created by the will’s interest in the ordering power of sublime and clear forms, yielding the art structures of music, dance, specific noble heroes, and the structured myth, of which Nietzsche declares: “Tragedy sets a sublime symbol, namely the myth between the universal authority of its music and the receptive

Dionysian hearer.”<sup>82</sup> Tragedy maximizes the resources of the sublime.

Nietzsche’s aesthetics also includes his theory about the decline of Greek culture, which he connects to the growing national admiration for Socrates, and for the overly Apollonian Socratic idea that what is good can be known by reason. In Nietzsche’s view, this disastrously over-stated rationalism is reinforced in the late and decadent drama of Euripides, who tried to reduce beauty to logical formulas and stressed the low debased interest in character analysis, as opposed to the higher ground of metaphysical value and belief. Socrates and Euripides cut themselves off from the saving instinctual and musical wildness of Dionysus. When Socrates tried to make mysteries of value clear to discursive reason and conceptual knowledge, he destroyed depth and tragic vision, and therefore Socrates dared “to spill this magic draught in the dust.” Nietzsche condemns the Socratic man for thinking that even “the sublimest moral acts” are “teachable.”<sup>83</sup> A further element in Nietzsche’s aesthetics concerns the specific relation between German culture and tragic myth. Nietzsche declares that the Socratic growth of science and of the reasoned-out ideal of democratic leveled equality has destroyed genuine culture all through Europe. He thinks the French have gone so far that they are hopeless. Pointing to German music, he insists that the wild Dionysian German heart is not dead, and can rise up to destroy the blight of science and Socratism.<sup>84</sup> Nietzsche’s deconstruction of science lies in his claim that scientific concepts are themselves fictions of the will, and that the theoretic man will meet his Waterloo when scientific thoughts move out to the extreme peripheral points of theory where the scientist “stares at the inexplicable.”<sup>85</sup> The man of science will then realize that science can never really make the dark things light.<sup>86</sup> It is important to note that, for Nietzsche, science will eventually become the hand-maiden for art in that the disappointed scientists will be driven to a sense of defeat which, “In order to be endured, requires art as a safeguard and remedy.”<sup>87</sup> So, when the battle between science and poetry ends, only poetry will be left on the field.

Given the catastrophic tenor of Nietzsche’s analysis of the sickness of modern nations, it would seem hopeless that any new cultural unity could emerge. However, Nietzsche believes that the pendulum will swing back toward artistic tragic wisdom.

For Germany or any other culture, religious myth is, for Nietzsche, the golden key, because religious myth prevents secularization and causes citizens to see current events as if connected to a timeless eternal zone. Of course the religiosity, for Nietzsche, is a socially helpful lie. The will needs this blessed assurance. In a blazing rebuke to modern secular humanism, Nietzsche proclaims that either a person or a society "is worth just as much only as its ability to impress on its experience the seal of eternity."<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche declares that in his age the "stupendous secularization is accompanied by a homeless roving about, an eager intrusion at foreign tables, a frivolous deification of the present or a dull senseless estrangement."<sup>89</sup> Nietzsche declares that such secularized cultures enter a "wilderness of thought, custom, and action."<sup>90</sup>

Nietzsche also states that Germany and other European nations cannot fully convert to any foreign imported myth, but must (as Vico thought) circle back into the sources of national culture and myth.<sup>91</sup> Nietzsche did not endorse any totally German search for cultural coherence, though it is equally obvious that he hoped for a center in German myth.<sup>92</sup>

Since music is so crucial for Nietzsche's art theory, some of his comments on music should be highlighted. Music is postulated as the first redeeming step of art toward the Apollonian ordering of a culture. Nietzsche makes music an Ur-principle by calling it a direct copy of the will at the stage when the will is one with the Primal Unity. Since music is thus an imitation of the will, it is an art symbol, an idealized and measured form carrying metaphysical meaning. The human joy in the flood of music allows us to comprehend as an intuition the "joy in the annihilation of the individual."<sup>93</sup>

Nietzsche asserts that opera is debased music, given over to frivolous pleasures, allowing the verbal text to murder the musical impulse. He expresses amazement that the same Renaissance age that enjoyed "the ineffably sublime and sacred music of Palestrina" could also welcome the beginnings of opera.<sup>94</sup> Nietzsche suggests that anyone hearing just the powerful music of the third act of Wagner's Tristan und Isolde would perish, would be annihilated in the "thundering stream" of the original cosmic will if it were not for the Apollonian restraint imposed by Wagner's chosen myth.<sup>95</sup>

Naming Bach, Beethoven, and Wagner, Nietzsche envisions a modern German culture awaiting rebirth in "the fire-magic of music."<sup>96</sup>

Music cannot clearly enunciate moral value because music is so close to the pre-rational and pre-moral aesthetic zone of the dawn of art in the Dionysian context; consequently, Nietzsche concludes, music teaches us that authentic art should not be encroached upon by the morally sublime, but must "insist on the purity in her domain."<sup>97</sup> Such a divergence would seem to work against his ideal of cultural unity, so that ideal should not be pushed too far. Dissonance in music is extremely important for Nietzsche (and would be important in painting) because dissonance proves that conflicting pairs can work together, as they do in the fraternal connection of Dionysian and Apollonian to produce the special paradoxical blending of suffering and joy (an important goal of Rothko, Newman, and Still). Nietzsche observes that just like Greek music and Greek tragedy, what is man but "an incarnation of dissonance."<sup>98</sup> In the interesting phrase picked up by Thomas Mann as the title of a novel, Nietzsche claims that when Greek music reached out toward Greek myth, the Greeks created and ascended their "magic mountain."<sup>99</sup>

Perhaps it would be prudent to confirm this interpretation of Nietzsche's narrative of the sublime with a few additional supporting passages. Early in The Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche makes it clear that the sublime art symbols make each person's life a work of art: "Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art."<sup>100</sup> Nietzsche connects Dionysian music to the psychology of the sublime in declaring that it "excited awe and horror."<sup>101</sup> He adds that this music incited man "to the highest exaltation of all his symbolic faculties," and that to order and express the world symbolically, "a new world of symbols is required."<sup>102</sup> In comments relevant to the fire and flame motifs in Newman and Still, Nietzsche gives special value to the symbolic myth of Prometheus. The fire Prometheus steals from the gods symbolizes the creative, aspiring human impulse in opposition to divine creativity, a myth different from Jewish legends in that "the Aryan representation is the sublime view of active sin as the properly Promethean virtue."<sup>103</sup> In modernist and postmodern movements, there is an element of transgression encouraged by this "active sin" vector in Nietzsche's philosophy;

however, this element is often given an exaggerated importance. It is reasonable to see Nietzsche's ideas as having an influence on the Promethean aggressive impulse in the abstract expressionist group, and on their hostility to organized religion. Nietzsche asserts, in opposition to traditional Christianity and Judaism, that effective myths are always killed when these sublime representations "are systematized as a completed sum of historical events" by the "stern, intelligent eyes of an orthodox dogmatism."<sup>104</sup> Religious dogmatism was firmly rejected by Rothko, Newman, and Still.

Nietzsche's sense of a primal unity as the reality behind Dionysian myth is conveyed when he speaks of "the eternally creative primordial mother," through whom "We are really for brief moments Primordial Being itself, and feel its indomitable desire for being and joy in existence."<sup>105</sup> In a further revealing comment on myth, Nietzsche states: "Without myth, however, every culture loses its healthy creative natural power: it is only a horizon encompassed by myths which rounds off to unity of a social movement."<sup>106</sup> Later in this study it will be shown that Rothko, Newman, and Still, in search of usable myth, enlarge the concept of myth and encourage other constructive enlargements which make Nietzsche's general theory of the sublime power of myth more productive. Nietzsche adds that mythless modern culture, separated from any "fixed and sacred primitive seal" in myth, cut off from the holy, has strangled the might of the saving sublime representations; yet at some deeper level, "a glorious, intrinsically healthy, primeval power" lies sleeping, not dead, sleeping in what Nietzsche calls an abyss, and "It is from this abyss that the German Reformation came forth."<sup>107</sup> This concept of the retreat of the sacred into an abyss of absence from which it may be resurrected by art constitutes a major theme for Nietzsche, and also for Rothko, Newman, and Jung.

In another passage, Nietzsche pinpoints his concept of sublime transfiguration through art in a manner sharply relevant to the program of non-imitative abstract expression. The transforming power of the sublime through tragic myth is effective "provided that art is not merely an imitation of the reality of nature, but in truth a metaphysical supplement to the reality of nature, placed alongside thereof for its conquest. Tragic myth, in so far as it really belongs to art, also fully participates in this transfiguring metaphysical purpose of art in general."<sup>108</sup> Nietzsche, in a sense, was at

least a spiritual father of abstract modern art, and his ties to abstract expressionism are close and deep.<sup>109</sup>

It is not necessary to explain much more of Nietzsche's thought in clarifying his theory of the sublime. However there are some crucial passages in works other than The Birth of Tragedy. In The Joyful Wisdom Nietzsche treats his key doctrine of perspectivism, which follows logically from his insistence that any sense of the world is spun from fictions. Obviously a particular set of harmonized fictions would issue from some guiding perspective. Our general sense of the world, in Nietzsche's view, will have to be "appearance seen in perspective."<sup>110</sup> In a section entitled "What one should Learn from Artists," Nietzsche asserts that artists teach us the great lesson of life: to use "inventions and artifices" to create our own desired perspective.<sup>111</sup>

Nietzsche gives helpful insights about his own moral vision. In passages throughout his works he rejects the sentimental "other" centered morality of sympathy and compassion that Christianity offered. Here Nietzsche comments that a noble and wise person will do his utmost "for me alone."<sup>112</sup> Often Nietzsche's ideas have a shrewd value even if one would modify them. For instance, in his self-centered morality Nietzsche lays a productive moral burden on each person. If we are to do our utmost for ourselves, Nietzsche concludes that we must ask the following question of all of our little daily habits: "are they the product of numberless little acts of cowardice and laxness, or of . . . bravery and inventive reason?"<sup>113</sup> There is a valid sense in which artists and people in general should not turn aside from their major chosen tasks, and should indeed do their utmost for their own chosen values. Painters often must walk alone with genuine "bravery and inventive reason," and Nietzsche encourages this kind of isolated existential idealism.

In another passage Nietzsche shows the value of a conserving and preserving sense of history, observing that a superior noble person in the modern world can enjoy something new, the historical sense, which allows a modern aristocrat to absorb all the sufferings and joys of past humanity as "one who has an horizon of centuries before him, as the heir of all nobility, of all past intellect, and the obligatory heir . . . of all the old nobles, while at the same time the first of a new nobility."<sup>114</sup> Such a condition

would yield "a God's happiness, full of power and love."<sup>115</sup> Here Nietzsche shows that all the sublime representations from the past remain permanently constructive in spite of the transvaluation of values which he advocates. There is no point in ignoring conservative features of Nietzsche's thought.

Furthermore, Nietzsche's attack on Christianity contains some moderating elements. While Nietzsche never wavers in his belief that the sublime symbolic and mythic forms of Christianity were in service of a wrong and harmful perspective, he observes that "Most people in old Europe . . . still need Christianity at present, and on that account it still finds belief."<sup>116</sup> Since Luther, in spite of his heroic will, hated all higher and noble men and encouraged "plebeianism of the spirit," the Protestant Reformation "was a coarse, honest misunderstanding."<sup>117</sup> Nietzsche's elitist sense of superior sensibilities is inescapable.

Here Nietzsche reveals his important later concept that productive sublime art must originate not as reaction, and not from any "reduced vitality," but rather from a sense of plenitude, of exuberant "overflowing vitality." He dismisses romanticism (as he understood it) as a kind of lament coming from reduced vitality. Nietzsche calls for a pivotal question: "Has hunger or superfluity become creative here?"<sup>118</sup> He declares, "We love art when it is the flight of the artist from man, or the raillery of the artist at man."<sup>119</sup> Nietzsche is a strong humanist, and what he objects to is a kind of lower humanism that does not reach high enough toward the superman.

Some valuable ideas relating to sublime art appear in Nietzsche's Twilight of the Idols.<sup>120</sup> Nietzsche again makes the point that mimesis is a wrong view of art, that born painters "never work 'from nature,'" and that copying nature is "lying in the dust" before trivial facts.<sup>121</sup> Nietzsche adds that all kinds of ecstasy stand behind art--the ecstasy of sex, strong passions, destruction, cruelty, and impassioned will, leading the artist to idealize, which is to ignore surface details and "bring out the main features."<sup>122</sup> Nietzsche declares that the artist "transforms things until they mirror his power--until they are reflections of his perfection. This having to transform into perfection is \_\_\_\_\_ art," and since Raphael displayed this transforming and "Yes"

saying passion, "Raphael was no Christian."<sup>123</sup> Nietzsche follows with an important comment about architecture, a comment revealing Nietzsche's concept of a grand style. He claims that architects transcend the Dionysian and Apollonian states as they actualize a unique act of will and almost literally move mountains, performing their feats in a noble grandeur of style which is oblivious to opposition, does not try to please, and gives itself its own laws.<sup>124</sup>

Nietzsche sheds light on his quarrel with Schopenhauer, who displays "a maliciously ingenious attempt" to make the positive and exuberant forces of life serve "a nihilistic total depreciation of life."<sup>125</sup> Schopenhauer's negation of desire and negation of sexuality are misguided because, Nietzsche observes, sex is the cause of so much of the beauties of nature seen in colors, fragrances, tones, and graceful rhythmic movements.<sup>126</sup>

Nietzsche calls art for art's sake a hopeless doctrine because art always has metaphysical and idealizing purposes as it projects a certain vision of a desirable kind of life; as it praises, glorifies, and selects; and as it sets about to make stronger or weaker some chosen group of values.<sup>127</sup> Adding comments importantly connected to his theory of the sublime, Nietzsche thinks the tragic artist operates "without fear in the face of the fearful and questionable," a "triumphant state" showing "Courage and freedom of feeling before a powerful enemy, before a sublime calamity, before a problem that arouses dread."<sup>128</sup> Theory of the sublime in general focuses upon the sublime challenge of something fearful and questionable, plus affirmations coming out of this challenge.

Rothko, Newman, and Still refused to become greatly involved in the generally socialist and religious humanitarian causes of their milieu, no doubt influenced by Nietzsche's elitism for the sake of a sublime aesthetic project. Nietzsche points to a wide recent growth in the sense of victimhood, accompanied by much bewailing of the lot of the average man. He notes that the leveling Socialists and Christians are conspicuous for bewailing,<sup>129</sup> and he highlights "Our morality of sympathy, against which I was the first to issue a warning," claiming that everywhere he looks everyone is either sick or "a nurse for the sick," and that true and wholesome power in a society

must cleave, must create strong hierarchy.<sup>130</sup>

Nietzsche has his own version of a return to nature, and it corresponds to that of Rothko, Newman, and Still, who, like Nietzsche, were strongly influenced by primitive art but also realized that the modern intellect can never return to any primitive state. Nietzsche proclaims, "I too speak of a 'return to nature,' although it is really not a going back but an ascent--up into high, free, even terrible nature and naturalness where great tasks are something one plays with."<sup>131</sup> Rothko, Newman, and Still, like Nietzsche, accept the current stage of life and try to move ahead, using primitivism as a stimulus, but not as any return to primitive life.

Nietzsche's The Will to Power also sheds important light on Nietzsche's vision of art's sublime qualities, and sublime tasks. While Nietzsche never relents in his attacks upon Christianity, he now reveals an appreciation for the Christian movement, declaring that Christianity was highly constructive in placing a high value on man; creating a sense of perfection, freedom, and meaningful evil; assuming that men can have knowledge of absolute values; keeping man from despising himself; and holding nihilism in check.<sup>132</sup> Nietzsche adds that Christianity also asserted the value of truthfulness, and that value will lead to the rejection of Christian beliefs.<sup>133</sup> Nietzsche's doctrine of perspectivism prohibits any reaching of final truth, "there simply is no true world"; mankind always creates some useful simplified world based on fictions that serve the needs of the will to power and the result is some "perspectival appearance whose origin lies in us."<sup>134</sup> Thus all thinkers create fictions of value in the manner of artists. Nietzsche's sense of the fading of Christian belief is certainly part of the world-view of the abstract expressionist painters: "The time has come when we have to pay for having been Christians for two thousand years: we are losing the center of gravity by virtue of which we have lived; we are lost for a while."<sup>135</sup> It is important to note that Nietzsche depicts Jesus as one of the proper artists and heroes in the bold proclaiming of value. In Nietzsche's view the church twisted the teachings of Jesus: "What did Christ deny? Everything that is today called Christian."<sup>136</sup> Nietzsche declares: "it is we scholars who today best fulfill the teaching of Christ," and Christ on the cross "is the most sublime symbol--even today."<sup>137</sup> Nietzsche shows a less radical

streak in claiming that powerful artist aristocrats must always use existing moral and religious forms as vehicles for proclaiming new values, and that God can be seen in a new way, not as a humanitarian God, but “God conceived as an emancipation from morality, taking into himself the whole fullness of life’s antitheses, and in a divine torment, redeeming and justifying them”; and “God the supreme power—that suffices!”<sup>138</sup> Certainly Nietzsche’s more moderate tone is not any great concession to Christianity: “I abhor Christianity . . . because it created sublime words and gestures to throw over a horrible reality the cloak of justice, virtue, and divinity.”<sup>139</sup> Part of this “horrible reality” is what Nietzsche construes as the Christian doctrine that natural life is tainted and worthless.

Many passages focus on art and aesthetic theory. Nietzsche finds self-narcotization in the idea of art for art’s sake.<sup>140</sup> He rejects any return to nature because “there has never yet been a natural humanity.”<sup>141</sup> Since reason and passion are terms often met in art theory, Nietzsche’s view on their relation is noteworthy. He rejects their separation which might degrade passion: “The misunderstanding of passion and reason, as if the latter were an independent entity and not rather a system of relations between various passions and desires; and as if every passion did not possess its quantum of reason.”<sup>142</sup> This is very close to Blake’s position in “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.”

In an important passage Nietzsche comments that among the value-declaring fictions of art there is a class of necessary fictions: “we have to believe in time, space, and motion, without feeling compelled to grant them absolute reality.”<sup>143</sup> Nietzsche’s concept of necessary fictions, like Wallace Stevens’s derivative concept of final fictions, has not received the emphasis it deserves, and it brings Nietzsche closer to Kant. Kant’s a priori categories of space and time are seen as logically necessary, while for Nietzsche they are necessary for human survival in a bearable constructed world: “Truth is that kind of error without which a certain species of living being cannot exist.”<sup>144</sup> Interestingly, Nietzsche does not totally reject Kant’s point of view: “The most strongly believed a priori ‘truths’ are for me—provisional assumptions,” including the “law of causality” which “not to believe in would destroy the race.”<sup>145</sup> Nietzsche

later adds (in a sentence Kant might have written) that “Rational thought is interpretation according to a scheme that we cannot throw off.”<sup>146</sup> Nietzsche rejects any absolute truth because such truth would deny those qualities in the world “that constitute its reality: change, becoming, multiplicity, opposition, contradiction, war.”<sup>147</sup>

Nietzsche rejects the concept of a higher ideal world because it would keep artists from their task of declaring and shaping a more perfect real world. The artists “at least fix an image of that which ought to be; they are productive, to the extent that they actually alter and transform; unlike men of knowledge, who leave everything as it is.” The sublimity of the whole project of art rests precisely in this power to transform through art symbols via the will to power. In one of his most valuable definitions of will to power, Nietzsche explains that it is “not self-preservation, but the will to appropriate, dominate, increase, grow stronger.”<sup>148</sup>

There is a sense in which Nietzsche is driven to the sublime due to weaknesses in the idea of the beautiful. Any concept of traits of beauty could be no more than another temporary perspective; thus “To experience a thing as beautiful means: to experience it necessarily wrongly.”<sup>149</sup> Of course artists will continue to seek valuable fictions of beauty in that the genesis of art is “That making perfect, seeing as perfect, which characterizes the cerebral system bursting with sexual energy,” and lovers dream of a romantic transfiguration which makes life “a succession of sublime things.”<sup>150</sup> Art is “sublimely expedient even when it lies.”<sup>151</sup>

In an interesting rebuff to much recent thought, Nietzsche refuses to reduce our world to language. He places language under art: “The aesthetic state possesses a superabundance of means of communication, together with an extreme receptivity for stimuli and signs. It constitutes the high point of communication and transmission between living creatures—it is the source of languages.”<sup>152</sup>

Nietzsche labels as effeminate any art theory focused on the viewer, calling instead for a masculine theory focused on the creative artist.<sup>153</sup> Declaring that the artist cannot offer pessimism (and that Schopenhauer was wrong) Nietzsche asserts: “What is essential in art remains its perfection of existence, its production of perfection and

plenitude; art is essentially affirmation, blessing, deification of existence."<sup>154</sup> One principle behind Nietzsche's scorn of romanticism is made clear when he observes that the strong feelings of nationalism constitute a decadent form of romanticism and that the hunger for excessive feeling, imagining, and exoticism reveals a "Weariness of will."<sup>155</sup> Nietzsche, in a move relevant to abstract art, condemns Wagner, Hugo, Zola, Taine, and romanticism for lacking a tyrannical will to unity shown by their failures in "omitting, shortening, clarifying, simplifying."<sup>156</sup> Since abstract expressionist art leans heavily on measure and ratio, it is noteworthy that Nietzsche stresses the passion for and power of restraint as a trait in the coming aristocratic new barbarians who will appreciate "The natural delight of aesthetic natures in measure."<sup>157</sup> The delight in measure follows logically from both classical style and the Apollonian principle. One great Nietzschean law is that when Dionysus strengthens, Apollo must also strengthen. Almost writing a credo for Rothko, Newman, and Still, Nietzsche proclaims that "To remain objective, hard, firm, and severe in carrying through an idea--artists succeed best in this."<sup>158</sup>

Predictably, Nietzsche's emphasis on measure and simplification involves a strong valuation of form in art. Formalism is implied in Nietzsche's remark that "Logical and geometrical simplification is a consequence of enhancement of strength."<sup>159</sup> Drawing close to Longinus and Kant in raising high the sublime trait of nobility, Nietzsche connects this trait to "Pleasure in forms; taking under protection everything formal, the conviction that politeness is one of the greatest virtues."<sup>160</sup> Nietzsche declares that the meaning of the forms in gardens and architecture is "to remove disorder and vulgarity from sight and to build a home for nobility of soul."<sup>161</sup> Giving an interesting insight into his doctrine of eternal recurrence (which, though improbable, does justify all of life and does demand that we create maximum excellence that can return), Nietzsche speculates that the shape, the form of space "must be the cause of eternal movement, and ultimately of all 'imperfection.'"<sup>162</sup> Nietzsche berates contemporary painters for leaning too much toward expressive meaning and not appreciating form "for the sake of what it is."<sup>163</sup>

Grand style and classical style continue as major concerns for Nietzsche. Of the grand style Nietzsche writes: "that it disdains to please; that it forgets to persuade; that it commands; that it wills--To become master of the chaos one is; to compel one's chaos to become form: to become logical, simple, unambiguous, mathematics, law--that is the grand ambition here."<sup>164</sup> Nietzsche observes that a classical style will bring to perfection some particular genus of art (as did Rothko, Newman, and Still for abstract expressionism) and requires "a quantum of coldness, lucidity, hardness."<sup>165</sup>

Nietzsche never diminishes his insistence that great art must be tragic. In choosing between the tragic symbolic value of the dismembered Dionysus and the wrongly manipulated crucified Christ, Nietzsche observes: "One will see that the problem is that of the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning or a tragic meaning. In the former case, it is supposed to be the path to a holy existence; in the latter case, being is counted as holy enough to justify even a monstrous amount of suffering. The tragic man affirms even the harshest suffering: he is sufficiently strong, rich, and capable of deifying to do so."<sup>166</sup> Nietzsche rejects both Schopenhauer's tragic pessimism and Aristotle's theory of tragic purgation by proclaiming that art must be "the great stimulant to life" and that tragic art "is a tonic." The tragic artist understands that "a preference for questionable and terrifying things is a symptom of strength."<sup>167</sup>

Rothko, Newman, and Still were deeply influenced by both Nietzsche and existentialism, and it is important to see how Nietzsche is considered a father of existentialism. In the existential movement the mortal isolated existent, lodged in a body under the supreme threat of death, must discover and live by his own discovered values. Nietzsche obviously belongs in this tradition. The physically embodied emphasis of Nietzsche appears in several passages: "All our categories of reason are of sensual origin," and "The phenomenon of the body is the richer, clearer, more tangible phenomenon," and "The body and physiology the starting point"; "The animal functions are, as a matter of principle, a million times more important than all our beautiful moods and heights of consciousness," and body and flesh are the great things in "spinning out the chain of life" so that it can be improved.<sup>168</sup> Perhaps the following comment gives Nietzsche's most lucid statement about his existentialism: "The individual is something quite new which creates new things, something absolute; all his

acts are entirely his own," and "Ultimately, the individual derives the value of his acts from himself."<sup>169</sup>

Enough of Nietzsche's fundamental beliefs have been covered to explain how his entire philosophic program (centered on the art power of symbol making to achieve a sublime elevation of mankind) becomes a sublime task and an exercise in aesthetic theory. Because the philosophic aggressive artist does everything that counts, Nietzsche can declare that "The 'genius' is the sublimest machine there is."<sup>170</sup> He can declare "Art and nothing but art! It is the great means of making life possible."<sup>171</sup> He can declare that the great man, the needed giant man of art, the noble man of the future, will be the sublime man, and "The sublime man has the highest value, even if he is terribly delicate and fragile, because an abundance of very difficult and rare things has been bred and preserved together through many generations."<sup>172</sup>

This rather detailed treatment of Nietzsche's theory of the sublime and the general pattern of his philosophy has been attempted on the basis of three assumptions: that his concept of the sublime has unique value as part of the background theory of the sublime; that his general philosophy has been a major formative influence on the American thought climate from the twenties to the present; and that both his theory of the sublime and his general philosophy shed important light on the search for sublimity by Rothko, Newman, and Still.

There are various possible objections to the picture I have drawn, one of these being that I have ignored the frequently raised problem that Nietzsche kept changing his conception of art and that later statements contradict earlier ones. This cannot be denied. My defense is that in The Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche gives his most specific definition of the sublime as a positive, constructive force, and does not later, in any clear way, repudiate this original sublimism. Therefore, I have looked for passages in his texts which seem to reinforce his most essential theoretic declaration. Admittedly, this is an over-simplification, adopted in the interest of working out a coherent, positive conception which is a possible one, and supporting it with concrete quotations. I have felt, rightly or wrongly, that the theory of the sublime which is given a positive cultural role in The Birth of Tragedy would be the theory most likely to be read and appreciated by Rothko, Newman, and Still, who were, I will argue, more modernist and positive

than they were postmodern and disruptive. However, a different position would also be possible, one focused on the fact that perhaps no thinker has been as disruptive and deconstructive as Nietzsche. As Robert John Ackerman notes, "We have, in a sense, two Nietzsches to deal with. . . . The first Nietzsche is content to attack the prevailing tables of his time (and ours, since those values are still discernible), and the other Nietzsche is trying to produce progressive new value tables."<sup>173</sup> It is the second Nietzsche that I have brought to the fore. I am not the only one to do so. Benjamin Bennet argues that the wild and wicked Dionysian spirit is not pure in its primitive origin, but becomes pure later when it is assimilated into sublime art forms and is connected to Apollonianism. The two mutually support each other. Bennet argues that Nietzsche sees Dionysian truth (horrible truth) as unacceptable. We struggle against it by turning to the Apollonian, in order to create our Socratic net of culture. Bennet declares that Nietzsche does not favor the destruction of the Apollonian-Socratic net, but hopes that it can be preserved, since it is our only hope.<sup>174</sup> That is, while Dionysus should be strong and active, the saving principle lies in the positive, affirmative, order-seeking work of Apollo. And this is the face of Nietzsche that I have tried to emphasize in a treatment of his constructive conception of the sublime. But this might be seen as a too easy optimism, in that Nietzsche also has in mind a very long period of tearing down, before a new constructive and wholesome cultural net can be possible, so that his nihilistic side might deserve the greater emphasis. In any case, what I have tried to do is to take a very limited perspective (in keeping with my limited focus on theory of the sublime), and to show how, if we simply accept Nietzsche's only definition of the sublime, that definition can be fleshed out and understood in relation to various comments Nietzsche makes in other works.

A brief sketch of the central features of Kant's theory of the sublime is necessary to round out the historical perspective. An elaborate treatment of Kant is not required because Rothko, Newman, and Still, while strongly influenced by Longinus, Burke, and Nietzsche, do not reveal any similar interest in Kant. Also, additional features of Kant's thought will become clear in the treatment of Crowther's extension of Kant's model. Describing sublime experience in his Critique of Judgment, Kant presents seven steps: (1) we experience something which in either size or force is so awesome,

boundless, and dangerous that the imagination cannot grasp it in a single clarifying image, nor can understanding deal with it; (2) this defect of faculties is not acceptable because we exist under an a priori law of reason which demands wholeness of comprehension; (3) reason then comes to our rescue by providing a holistic rational concept which does encompass the unbounded thing; (4) this judgment through reason is disinterested in that we register a phenomenological impact with no attention given to the general usefulness of the unbounded item (if it were the ocean, we would not have in mind its value for shipping lanes); (5) solving the problem through reason brings home to us the value of our supersensible zone of subjective reason, and sharply reminds us of our true vocation as thinkers in the transcendent realm of reason and moral choice operating in freedom; (6) we see that although the awesome entity might destroy us, we have courageous dominion over it through the power of reason; and (7) the essence of our sense of sublimity lies not in the boundless entity, but in our profound respect for our inner power of reason as it stands superior to nature's greatest structures.<sup>173</sup> For example, we could stand in front of ungraspable entities such as an ocean storm or a sky full of stars, finding these too vast to be comprehensible by any single image of imagination or single registering of understanding. Yet reason could come to our rescue with at least logically encompassing ideas, such as abyss or hurricane or cosmic vault. The painful frustration of important faculties would yield to the pleasure of victory through reason, and we would feel a conscious and heightened appreciation of and respect for subjective reason and its supersensible domain.

Kant marks out two large modes of sublimity, the mathematical and the dynamical, the mathematical realized through encountering a size too vast to be encompassed by the clear numbers and units of measure that the understanding offers. We are having an aesthetic experience triggered by sensory elements, but only reason can, in the sudden leap to an idea, give a sense of the wholeness of that which we confront. The dynamical sublime involves not size, but power. An infinite extension is not before us, but rather an infinite force, whose might carries some sense of fear; yet when the sudden leap to an idea of reason comes, we will see that a vast and dreaded power "has no dominion over us," and we will feel a special sense of courage to face such challenges and prevail, as we gain our victory of reason over nature's most

destructive powers.<sup>174</sup>

Importantly, Kant observes that war, a display of vast and dangerous power, could be sublime if conducted honorably. Such an insight opens the sublime to other powerful social movements, such as political struggles and conflicting intellectual currents and religions. A rather neglected aspect of Kant's theory of the dynamical sublime is his use of it to purge theology of some superstitions. Kant claims that in the sudden flash of reason which actualizes the sublime, it is proper to see our minds as superior to the forces of nature, and a person elevated to the sublime will refuse to read natural disasters as signs of the wrath of God; moreover, Kant claims later that the human sense of sublimity (which can overcome so much) repudiates all abject supplications to God which ask Him to overcome the evils of the world.<sup>175</sup>

In other important passages, Kant states that "dread and holy awe" are proper emotions in sublime experience; that in a context of loss and gain, we could feel an intellectual sublimity for the claim of moral law; that while the zeal of strong passions and their rugged tensions can reach the sublime, a higher mode is the noble sublime, a calm and cool stage, a cerebral contemplative sublime based on "the satisfaction of pure reason" such as we might feel in a rational grasp of a noble building or in the appreciation of a literary style, these being rational states which produce not a sudden flash of astonishment but a calm and sustained admiration; that strong passions are not sublime unless they trigger a conscious resolution through and triumph for ideas of reason; that deep solitudes and tragically colored meditations are potentially sublime states; and that meditative sadness about evil can be sublime when it utilizes supersensible ideas of reason.<sup>176</sup>

At one point Kant clearly reveals his agreement with Longinus that a raw idea can reach sublimity, and the sublimity can be enhanced if style is added to idea. This combination is very useful in treating the sublime subjects of Rothko, Newman, and Still. Kant's example is the idea of the absolute ineffable One inscribed on the Temple of Isis: "I am all that is and that was and that shall be, and no mortal hath lifted my veil," of which Kant declares, "nothing more sublime has ever been said."<sup>177</sup>

An important problem arises in Kant's efforts to connect the sublime to the moral. The beautiful is not immediately moral (though a beautiful thing could also be a symbol

for the good). Pure beauty can become dependent beauty when a moral or utilitarian concept is added to it. Yet with the sublime, we are taken directly into the ideational zone where free moral judgments are made, so that the sublime has a larger overlap with the moral. Among the connections Kant makes (other than the ones already named about the sublime claim of moral law and the sublimity of meditations on evil) are these: the arts would breed social discontent if not joined to moral ideas; aesthetic alertness is the mark of a good soul; disinterested aesthetic experience quickens and strengthens the cognitive faculties used in moral judgments; all aesthetic experience of purposivity without purpose points to our ultimate purpose, which is "our moral destination"; all inner subjective purposes are united through having their a priori source in will; the sublime prepares us for morality in that "the sublime prepares us to esteem something highly even if in opposition to our own (sensible) interest" (a logic form that  $x$  so resembles  $y$  as to strengthen  $y$ ); and alertness to the sublime is not instinctive, but must be taught by a high culture rich in moral idealism.<sup>178</sup> All of these connections seem to be relational ones that do not jeopardize the aesthetic autonomy of sublime awareness, yet obviously Kant raises difficult and unresolved problems about the exact reciprocity between the sublime and the good.<sup>179</sup> This brief sketch of Kant's treatment of the sublime is sufficient to show the basic features of his model, and thus to round out the historical background sought in Longinus, Burke, Nietzsche, and Kant.

Rothko, Newman, and Still were consciously aware of the accumulation of sublimicist theory through Longinus, Burke, and Kant, although not in a detailed manner, and aware also of the general philosophy of Nietzsche. It would be wrong for art historians not to apply this historical perspective to these three painters, when that very perspective yielded formative consequences for their works. Therefore interpreters need to move toward the abstract expressionists with a clear comprehension of these influences: from Longinus the concepts of the ideational sublime in raw ideas and force of intellect, the hot and cool sublime, the pattern of elevation and transcendence, the relation of the sublime to the good, the sublimity of formal excellence, and specific ways to invoke the sublime, such as verticality and seriality; from Burke the concepts of the sublime of pain and terror plus analogous experiences, the presence of psychological universals, the enhancements through difficulty and obscurity, the

essential element of overwhelming astonishment, the near-abyss conditions of darkness and silence, the terror-tinged plunges into depth, and the sublime of light and color; from Kant the concepts of the mathematical and dynamical sublime, the triumph of reason by virtue of holistic concepts, the close ties of the sublime and the moral, the cooperation between faculties, and the wide and complex enrichments for personality and culture through the reciprocal bonding of idea and sensory form in sublime experience; and from Nietzsche the concepts of sublime art symbols which integrate culture, the Apollonian and Dionysian, the aesthetic justification of life, the ideal of the aggressive will of the artist, and the necessity for joy and affirmation. We should also note that these theorists draw upon historical accumulations, and do not hesitate to employ with confidence essentialist and universalist language.

For treating twentieth century painters, the classical theorists of the sublime must be supplemented by ideas derived from modernist and contemporary sublimicist theory, the task to be undertaken next.

## Two - Four Recent Theorists of the Sublime

The heritage of the sublimicist ideas of Longinus, Burke, Kant, and Nietzsche has been strongly energized in the last quarter of the twentieth century, partly because of the value of the sublime for treating strong forces, rugged tensions, and negations which have developed in critical, philosophic, and political theory. A good cross-section of this new upsurge of interest in the sublime (involving theories applicable to Rothko, Newman, and Still) may be presented by explaining the chief features of the sublimicist theory of Thomas Weiskel, Paul Crowther, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Frances Ferguson. Weiskel, Lyotard, and Ferguson have been more strongly turned toward postmodern points of view than Crowther (though, as a later chapter will consider, postmodernism is not easy to define).

Weiskel did not finish the manuscript of his The Romantic Sublime before his death, which may explain the reader's impression that loose ends have not been brought together in a fully coherent study. However, Weiskel did break important ground in trying to accommodate the idea of the sublime to contemporary thought. Weiskel properly insists on the need for transcendence: "The essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human. What, if anything, lies beyond the human--God or the gods, the Demon or Nature--is matter for great disagreement." Declaring that "a humanistic sublime is an oxymoron," Weiskel adds that a supra-human transcendence becomes more difficult with the retreat of God. The sublime is gaining strength, yet it tends to become a "secondary or problematic sublime . . . pervaded by the nostalgia and uncertainty of minds involuntarily secular." The romantics began this secular move by seeking "a massive transposition of transcendence into a naturalistic key," using a "stunning metaphor" (which Weiskel

does not identify, but would be something like “natural supernaturalism.”) Since Weiskel focuses on a postmodern sense of the sublime to replace the outmoded romantic model, it seems surprising that he would call his work The Romantic Sublime. His explanation is that some basic features of the romantic sublime have carried over because our age is “a late variant of Romanticism”; however we cannot accept the high spiritual search for unity in Wordsworth and Coleridge: “To please us, the sublime must now be abridged, reduced, and parodied as the grotesque, somehow hedged with irony to assure us we are not imaginative adolescents. The infinite spaces are no longer astonishing; still less do they terrify.” Weiskel hopes to isolate the original sublime moment “in which a burden . . . is lifted,” an original moment with “a structure beneath the vast epiphenomenon of the sublime.” He fails to deliver on this promise, admitting that “It is difficult to be wholly clear about the logical status of the metaphorical moment we seek.” He further undercuts his logic by admitting, in a postmodern tonality, that the very idea of an originating moment could be a fiction, a trick of rhetoric.<sup>1</sup>

While we may accept Weiskel’s thesis that the sublime must produce a transcendence and an influx of power, he errs to assume that such patterns cannot exist in a fully human context. Longinus, Kant, and Burke all recognize some wholly secular sublime transactions, though they would all give a high place to the religious sublime.

Weiskel tries to attach his theory to semiotics (shifting it towards rhetoric) and also to Freud (shifting it towards naturalism and psychology). He states: “a general semiotic of the sublime would find, I think, the same discontinuity between sensation and idea as between idea and word—this is, at any rate, the substance of my hypothesis of fusing the natural and rhetorical sublimes.” Pursuing his semiotic and rhetorical direction, Weiskel posits one mode of the sublime when some sign or thing (some signifier) has a strong overload, and a second mode when some meaning (the signified) is overloaded. Pursuing his movement toward Freud, Weiskel assumes that our age, not receptive to Kantian or other idealism, would be receptive to a naturalistic, “a ‘realist’ or psychological account” because “many also experience the sublime whose adhesion to the empirical is firm to the point of scepticism toward any particular transcendent schema.”<sup>2</sup> Weiskel thinks we should stop talking of Kantian idealistic height and talk of naturalistic depth. The postmodern mind is suited to a blank wasteland metaphor, “an

abridgement of the sublime moment so that we are confined to the second phase and await futilely the restorative action which never comes, except ironically." Weiskel claims that to bridge the mode of an overloaded signifier, a metaphor would be called for, while to bridge over the mode of an overloaded meaning, metonymy would be suitable. He thinks the metaphor mode is negative, the metonymy mode positive.<sup>3</sup>

Weiskel states that if the turn to restore balance from an overload masks an ulterior motive to serve some ideology, then the turn should be viewed as a fiction, as in the case of Kant. Weiskel sees a positive sublime as offering a smooth reconciliation of conflicts, while a negative sublime maintains a sense of conflict, tension, sabotage, and disillusionment, an unmasking pattern. Weiskel thinks we should shift the discourse field to Freudian psychology, treating the sublime in terms of ego conflict, and yet unlike the harmonious egotistical sublime of Wordsworth, the Freudian egotistical sublime allows splitting and conflict, all of which can be encompassed under the Freudian concepts: "The sublime moment recapitulates and thereby establishes the Oedipus complex, whose positive resolution is the basis of culture itself." The terror stressed by Burke could be elided into "an unconscious fantasy of parricide." Even Weiskel realizes that this Freudian model would be too narrow, and that deeper than any Oedipus pattern would be more fundamental structures of attraction and repulsion, and deeper than this is a wish "to be pleurably stimulated." Sliding his model toward the negative mode, Weiskel claims that even if one tried for a harmonious Wordsworthian egotistical sublime, that would no longer work because the concept of self has collapsed into "unresolved ambivalence," so that the "structure of the egotistical sublime ends precisely at the point of ambivalence in which we found the beginnings of the negative sublime." Revealing again the obvious wandering and wavering aspect of his thought, Weiskel observes that his psychological and naturalistic formula is useful "only if it is not taken too seriously."<sup>4</sup>

Weiskel has not made a major contribution to theory of the sublime because the various directions of analysis are never crystallized into a coherent pattern. However, he has importance as an indication of the struggle by postmodern theorists to maintain some kind of transcendental move required in sublime experience, yet also use the sublime to support highly negative, sceptical, and anti-idealist points of view. Weiskel

tries to show that negative, ironic, and disruptive uses of the sublime are the only ones now possible. While it would be conceivable to apply such a model to early abstract expressionism (focusing on ego problems, voids, and doubts), such a negative and ironic sublime would not do full justice to the positive vision of these painters, though they have strong negative elements.

From 1985 through 1989, Paul Crowther published a group of articles and a major book focused on Kantian aesthetics and theory of the sublime. From this launching, he has gone forward to produce a comprehensive modern critical aesthetics and demonstrate its value in addressing current theoretical issues and debates involving aesthetics and philosophy, with more to come on modern philosophic currents. A full and fair description of Crowther's system is beyond the scope of this study, but some of its core principles may be stated. Crowther, like the rest of us, is face to face with an age which (unfortunately) seems to be destabilizing any and all major structuralisms which would allow a permanent order for society, art, thought, and culture. We observe a peculiar will to scepticism. Crowther's thought has the great advantage of absorbing some of the sceptical and pluralist tonality, yet discovering deep continuities and permanent conditions which make for stability, while accepting to some degree pluralism and change factors that have come to the fore. Along the way, Crowther challenges most of the recent destabilizing doctrines, and by doing so, probably anticipates the positive turn that philosophy and theory are likely to take as a new century begins.

In the broadest sense, Crowther adapts Kantian theory of beauty and sublimity to Merleau-Ponty's concept of selfhood as pre-linguistic physical embodiment, and also as embodiment in the historically accumulated cultural field. The self as physically embodied opens the domain of special needs for a self-conscious embodied person, and the background web of culture opens the domain of cultural historicity, so that Crowther, using a principle of reciprocity, is able to locate a highly productive set of continuities and stabilizations which are, in principle, permanent. Procedurally, Crowther is eclectic but looks for modifications, gaps, and unrecognized implications which sustain his general point of view. His latest work, Art and Embodiment, extends from Merleau-Ponty and develops around and towards theorizing the basic needs of self-consciousness, chief of which are attention, comprehension, projection,

reversibility, species-identity, and individual freedom. This phenomenology of self-consciousness allows us to discover “an emergent order in human existence: one which is orientated towards answering the needs of self-consciousness rather than those of physical survival alone.”<sup>5</sup> Kant features prominently in Crowther’s synthesis in that aesthetic experience satisfies a permanent human need and greatly enhances the culturally mediated emergent order. Extending Kant, Crowther argues that art supplies to self-consciousness unique and indispensable aesthetic values which are, inescapably, philosophic values as well. One indication of Crowther’s acceptance of becoming as it modifies theory (plus his insistence on continuities) lies in the ideal of “flexible constants” which he articulates in the preface to his Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism.<sup>6</sup> Crowther’s complex model works against both the scepticism and narrow reductionism which are so prominent in recent theory-building. His model of critical aesthetics gains a wide range of applicability because he brings together the theoretic assets of autonomy criteria, cross-relations, historical content, existential grounding, and embodiment implications; and he is strongly aware of the complex ethical good which lies behind productive art and thought.

For the purposes of this study, the approach to Crowther will concentrate on his contribution to the theory of the sublime, keeping in mind that this type of autonomous aesthetic experience is one element in his overall critical perspective. A good starting point is Crowther’s The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art. I will not try to follow the full analysis, but will concentrate on selected points of emphasis, on Crowther’s modifications and enhancements of Kant’s model, and on Crowther’s final general theorizing of the sublime.

Since Kant’s conception of the sublime is connected to his ethics, Crowther presents Kant’s ethical theory as a necessary background, before taking up the Critique of Judgment. Crowther notes that, for Kant, there would be a special bodily emotion of respect when a person rises to the sublime zone of moral duty perceived as universal law, yet Kant does not explain why this would have to be the case, and there is also the problem that many people might obey the moral law and have no sense of sublime respect—so that there are difficulties as Kant tries to bond morality to sublime emotion.<sup>7</sup> From my point of view, one interesting feature of Kant’s emphasis on respect is that it

is a cool, calm emotion, and the stern ascent to the categorical imperative of moral law is also very cool. Therefore if Kant or others can successfully find a necessary connection between ethical choice and sublimity, this state would have a natural affinity with Kant's noble sublime, and would thus attach to the cool and measured moral vision of Plato. Crowther observes that throughout his critique of ethics, Kant uses the concept of the sublime only in reference to the moral law, showing perhaps a tendency even to limit the sublime to moral selfhood, a tendency in part based on Kant's decision to use morality to establish the crucial concepts of God, freedom, and immortality. Crowther points out that Kant assumes "the axiological superiority of moral consciousness," and that "for Kant, the supersensible grounding of moral consciousness renders it ontologically superior to any phenomenal object or state."<sup>8</sup> One important issue raised by Crowther's treatment is the general stature of the moral sublime, obviously quite high in Kant's model. To the extent that any productive ethical attitude must be based on ideas of the good, the moral sublime should be seen as falling under the ideational sublime, though it would have an autonomous domain. This issue is relevant to Rothko, Newman, and Still because they work chiefly with the ideational sublime as it can be rooted in sensuous art forms, and they were very serious about moral vectors in their art.

After this discussion of Kant's emphasis on the moral sublime in the Critique of Practical Reason, Crowther treats the way in which the Critique of Judgment moves the idea of the sublime from the moral zone into the aesthetic domain. Kant stresses that reflective judgments seek final ends and should yield pleasure. Crowther underlines the value to Kant of aesthetic reflective judgments, because in this special area "our pleasure in natural finality is enjoyed explicitly," whereas in non-aesthetic cases the pleasure could slide by unnoticed.<sup>9</sup> The pleasure of our search for rational and moral finality in nature stands uniquely manifested in aesthetic judgments, thus making a link from nature to aesthetics to morality. An aesthetic judgment both affirms the pleasure and, philosophically, implicates the supersensible inner realm where all a priori foundations are discerned. Crowther is explaining the Kantian basis for the autonomy of aesthetics, as well as the philosophic value of art.

Kant does insist that the judgment of beauty is pure, based on formal unity, but

Crowther crystallizes ways in which Kant connects beauty to morality: a beautiful object may be a symbol for the good and claim universal assent; the pleasure makes us aware of the superiority of our supersensible rational being; the judgment is universal because reflective judgments must have a universal a priori basis and are also grounded on a universal common sense; aesthetic judgments are analogous to moral judgments in immediacy, disinterestedness, and universality; and in common usage most people assume an analogy between beauty and morality.<sup>10</sup> Kant does bring in art as well as nature. He does not say (as I would) that any painting intending to do good for the world is a general symbol of the good, over and beyond any internal moral content. Plato would say this ought to be the case. Crowther observes that moral content would be one feature which heightens the consciously recognized presence of the supersensible domain of reason and morality. By these emphases Crowther explains Kant's statement in the last paragraph of the Critique of Judgment that at the highest level, aesthetic taste is, in Kant's words, "a critical faculty that judges of the rendering of moral ideas in terms of sense."<sup>11</sup> Though not as strongly as I would prefer, Crowther is sensitive to moral value in various elements of his critical aesthetics, and this is a strength. The moral vision of Rothko, Newman, and Still should not be abrogated, and a Kantian foundation can help explain it. However, Crowther believes Kant pushes the moral element too far, because a Kantian aesthetic judgment is not the same thing as a moral judgment. Also, Crowther finds the whole idea of subjective finality not invalid, but troublesomely vague.<sup>12</sup>

After a lucid reconstruction of Kant's core concepts of the mathematical and dynamic sublime (the sublime of size, and of force), Crowther reconstructs Kantian aesthetic theory to invest it with some extensions and enrichments: the Kantian aesthetic experience harmonizing nature and mind would generate a unique respect for the material sensory manifold and also cause us to feel strongly at home in the world; Kant is wrong to insist on a fully disinterested aesthetic state oblivious to truth and reality, and wrong to restrict aesthetic response to formal surface features; and, on phenomenological grounds, the aesthetic cannot properly be seen "as a single mode of experience, but as a domain of logically and phenomenologically cognate experiences at once definable and differentiable in terms of their contrasting ways of embodying the

felt compatibility of rational cognition with the sensible world”—an approach which “allows us to escape from the unwarrantably restrictive definitions of the aesthetic propounded by traditional formalism, yet without succumbing to scepticism as to the very possibility of finding criteria for the aesthetic.”<sup>13</sup> Obviously, Kant’s own emphasis on bodily states and human faculties, plus his passion to make a place for moral and rational vectors, supplies a warrant for Crowther’s amplifications.

Next Crowther offers his revision of Kant’s theory of the sublime, recommending a tighter analogy between the mathematical and dynamical sublime, the common feature being the pleasure of consciously realizing that our intellect can transcend some vast physicality or infinite power, can range over something so challenging. Since an obvious rational component enters, we must drop the fully disinterested concept, and should also drop (as some of Kant’s examples would imply) the Burkean insistence that pain or terror is always required. Crowther points out that much of the awe and astonishment are generated by paradox, the sense of being both chained and liberated.<sup>14</sup>

Crowther moves to the important task of extending the sublime from works of nature to works of art. Kant confines himself almost entirely to sublime experience triggered by nature, but he sometimes mentions sublime art, as when he cites St. Peter’s in Rome as being sublime because it is so huge and complex, and the literary inscription on the Temple of Isis as being a peerlessly sublime content enhanced by artistic style. Consequently we may extrapolate to assume that a work of art may provoke the sense of the sublime by sufficient hugeness, complexity, and monumentality. Our conscious awareness of it as a thing made for a purpose is overwhelmed, thrust aside in the jolt of sublime impact. Furthermore, since depth of content can reach sublimity, Kant gives us warrant to conclude that there would be a further range for sublimity as we complicate the content of the work by the sophisticated theoretic understanding we bring to it, so that both a phenomenal impact and a cerebral complication would create the sublime sense of awe and wonder, both of them being vast and difficult to grasp.<sup>15</sup> These deepenings of the Kantian model are indispensable in understanding the sublime subjects of the abstract expressionists.

Crowther adds that Kant’s sense of artistic genius would further activate the

qualities making for sublimity, as in the case of King Lear, following the unique laws of Shakespeare's genius, creating such a vast range of universality, and adding his stylistic splendors. However Crowther cautions that we should not restrict what type of subject might lend itself to sublime impact—that, for instance, a Watteau Fête galante might embody an overwhelming tragic sense of transient love. This is an important point, causing us to be alert for explosive concepts even in a cool painter like Vermeer, and like Newman. The expressive vector coming from genius would need to be paired (from the audience's point of view) with overwhelming personal impact, so that, in a relatively disinterested context, the sublimity of art encompasses overwhelming scale and scope of the object, overwhelming conceptual content, the expressivity of genius, and overwhelming personal impact, with the pleasure coming from the recognized compatibilities between the sensible and mental worlds, which causes us to feel at home in the world as sensate and rational creatures.<sup>16</sup> Since all four areas involve human powers, Crowther reaches a definition: "the sublime is an item or set of items which, through the possession or suggestion of perceptually, imaginatively, or emotionally overwhelming properties, succeeds in rendering the scope of some human capacity vivid to the senses."<sup>17</sup> Crowther adds that—as powerful forces—war, capitalism, and class warfare (as Marx theorized) become possible sublime subjects.<sup>18</sup>

At the end of his study, Crowther points to philosophic and moral values implicated in the experience of the sublime—philosophic in that the sublime reveals ontological relations, essential faculties, metaphysical concepts, and transcendent structures. Some necessary moral adjuncts named by Crowther (extending the Kantian model) seem to be indisputable: that the sublime asserts rational selfhood and thus engenders respect for all persons; that the various powers and excellencies met in sublime encounters enhance respect for the whole human race; and that the sublime, though essentially aesthetic, can lead to moral values.<sup>19</sup> While Crowther does not say so at this point, these horizon reachings to all of humanity would relate to his conception of art as enriching our sense of belonging to a hospitable world, a world-hold meshing with body-hold.

Some additional features must be indicated in other studies by Crowther. Since Burke's emphasis on emotional states points to an existential sublime centered in strong

but distanced physical and mental shocks that threaten life and arouse terror, Crowther pursues the implications of such an existential sublime for art, noting that artworks have distancing built in that allows for contemplative scrutiny, and that human beings seek out dangerous shocks of the sublime, “enjoy the dangerous thrills of the sublime for their own sake.” Burke understood that these experiences are salutary, and we may properly connect such sought-out thrills to the existential boredom of so many people in the work-world of capitalism and state-capitalist societies. Unfortunately this need for shocks to relieve monotony is generally met by “shocks provided by the media—especially television with its sports events, violent gangster programmes, horror films and sensational news items.” However the authentic existential shock of the sublime goes much deeper, yielding not only escape from boredom, but also the elevation and rejuvenation of vital human faculties, which accompany the tragic awareness of death and finitude. Since all societies desire such shock relief from boredom, “What Burke offers, then, is the basis of an existential variety of the sublime. In it, some actual or represented negation of life disrupts the normal monotonous tenor of our existence and makes the present moment of consciousness all the more vivid.”<sup>20</sup> Crowther—disagreeing with those who think that shock and violence are always harmful to society—argues that shock materials could be morally reprehensible if they produce a general desensitizing of ethical concern, but that would have to be weighed against the spiritual value of sublime shock in relieving boredom and enhancing existence—including the encouragement for existential courage against the dangers and negations of life. To prevent both desensitizing and the film-television tendency to enfeeble the potentially sublime by reducing it to mere entertainment and profit, Crowther recommends the alert and informed public discussion of these issues through a critical aesthetics of the kind he has produced.<sup>21</sup> Democracies must be vigilant and informed.

In a further consideration of Kant, Crowther argues that we need not accept Kant’s claim that natural objects themselves cannot be sublime. Kant could have saved himself from this restriction by observing that a natural object has intrinsic features which call up the very zone of supersensible reason, morality, and freedom that he wants to invoke. To allow for the sublimity of a sensible item, including art objects, Crowther supplements Kant’s morally focused theory with sensory grounding.<sup>22</sup> Even

if some find Kant's idealism too extreme, this would not, Crowther declares, invalidate his acute universalist insight that, in sublime encounters, concepts of reason successfully bridge over some overwhelming shock of the sublime. There is no way to rule out rational capacities because the human hold on world and experience always involves the reciprocity between sensible and rational. Also it should be accepted that universalizing judgments are appropriate, since other people (with the same body-hold and needs) will have to experience objective sublimicist features the same way we do. Crowther is right to claim that his search for deeper and wider reciprocities carries forward the hallmark Kantian method of synthesis.<sup>23</sup>

Crowther makes the important point that the postmodern theoreticians hostile to the idea of the aesthetic fail to see that the concept of the relatively disinterested sublime has practical value for understanding unstable and ungraspable social groups in conflict, for shielding analysts from despair, and for maintaining the ideal of consensus emerging from rugged conflict.<sup>24</sup> Crowther points to a set of flexible constants that give some stability—such things as ontological reciprocity and embodiment, the uniqueness of embodied subjects and the genuine newness of individually stylized perception, the necessity for sense of self, the powers of individuals to resist social conformity, the energizing connections to historical fields, disclosures of finitude and redemptive possibilities, workings of empathy, and patterns of synthesis—none of these being merely linguistic structures. Such constants do not negate the obvious truth that, through history, the contextual field keeps growing, emerging, and changing. For Crowther, not every mighty something is sublime, but only those “which succeed in both engaging and stimulating our cognitive capacities.”<sup>25</sup>

Some indication has already been given of Crowther's focus in Art and Embodiment on the needs of self-consciousness. I am not trying to sketch his full aesthetic theory, but to concentrate on his analysis of the sublime. However in this work (as we would expect from aesthetic theory) Crowther gives detailed attention to the special powers and advantages that art possesses as it, through distancing, brackets values off for heightened awareness and richest contemplation, the ways in which excellent art, superior to philosophy and far above kitsch, offers an “image of human experience itself,” such that “Qua symbolically significant sensuous manifold, art

shows that reciprocity of sensibility and reason, and the individual and collective, which are fundamental to embodied subjectivity.”<sup>26</sup> The root idea is that the ontology of art is homologous to the ontology of integrated human life, as philosophy would not be.

While I cannot pursue this in detail, some items bear strongly on the crucial concept of transcendence in theory of the sublime. For Crowther, art works achieve an overcoming of personal and cultural antagonisms, which gives to art its unique mode of redemption. However, this overcoming of finitude cannot, in his view, take us as high as a postulated timeless Platonic world. We are not transported, in sublime art, by Platonic absolute universals. However, the logical categories used by the intellect in grasping sublime experience are natural kinds that endure through aeons, so that we can be elevated from the existential to the aeonic; thus sublime art creates a reciprocity between finite and trans-finite. One pleasure of the sublime is the victory over astonishing size or power, and another is the pleasure and transcendence achieved in seeing something as “the perfect specimen of a natural kind.” This reference to a concept would take the experience out of pure beauty into the Kantian zone of dependent beauty and to the sublime. Such reconciliations and quasi-eternal transcendencies yield a secular theory for the redemptive powers of art, which Crowther calls “our secular immortality.”<sup>27</sup> In two more specific comments on the sublime, Crowther notes that postmodernism tends to shift the setting for sublime experience to urban life and the world of techno-science, and that postmodern audiences have a special affinity for the sublime, “a sensibility orientated towards the disruptions of the sublime rather than the felicities of the beautiful.”<sup>28</sup> This is why sublimicist thought can be productive in the search for consensus features that bridge over and synthesize the rugged ideological clashes and pluralisms of the contemporary world, assuming of course that the disruptions can come to some kind of larger encompassing pattern.

Lyotard’s theory of the sublime is certainly designed for an epoch obsessed with techno-science. For him, the sublime is our only salvation because it keeps alive metaphysical thinking (presenting the unrepresentable) in an age when all legitimating narratives that might stabilize culture have been shattered. Paradoxically, Lyotard

defends, in his way, a kind of Platonic idealism floating above the unreliable real world, yet not sharing the crucial principle of Plato and Aristotle that the ideal Forms have explanatory consonance with reality and yield true knowledge. Lyotard's floating world is made possible by the lift of the sublime.

Appropriately, Lyotard's most clarifying statement "Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime," came in an art journal.<sup>29</sup> The basic thesis is that the modern world of data-gathering, efficiency-worshipping, wealth-seeking, techno-scientific, ruthless capitalism is destroying soul and spirit (using photography as its tool ) and the only hope of salvation lies in avant-garde artists and philosophers who resist this new leviathan by fundamental questioning of the very nature of art and the very nature of thought. These radical scepticisms demand the use of ideas, and a powerful idea belongs in a spiritual absolute realm which cannot be fully presented (as Kant understood) by any clear image or clear understanding. Therefore avant-garde painters and philosophers share the common necessity of presenting the unpresentable, bringing art and philosophy fully into the domain of the sublime. Their whole project is sublime. This conception of the sublime originates with Nietzsche: an entire project of art and philosophy presenting a higher fictional world of value.

Lyotard locates a great contemporary demon in capitalism merged into technology and free-market strategies; and his thought allows that socialism can remain a valid, Utopian, absolute dream no matter how much it is defeated in real politics and real society. He hopes to help a modern confused world shore fragments against ruin.

Photography, for Lyotard, functions as the nemesis of sublimity because it crushes painting: "Painting's impossibility arises from the industrial and postindustrial--techno-scientific--world's greater need for photography than for painting." Lyotard believes that painting attained its true place of honor in the Renaissance when, under "Neoplatonic inspiration," it gave citizens and nation their sense of identity in a reasoned and orderly world. Sublime and absolute ideas were wedded to the sensory forms of paintings. Yet the new technocratic capitalists care nothing about spiritual ideology. They do have their sense of infinity, but it is only the consumer-focused "infinite ability of science, of technology, of capitalism, to realize." Photography can publicize efficiently every new product on the market, can easily prostitute itself to "The hardness of industrial beauty," and thus photography jettisons the original noble task of

painting to bring citizens into the ideal but unrepresentable worlds of value and philosophy. A photograph presents what is representable, the hard surface beauty of a new object for consumption.<sup>30</sup>

Painting, reeling from this triumph of photography, but still keeping alive, in the avant-garde, the desire to reach some kind of ideational paradise, finds no solid world of belief, and therefore can only question painting itself as its metaphysical project—just as philosophy can only question thinking itself. In our time, Lyotard believes, “there are no consistent symbols for good, just, true, infinite, etc.”<sup>31</sup>

In spite of the general state of doubt, for Lyotard, modern painters must keep alive the honorable thrusting toward the sublime: “That which is not demonstrable is that which stems from Ideas. . . . The universe is not demonstrable; neither is humanity, the end of history, the moment, the species, the good, the just, etc.—or, according to Kant, absolutes in general.” Serious avant-garde painters must continue to strive to use abstract means to mesh with Kant’s “negative presentation” of the unrepresentable, to make “ungraspable allusions to the invisible within the visible”; and “The sublime is the sense that these works draw upon, not the beautiful.” Even when the questing painters fail, “and even if that causes suffering, a pure gratification will emerge from the tension.”<sup>32</sup>

Interestingly, Lyotard scorns postmodern architecture for giving up on profound experimentation and dialectic, for accepting a feeble “eclecticism of consumerism,” for selling out to the present state of techno-scientific culture, for catering to “the sensibility of the supermarket shopper,” for caving in before this “menace” which “implies the corruption of painting’s honor.” For Lyotard, the crisis is too deep for the relaxed pursuit of quaint architectural playfulness, and for the relaxed pursuit of the beautiful. “The spirit of the times is surely not that of the pleasant: its mission remains that of the immanent sublime, that of alluding to the nondemonstrable.” The radically questioning philosopher dares to call the avant-garde painters “his brothers and sisters in experimentation.”<sup>33</sup>

Lyotard’s position may be more fully understood by considering three of his books, The Postmodern Explained, The Postmodern Condition, and Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime. The Postmodern Explained is crafted, interestingly, as letters

to children. Lyotard explains that serious art is always threatened when any single party takes control, or capital takes control. Science, capitalism, and techno-science forge an unholy trinity encouraging a bleak materialism, the “escape of reality from the metaphysical, religious, and political assurances the mind once believed it possessed.” Kant’s theory of the sublime is indispensable, because “the aesthetic of the sublime is where modern art (including literature) finds its impetus, and where the logic of the avant-garde finds its axioms.” Modern painting is in search of techniques for “presenting the existence of something unrepresentable. Showing that there is something we can conceive of which we can neither see nor show--this is the stake of modern painting.”<sup>34</sup>

Lyotard presents avant-garde painters as those who undermine realism and all simple gazing at the surface of museum objects. Thus the artists have “humiliated and disqualified reality”—a project he locates correctly in the vision of abstract painters such as Newman. Lyotard’s turn away from nature is important. Two marks of modernity are postulated by Lyotard: a passive nostalgic mode of melancholic regret for the absence of significant presence, and a zestful novatio mode of bold experiment, the former seen in Proust and German expressionism, the latter in Joyce, Braque, and Picasso. In Joyce, the writing (the signifier) “makes us discern the unrepresentable.” This carries forward the suggestions of Longinus and Kant that style is a resource for the sublime. Lyotard points out that allusion in art creates these two modes of modernity, so that “allusion . . . is perhaps an indispensable mode of expression for works that belong to the aesthetic of the sublime.”<sup>35</sup>

Lyotard, like Crowther, has his own rejection of formalism: it signals the weak retreat into the merely pleasant (a cowardice in a time of total crisis). Formalism avoids the agony of the true sublime. When the nostalgia for absence takes consolation in pleasant form, this is not the true sublime, which must include both a pain and a pleasure breaking beyond form, “a pleasure in reason exceeding all presentation.” Crowther and Lyotard both defend the authority of reason, but for Lyotard, it cannot take us anywhere, it can only stay alive in a wasteland. For Lyotard, postmodern artists and philosophers must be iconoclasts who shatter and destabilize: “The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that

which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations--not to take pleasure in them, but to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable." Thus "The artist and the writer therefore work without rules in order to establish rules for what will have been made." In a sense, Lyotard is full of the wildness of Nietzsche. Lyotard remains somewhat in Nietzsche's anarchic stage, but unlike Nietzsche, he makes anarchy permanent, because when he condemns nostalgia for what is "impossible," the impossible is any kind of universalist vision of purpose and value which could unify cultures and selves. Lyotard makes this clear when he declares: "the answer is this: war on totality. Let us attest to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differends and save the honor of the name."<sup>36</sup> The differends are those saving layers which Ideas project out beyond material reality, as well as between different language games. Lyotard's rebuttal of Hegel is that no total conceptions will ever return, yet the sublime is our sacred weapon to keep spirit itself alive in an age in which spirit does not know, cannot know, what values and beliefs to celebrate.

Lyotard comments that his earlier work, The Postmodern Condition, was flawed in that it gave too large a place to narrative as the only way to legitimate a given specific idealism for society. Science has no narrative, and the present authority voice, capitalistic techno-science, has no narrative. However, Lyotard repeats his basic claim that all of the great legitimating narratives have collapsed: the Christian dream, the Western enlightenment dream of human emancipation through reason and freedom, the Marxist dream of the emancipation of labor. Science is perceived as undermining its own optimism, and techno-science has no need of narrative, thriving on efficiency and success, paying no attention to what is "good, just, or true." Justice is a major concern for Lyotard, and he claims that the religious route "is far from being just."<sup>37</sup>

Lyotard, coming strongly into the postmodern concept of culture as language games, develops the thesis that language itself can legitimate, without narratives of origin, simply by the realization that linguistic phrases are givens. They just show up as novel events. Phrases are used to situate individual identities and referents. Phrases have been misused in cultures based on heroes and myths, misused to support totalitarian dreams. For Lyotard, the legitimate governments are "Republican" and

“deliberative.” They might seem paralyzed by encouraging diverse views and a “play” between phrase families (linguistic communities). But somehow, not in a logical fashion, they can ask “What ought we to be” (a search for an unrepresentable sublime), and somehow produce an answer, identify friends and foes, by just some prescription of an ought, with no need for a legitimating narrative. This is Lyotard’s own political and social dream. It is rather dismaying for him to declare that there are no norms for goodness or justice, just some arbitrary assertion of will. Nietzsche has, partially, been absorbed. What hurts Lyotard is that his favorite enemy, techno-science, has deliberated and has asserted by fiat an ideal, proceeding to give it control through its own “phrase regime.” Lyotard can say that we ought to protect, somehow, a plurality of discourse communities, but this is a vague and hapless position. He hopes that somehow, order will fall out of multiplicity. Again, however, Lyotard can be very helpful. He states that the grand stake, the first stake, for a culture is asking a question, “What ought we to be?” This priority for a question that founds an “ought” gives a powerful moral center to Lyotard’s thought. Bringing moral thinking to the fore, he correctly asserts that the actual does not incapacitate the ought: “One cannot deduce what a people ought to be from what it is today.” Whatever kind of new ideal some reflective republic can declare by fiat, the sublime sensibility (not needing empirical proof) can communicate it by analoga.<sup>38</sup> Though Lyotard does not give examples, a good one would be, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a mustard seed.”

Lyotard agrees with Kant that this openness to the sublime grows from high culture and must be acquired through culture. And he emphasizes his sense of pluralism by declaring that all dogma and all hegemony should be resisted “without forming a new ‘front,’” but by supporting a multiplicity of “micrologies.” There is no politics of the sublime, “But there is an aesthetic of the sublime in politics.” Political conflict is one field for sublime appreciation, suggested, Lyotard claims, by the fact that even disinterested people thrilled to the French Revolution.<sup>39</sup> This is not nearly as good an example as that disinterested people would thrill to the political decisions that have created great museums of art.

The combination of melodrama and pessimistic crisis is distinctive in Lyotard. He condemns thinkers like Sartre, Chomsky, Negri, and Foucault for seeking some

hopeful philosophy and not accepting the total “vacancy of the place once occupied by intellectuals.” The Lyotardesque melodrama appears in statements such as Nazism “burns” the avant-garde, while capitalism, “without any concern for legitimation, by pursuing the disintegration of the modern social bond, the community of citizens,” delivers the avant-garde “muzzled to the culture industry.” He continues his scorn for postmodern architecture, calling its multiple quotations from earlier periods a feeble “bricolage” based on a dishonorable rejection of modernist idealism, a rejection of the “ideal of the progressive realization of social and individual emancipation encompassing all humanity.”<sup>40</sup> Lyotard is at his best when his distinctive accolade for the sublime is joined to his own moral imperative. He is important, partly, for understanding that sublimity is not separable from morality, though, as with Crowther, that does not entail that moral judgments are not separable from aesthetic judgments. In fact, Lyotard’s “phrase regimes” would set off aesthetic phrases from ethical phrases.

Lyotard claims that his war against collapsed or misguided hegemonies, his championing of avant-garde questioning and restless going beyond, has emphasized “the moment of dissent,” making a system of “critical rationalism”—somewhat similar in spirit to Crowther’s critical aesthetics, yet thoroughly pervaded by negativity.<sup>41</sup>

It must be emphasized that Lyotard, to the discomfort of Marxists, condemns to failure both liberalism and Marxism.<sup>42</sup> It does not favor Marxism or other strong ideologies when Lyotard insists that at the moment, paralysis is everywhere, and no new viable positive theory is in sight. Revealing an important closeness to Crowther, Lyotard insists that what is required, what we do not have, is a metaphysical system that recognizes basic human needs, “needs for security, identity, and happiness.”<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, Lyotard sets writing against language, proclaiming that in our current state of negativity, writing allows the project of the sublime: “One wants to say what it does not know how to say, but what one imagines it should be able to say.”<sup>44</sup>

We have noted Lyotard’s desire for “thrown out” phrases with no origin. The avant-garde is always beginning anew, which is the task of writing as opposed to language. Lyotard claims that writers (we may include painters) preserve true “initiation” events, with an ontological function included: not to “tarnish the wonder that (something) is happening,” and thus to protect the deep moments “from what is

customary or understood"—a role made to order for the sublime.<sup>45</sup> To use Crowther's term, we might locate two aeonic constants in Lyotard: basic human needs and the sublimicist imperative for Utopian metaphysical speculation and innovation.

Since in Lyotard's view reason, for the time being, cannot decide what to hope for, we can hope only for a saving residue felt in "the unconscious body" as a "sensibility" that can be "communal." This is the sensibility of the sublime, and through it, though we are entrapped in a new capitalist-technocratic barbarism, we can maintain "the responsibility of resisting and bearing witness," can resist technology by using its forms "in an attempt to bear witness to what really matters: the childhood of an encounter, the welcome extended the marvel that (something) is happening, the respect for the event."<sup>46</sup> We must accept "doing no more than making a start."<sup>47</sup> That start is, for Lyotard, the sublimicist transcendental moment articulated by Kant. Lyotard's advice to negate almost everything and do almost nothing explains why Wlad Godzich has aptly called him "the wild man, albeit the gentlest kind, of French philosophy for nearly twenty years."<sup>48</sup> While dramatizing wholesale collapse and despair, he uses the sublime to keep alive the revolutionary mentality.

Lyotard's explanations in The Postmodern Explained contain almost all of the important ideas from his earlier The Postmodern Condition. Yet a few points from the earlier work are noteworthy. Lyotard cautions that in the hegemony of capitalistic techno-science, selves will be defined as "located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass"; to help ward off the danger of such a world we should strive to give citizens at large full access to computer banks. He warns that when university professors (who could keep alive sublimicist thinking) allow themselves to be judged by efficiency, outcomes, and performance criteria (added to the fact that they allocate but do not control funds), they enslave themselves to the techno-scientific managers, turning away from the sublime task of "the realization of the Idea or the emancipation of men."<sup>49</sup>

Lyotard traces the collapse of science to problematics in Plato's dialogues. As science and other narratives of coherence disintegrate (Lyotard here recognizes Nietzsche's nihilism), people would fall into great pessimism and barbarity except for the saving hope that a new "legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic

practice and communication interaction.” In short, no one can stop them from throwing out some new phrases, some “new statement” profoundly revolutionary.<sup>50</sup>

As a rule, Lyotard insists that each narrative or phrase regime is sealed off so that some non-scientific narrative cannot be judged by the ideas of science, which would seem to deny overlap between sublime territories. However, he admits that science does condemn folk narratives as “savage, primitive, undeveloped,” making for “the entire history of cultural imperialism from the dawn of Western civilization.” Yet he also declares that it is “impossible to judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge on the basis of scientific knowledge and vice versa.” In other words, science does judge other language communities, but the judgments are not valid. Under Lyotard’s model there can be no consensus, yet he admits that all organizing narratives are designed to create social consensus. As a practical matter, in an age of doubt, he believes that somehow, “We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus.”<sup>51</sup> This does not seem possible. A coherent philosophy (some form of Lyotard’s envisioned Idea) will have to make sharp and negative cross-cultural judgments, or lose its legitimation. Lyotard’s rejection of judgments across phrase families weakens his own negative judgments about capitalism and techno-science, as it would also weaken his condemnation of religions and Neo-Platonism. Scepticisms tend to weaken truth claims, and there will be a loss in judgmental force when, as Godzich claims for Lyotard, the cogito is replaced by the dubito.<sup>52</sup>

Lyotard’s Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime explains why he leans so heavily on Kant, whose theory of the sublime is connected to “the transport that leads all thought (critical thought included) to its limits.” The Kantian sublime is “a sudden blazing, and without future. Thus it is that it acquired a future and addresses us still, we who hardly hope in the Kantian sense.” Kant perceived that “the sublime feeling is only the irruption in and of thought of this deaf desire for limitlessness.” Lyotard conceives of sublime subreption as the trick which averts horror, “subverts it and turns it into admiration and respect for an unrepresentable Idea.” Kant’s sublime points to the exalting principle that before all the operations of reason, “there is thought,” and “this is absolute.” The feeling of the sublime “is neither moral universality nor aesthetic universalization, but is, rather, the destruction of one by the other in the violence of

their differend.”<sup>53</sup>

Lyotard, as revolutionary, likes the violence of the sublime, using it to connect sublimity to morality. A specific virtue is not violent, but morality in general is violent through “its resistance to temptation, its triumph over them, reducing them to naught.” Lyotard often takes up the idea that while a moral judgment lies in a different field from the sublime, there are genuine relations without a mixing of categories. There are analogies between the sublime and the moral, which allow a kind of jump from one category into the other, though analogy is not a true bridge. However “Kant is well aware that the cousinship between the good and the sublime is closer than that between the beautiful and the sublime.” When the perceiver of the sublime resorts to reason, the self enters the supersensible domain where practical moral reason holds sway; thus the sublime “furnishes practical reason the opportunity to reinforce its hold on thought and to extend its power according to its faculty interest,” a situation in which “reason can in effect render almost ‘intuitable’ . . . to thought the Idea of its true destination, which is to be moral.” Lyotard adds the interesting idea that the sacrifice of imagination and nature at the altar of reason generates an aura of the sacred: “By sacrificing itself, the imagination sacrifices nature, which is aesthetically sacred, to exalt holy law,” and “when one lights the beautiful on fire, the sign of the good rises from its ashes.” Because the sublime is violent, it can perform a major service for the good, even though the two are only cousins.<sup>54</sup> Thus from the broadest point of view (somewhat like Nietzsche) Lyotard gives to the sublime the whole human program of thought as a transcendental enterprise, the whole program of breaking out of existing world-views to establish new foundations of value and belief, but he attaches the sublime more to Idea than to art, unless we can find in Lyotard the evidence that he, like Nietzsche, construes ideas as artistic fictions. Lyotard gives these great tasks to the sublime, but makes it difficult for the work to proceed in the postmodern world because, while we know how to start a new philosophy (using sublimicist sensibility to throw out new phrases of sublime violence), we do not know which philosophy to start; yet in our confusion we might stumble on some useful idea of pluralistic justice to soothe the troubled waters while we wait. Lyotard’s thought is noble and in its way hopeful, yet in its way it is also greatly paralyzed.<sup>55</sup>

Frances Ferguson's contribution to sublimicist theory is difficult to pin down because she launches a contradictory project of trying to maintain an allegiance to Kant, and also to deconstruction theory. She wants to blend transcendental idealism with the theories that reject it. A second source of difficulty in understanding Ferguson is that many sentences are unclear, a trait which further aligns her with deconstructionists like Paul de Man. However there is a final judgment about Ferguson that seems reasonable: she yields so much ground to rhetorical problematization that she comes close to viewing the sublime and human nature as rhetorical constructs. While she repeatedly claims that she wants to maintain the on-going value of the sublimicist theory of Burke and Kant, she does this by following the deconstructive mode of finding in the sublime not a source of any victorious and transcendent resolution of difficulty, but rather a site for the enactment of rhetorical problematics. Weiskel at least hopes for psychological constants, and Lyotard at least has a master concept of a cultural ought, but when Ferguson is in danger of reaching some clear affirmative ground, she habitually seems to undermine it, which may of course be part of her purpose.

Ferguson is aware of her contradictory impulses. Indeed, in the introduction to her main study, *Solitude and the Sublime*, she admits that the clarifications she forces on Burke and Kant are taken away as she brings in recent linguistic and deconstructive theory.<sup>56</sup> However, in spite of confessions of contradictions, Ferguson also writes as if she has one constant intellectual commitment: to defend Kantian idealism (which she calls formalism) against both Burkean empiricism and the anti-idealist tendencies of Derrida, de Man, and other deconstructionists. Ferguson might have moved against two arguments that materialism launches against formalist Kantian idealism: that empiricism overcomes idealism or that idealism harbors a kind of self-deluding empiricism. However, in preparation for her own undermining of Kant, Ferguson finds that the real interest in Kantian idealism resides not in problems resolved, but in "the question of individuation," or "how can there be one of anything." Apparently Ferguson makes this strange reduction of Kant because what she really wants to talk about is the nature of self in relation to society, especially the theoretic ambiguity surrounding this problem.<sup>57</sup>

Operating like a deconstructionist, Ferguson seeks some troublesome site of

aporia in the sublimicist theory of Burke and Kant. Sublime experience requires the activation of mental constructs. Ferguson notes that Burke treats mental images “first as if they were the affective traces of objects and then as if they were objects themselves”; thus Burke has difficulties because the increasingly non-material mental images make empirical experience “virtually illegible,” rendering “the testimony of the senses its own skeptical double”—a conflation shared by “recent deconstructive and historicist criticism.” Thus Burke’s materialism is weakened as the role of linguistically mediated mental images is strengthened. This is a possible criticism of materialism, but it is not closely connected to Burke’s sublimicism. Ferguson does from time to time defend Kant, pointing out here that Kant correctly resolves this problem by giving everything to mental images and formal mental categories. Because Kant construes “aesthetic form as a regulative structure,” he makes epistemology “parasitic on form.” Ferguson would like to believe this since she wants aesthetics to govern epistemology: “I argue that aesthetic formalism (rightly) insists that the material can only count as matter at all through the operation of prior systematic articulations of human agency.” Kant might well agree that matter has no status except in terms of categories of mind, but Kant would base this conclusion on his own epistemology, not on his aesthetic theory. This is one of numerous places at which Ferguson seems eccentric.<sup>58</sup>

Ferguson obviously has been influenced by the reader-response theory that became wide-spread somewhat before deconstruction thought. Reader-response is another way to cancel the intent of the artist and to problematize the separate objective identity of the art object—strategies that Ferguson thinks she should support. Therefore she finds aporia in Kant, claiming (wrongly) that Kant completely identifies the sublime with nature, thus minimizing affective response, failing to see that “the viewer’s or auditor’s response may be necessary to constitute the experience as aesthetic.”<sup>59</sup> This is a strange comment in that Kant gives the sublime not to nature but to the viewer’s subjective response via inner concepts of reason. We must assume that Ferguson wants to assert reader-response theory at all cost. Since audience-response is linguistically mediated, this theory shifts the ground away from art objects and artistic creators.

Ferguson ties Burkean empiricism to deconstruction in a rather odd way: deconstructionists take away selves and external objects so that (thanks to rhetoric)

nothing material is left except the marks of letters on the page. We have “writing-as-mark,” not “writing-as-reference”; thus “Ironically, deconstruction. . . . converts the analysis of the beautiful and the sublime into a modern variant of the empirical model that Burke established for it.”<sup>60</sup> Again, this is peculiar forcing, in that the deconstructionists would strongly reject the psychological constants that are the essence of Burke’s aesthetics. Ferguson makes no objection when she points out that the “self-reflexive” rhetorical world of the deconstructionists allows them to interpret “Kant’s discussion of aesthetics as so many backhanded and implicit arguments against the viability of ideas of unity and autonomy for art objects as well as individuals.” Ferguson thinks we can keep the virtues of Kant’s formalistic idealism and wed it to the deconstruction logic that “keeps the formal constructive process from being able to close.”<sup>61</sup> Closure (based on the Derrida-deconstructionist rationale) is impossible because our discussions occur in texts that fade out infinitely at the margins into other texts, so that self-reflexive rhetoricity (allowing no firm knowledge or contact with reality) is inescapable.

In the Kantian formalist account of the sublime, from Ferguson’s perspective, the solitude of the perceiver “represents the difficulties of arriving at any account of any one whatever outside a process of systematic formalization,” while for Burke, beauty becomes a positive social form resisted by sublimity, which is the “dysfunctional social form that enables society to continue by providing illusions of individuality.”<sup>62</sup> It is Ferguson, not Burke, who calls them illusions. Again, we get the impression that Ferguson wants to use the sublimicist theory of Kant and Burke as a site for raising problems about the individual, society, the aesthetic, and the epistemological, so that the rhetorical discourse of Kant and Burke can seem relevant to and compatible with the deconstructive discourse. Other than appreciating the value and importance of deconstruction, Ferguson tries, not very clearly, to explain the second half of her project: “Ultimately, the subject of this book is the way in which the aesthetic discussion that emerged in the eighteenth century located an anxiety about the relationship between the individual and the type, the particular and the general, not merely as one epistemological problem among others but as the characteristically aesthetic epistemological problem.” Ferguson’s use of “anxiety” reveals her concern to

find problem areas.<sup>63</sup>

In an article on the Burkean sublime, Ferguson at the start points to Wordsworth's appreciation of "disputed" meanings, and Coleridge's awareness that conceptions of pleasure are "equivocal." Ferguson finds a problem for Burke when he uses "linguistic practice" as his evidence (not empiricism). Ferguson, not objecting to de Man's position that there is nothing except a "rhetorical sublime," notes that Burke makes use of both ordinary language and literary language for evidence, adding the peculiar point that Burke does not lean on language as being true and making contact with real objects, but rather leans on the "obscurity" of language. Burke of course does find sublimity in obscurity, but certainly does not embrace the rhetoricity that Ferguson implies. Ferguson apparently turns fully deconstructionist when she writes that it would be "churlish" to chide Burke for implying "rhetoricity" and "subversiveness" because the *Enquiry* has itself preceded us in this gesture." Burke relies on "conventions of reading" and "offers narratives about" sublime or beautiful objects, as well as lacing the *Enquiry* "with quotations which are explicitly rhetorical." Ferguson justifies Burke's inaccuracy in quotations because the integrity of other texts has "no force" when set beside Burke's own "affective" rhetorical strategy. This is one of the many unfortunate features of deconstructive rhetoricity: misreadings are celebrated as normative. Ferguson ends by emphasizing properly Burke's sense of the beautiful as weakening and the sublime as strengthening. It is no accident that Ferguson concentrates on these "power relationships," bringing her article closer to current deconstruction thought and to political correctness.<sup>64</sup>

In Ferguson's chief work on practical criticism, she gives away her deconstructive and rhetorical bent in her title: Wordsworth: Language As Counter-Spirit--a peculiar title in that Ferguson gives Wordsworth's remark that language must never be allowed to function as counter-spirit, Wordsworth's point being that words must truly represent thoughts, otherwise language becomes, Wordsworth declares, a "counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve." Having given her own blessing to deconstructive rhetoricity, Ferguson cannot allow Wordsworth to mean what he says; therefore she argues that Wordsworth's own ambiguous language sabotages his idealism, creating what is

simultaneously both “spirit and counter-spirit.” In their actual language use the romantics “commit themselves to the antinomy as a constant mode of perception. The erosion of the notion of unity becomes an inevitable corollary of the Romantic allegorizing of language.” Since the experience of cosmic unity is the core of the sublime for Wordsworth and Coleridge, Ferguson, in her typical manner, tries to make them relevant by undermining their basic beliefs, using rhetoricity as the tool for this inversion, reinterpreting them as subverting the unity of external objects, self, and cosmos. Faced with the sublimicist affirmation at the end of Wordsworth’s immortality ode, Ferguson comments: “The almost universal invocation of the last three stanzas speaks of continuities and connections, but it affirms these connections in a rhetoric which suspends itself over a gap in demonstrable truth.” Ferguson embraces Derrida in her claim that the Lucy poems, in effect, renounce the stability of selves and objects because “In such a poetic universe, language must increasingly do without the imaginary anchors of justification and grounding.”<sup>65</sup>

A final look at Ferguson’s criss-cross methodology may center, appropriately, on Wordsworth’s own fragmentary essay about the sublime. After giving Wordsworth’s claim that in the authentic sublime experience, the mind should soar above multiplicity to an “intense unity,” Ferguson declares: “Yet the multiplicity and nature of the qualities which he requires of sublime objects—individual form, duration, and power, all coexisting—tend to erode the internal unity of the objects with which the mind is to establish ‘intense unity.’ Thus, while we might see the mind’s ‘union’ with sublime natural objects as an effort to impute to itself (temporarily) a stability and continuity which it lacks, Wordsworth is repeatedly drawn to examples which are those of opposition and resistance.”<sup>66</sup> Since Ferguson does recognize some kind of subjective entity as audience, and since she keeps talking about self and society, it would not be correct that she fully endorses a “merely rhetorical” sublime, yet she constantly leans in that direction, and may fairly be seen as a representative of the postmodernist and deconstructive mentality which would reduce the sublime to nothing more than rhetorical construct. She treats the sublime, the aesthetic, and the self as sites of contradiction and ambiguity, due chiefly to the power of rhetoric to construct all putative truths, beliefs, realities, and agents. If the sublime becomes no more than a

dramatic but fictive way of using language, then obviously no authentic sublime is left, since there can be no real transcendence and no genuine selves to experience it.<sup>67</sup>

Ferguson, Weiskel, Crowther, and Lyotard are obviously helpful in the establishment of an adequate context for approaching the sublimicisms of the abstract expressionists. Crowther's thought is more affirmative and philosophically positive (with cognizance taken of the current attraction for a negative sublime), while the other three are strongly marked by the general recent climate of scepticism and anti-idealism, offering support for those who might want to slant the works of Rothko, Newman, and Still toward postmodern assumptions.

In the case of Weiskel, such a postmodern orientation could utilize his key concepts of the retreat of God, the decline of transcendental idealism, the emergence of a problematical secondary sublime featuring diminishment and parody, the attraction to semiotics and Freudian psychological naturalism, the assumption that ideology is fictive, and the assumption of the collapse of the vision of a unified self. Yet such a negative and pessimistic sublimicism could not do justice to Rothko, Newman, and Still, who (while they clearly understand the truth of declining spirituality and traditional idealism) do not yield to the sceptical voids, but rather try (in tune with modernism) to fill the voids with new kinds of belief and value. However, to the credit of Weiskel, he understands clearly that the sublime always requires transcendence, as we have seen in his comment: "The essential claim of the sublime is that man can . . . transcend the human." It is better to say that the sublime requires major and astonishing transcendence from one zone to another, in some cases involving the human and natural, in some cases the supernatural. In all cases there is a kind of mysticism, if we mean by that a deep sense of spiritual reaching out in relation to some kind of Other--which could be some rich and surprising painting whose contents seem touched with at least quasi-eternal values. There is always the prospect of sublime ideas energized by devices of form and style.

In the case of Ferguson, the serious limitation is also excessive negativity, the moving too far toward a fundamental problematization of all discourse, too far toward a conception of language as sabotage, too far toward a rejection of closure, and too far toward the unwarranted rejection of stable, autonomous, and morally responsible selfhood. On the credit side for Ferguson (and supportive of abstract expressionist

perspectives) is Ferguson's desire to keep the older sublimicist discourse in play (such as that of Kant and Wordsworth) and to maintain focus on the theory of selfhood, refusing to completely abandon some genuine sense of the subjective agent. These are important theoretic assets.

In the case of Lyotard, what we might call the seal of negativity lies upon several of his key assumptions: the collapse of coherence-yielding narratives, including Marxism; the peculiar state of having the sublime power to utter novel phrases for a new order but not knowing what to say; the acceptance of radical scepticism for the languages of art and philosophy; the hopeless dream of some social justice not connected to or justified by any coherent ethical or political theory; and the failure to see that cultures need homogeneity as well as diversity. On the positive side (and thus applicable to the positive visions of Rothko, Newman, and Still) are six major doctrines in the thought of Lyotard: that culturally integrating phrases must exhibit a moral core; that sublime vision and experience must be activated by the avant-garde as thinkers and artists strive to present the Kantian unrepresentable, which--for Lyotard--is lodged in metaphysical speculation about the good, the true, the real, and the beautiful; that art can change culture by creating analogia for new values (a kind of ideographic art symbol), thus making likeness as fundamental as difference; that the damaging features of techno-scientific capitalism can be resisted by the avant-garde; that even in a time of declining faith, the artists play a crucial role in keeping the power of sublimicism alive as they at least bear witness to the raw ontological wonderment of being, which is the ur-ground encouraging the more complex new metaphysics and morality waiting in the future; and that (in accord with Nietzsche) the entire project of a painter or philosopher can be a project of the sublime. When Rothko, Newman, and Still insisted upon some absolute dimension in their metaphysical subject matter, they were themselves asserting that very power of idealized thinking in which Lyotard locates the absolute essence of the sublime. Lyotard greatly elevates the mode of the ideational sublime in his peculiar longing for an unrepresentable paradisaical vision.

As Lyotard is more positive than Weiskel and Ferguson, Crowther is more positive than Lyotard, and it is indeed helpful to discover contemporary theoreticians who reject a radical break with the past; who appreciate on-going integrations in personality, thought, art, and society; who utilize some features of flux and negativity

without giving them final dominion; and who find mutually supportive reciprocity between elements which (in other perspectives) make for splintering and alienation. It is certainly clear that Crowther's utilization of Kant, existentialism, phenomenology, and other elements to create a positive critical aesthetics bonded to society and philosophy, and aiming for polarities that harmonize, offers a kind of positive perspective adequate to treat most of the core ambitions of Rothko, Newman, and Still, who, like Crowther, were in search of a new synthesis for ideas and art, a new kind of redemptive social coherence in which negative features are recognized, but given subsidiary status. Crowther's extensive speculations on the art object and the self as complex embodiments which join the sensory and the cerebral supply the kind of context needed to explain the hopes and works of the first-generation abstract expressionists. However, from my point of view, there are some problems with Crowther's analysis. The values which he associates with the sublime are not ranked in a clear hierarchy which might give a firmer pattern. For instance he does not assign to the religious and the moral sublime the extremely high place which they deserve in light of the manner in which religions and moralities establish so great a degree of cultural unity. Since Crowther makes much of our feeling at home in the world, one might press him in this manner: speaking existentially and phenomenologically, how crucial is a religious orientation in supplying an adequate sense of at-homeness in our galaxy and in society? Also, if the embodied self seeks a harmony of faculties, does and should the moral sense take a certain dominion over other faculties when it emerges into full conscious power? Since moral vision is intrinsic to art forms and is powerful in their making, criticism should always apply moral criteria to the evaluation of art qua art; thus Crowther might well give more prominence to the moral and to the moral sublime, in a move toward a sharper hierarchy of values.<sup>68</sup> He might give aeonic duration to some universal moral principles.

Together, Weiskel, Ferguson, Lyotard, and Crowther give high status to the sublime as a source of awe and wonder, as a generally rugged and complex experience (either calm or turbulent), and as an encounter which (aesthetically) is uniquely wedded to metaphysical and moral ideas. They offer proof of the value of absorbing historical perspective and of using essentialist terminology. They show that all sublimicist analysis is accompanied by problematical features, yet there are so far--in recent

thought--no persuasive arguments to replace positivistic models of value and philosophy with sceptical models, no persuasive arguments to abandon trans-cultural and permanent truth claims (including moral ones), no persuasive arguments that major hegemonic Western narratives should be rejected wholesale, no persuasive arguments that the modernist avant-garde search for new centers of order should (or has) come to a halt, no persuasive arguments that spirituality and religiosity must yield to materialism, and no persuasive arguments that sublimicism, as a concept, has been discredited by the full submergence of selfhood or the full emergence of rhetoricity. Obviously, for painters of positive belief such as Rothko, Newman, and Still, much is at stake in the general fight over whether or not truth, knowledge, spirituality, morality, transcendence, and cultural coherence and continuity retain or lose their traditional prestige. All eight of the theorists treated so far in this study are highly relevant to the larger overall debate, and in my view, all of them are effective in warding off total scepticism. An important factor in the formation of largely positive beliefs by the abstract expressionists was the powerful contemporary influence of Sartre and Jung, and it is therefore necessary, in the next chapter, to round out the background picture by trying to pin down just what it was in Sartre and Jung that stimulated Rothko, Newman, and Still, and brought distinctive new coloration into their particular visions of the sublime--and thereby brings new elements into my own working theory of the sublime, formulated at the end of the next chapter.

### Three - Indirect Sublimicisim in Sartre and Jung

The general impact of Nietzsche's ideas on the abstract expressionists was very great. It is usually, and correctly, assumed that, after Nietzsche, the two contemporary thinkers exerting the greatest influence on Rothko, Newman, and Still were Sartre and Jung. Sartre far outweighed other twentieth century existential philosophers because he popularized his ideas, giving them compression and clarity. Also, Sartre's ethical imperatives were stronger, a factor which made him more congenial to the American spirit. Kierkegaard should be placed after Sartre in strength of influence, but his impact was greatly diminished by his intensely Christianized vision and his uncompromising irrationalism. Heidegger's impact was felt much later than that of Sartre, and had little influence on the thinking of the founders of abstract expressionism. Jung eclipsed Freud as an influence in art and literature because his essential categories embraced spiritual and aesthetic values in opposition to Freud's more bleak and narrow emphasis on sex, neurosis, and materialistic determinism. This is not to say that Freud did not loom large, but rather that his erotic obsessions were both appreciated and incorporated into the more broadly hopeful and humanistic perspective of Jung. Myth theory was in general a powerful stream affecting all artists, and it may be treated as an adjunct to Jung, who so fully absorbed the various thinkers advancing the claims for myth.

Sartre's most popular essay, "Existentialism is a Humanism," certainly presents a logical starting point for a brief consideration of his ideas. This essay may be conveniently found in Walter Kaufmann's Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre. Sartre begins by restating his basic claim from Being and Nothingness that unlike the other objects and creatures of nature, man is a unique form of being whose essence cannot be known ahead of time. Man enjoys so much freedom of choice, so much creative freedom to shape his own nature, that his essential features cannot be established until his choices are exercised in the on-going processes of the life

experience. In Sartre's words, "man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world--and defines himself afterwards."<sup>1</sup> Man is nothing at the start, "he is what he wills" and "is nothing else but that which he makes of himself."<sup>2</sup> Sartre moves promptly to his ethical imperative by deducing that as a creature of free choice, "man is responsible for himself," having "the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders. And we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men." It is inescapable that "in choosing for himself he chooses for all men" because in each choice he creates "an image of man such as he believes he ought to be."<sup>3</sup> It is not surprising that the abstract expressionist painters responded to these stirring declarations of Sartre. Painters welcome the idea that their lived choices as artists stand not on the edge of philosophy but at the core, a point of view reinforced by Nietzsche. Sartre strengthens his ethical stance by proclaiming that "nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all," that "In fashioning myself I fashion man," and that we must always ask (in a totally Kantian manner) "what would happen if everyone did as one is doing?"<sup>4</sup> Even if most interpreters of Sartre have not made the point, it is nevertheless true that Sartre's thought gains one of its best features in this striking ethical proximity to Kant. While criticizing Kant for not recognizing how often abstract principles break down in the press of difficult choices, Sartre specifically declares his agreement with Kant that "a certain form of . . . morality is universal."<sup>5</sup> To properly understand the excitements and dedications of the abstract expressionists we must reconstruct the heady intoxication, the artistic enthusiasm, with which the American artists in the forties and fifties greeted the principles of Sartre, steeped as they were in individualism, moral seriousness, value theory, and creative freedom.

Sartre offered also a tragic vision to supplement that of Nietzsche, with his tragic sense that man has no divine sponsor and is forlorn, that the duty to choose for all mankind carries with it an enormous burden of anxiety which cannot be lifted because we cannot shift any of the burden to God or to preestablished human nature, cannot escape our own total responsibility for our virtues, vices, and passions. In Sartre's famous words "We are left alone without excuse," and are "condemned to be

free.”<sup>6</sup> Sartrean despair has a further basis in that each existent controls only a small portion of the world and cannot be confident that social forces and social groups will act responsibly--thus the individual must “act without hope,” and Sartre drives home his point by declaring that no one should place great hope in the Communist party because we “do not know where the Russian revolution will lead.”<sup>7</sup> The American artists were thoroughly Sartrean as they became fiercely engaged in life choices, in the activism of art, demanded by Sartre: “Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing but the sum of his actions” and “no other than a series of undertakings.”<sup>8</sup> If there is any doubt that Sartre followed Nietzsche in taking art as the model for life, Sartre dispels it in his assertion that “moral choice is comparable to the construction of a work of art” and “There is this in common between art and morality, that in both we have to do with creation and invention.”<sup>9</sup>

Not enough attention has been given to Sartre’s insistence that the bed-rock foundation of existentialism is the cogito of Descartes, because “This theory alone is compatible with the dignity of man, it is the only one which does not make man into an object.”<sup>10</sup> Sartre notes that the absolute and free commitment of Descartes to his cogito has the true character of all existential commitment, and in this sense “free being” is also “absolute being.”<sup>11</sup> Newman was vehement about a reasoned metaphysical content for art, and so was Still. Irrationality did not appeal to them, but Sartrean rationalism did, with its new version of the cogito. Husserl and Sartre both agree that their philosophies are a working out of the deeper implications of the Cartesian revolution.<sup>12</sup>

Offering another principle which would encourage painters to turn inward, Sartre declares: “we do not believe in progress” because “man is always the same, facing a situation which is always changing, and choice remains always a choice in the situation.”<sup>13</sup> Sartrean ethics validates the selves of others in that the cogito assumes others and “the intimate discovery of myself is at the same time the revelation of the other as a freedom which confronts man”; thus we find ourselves in a world of “inter-subjectivity,” and “It is in this world that man has to decide what he is and what others are.”<sup>14</sup>

While much has been made of the atheism of Sartre, it is important to understand that the existence or non-existence of God is not a crucial issue. Sartre's position is that even if God exists, He can play no role in human thinking or choosing. As evidence, Sartre effectively observes that even if one hears some mysterious voice, the individual must decide if the voice is or is not angelic, and even if religious signs are given, "still, it is I myself, in every case, who have to interpret the signs."<sup>15</sup> Agreeing with Nietzsche, Sartre observes that human values are made by persons, not by God, and that "even if God existed that would make no difference" because man is abandoned and "there is no legislator but himself."<sup>16</sup> Sartre lays a basis for an existential subjective sublime (leaning on Kant and Nietzsche): "Man is all the time outside of himself: it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist. Since man is thus self-surpassing, and can grasp objects only in relation to his self-surpassing, he is himself the heart and center of his transcendence."<sup>17</sup> By such logic, Sartre (as well as Nietzsche) encouraged the abstract expressionists to have prophetic hopes about reaching transcendence via subjective assertions of value. Significantly, Sartre (agreeing with Nietzsche) rejects any merely human humanism: "an existentialist will never take man as the end, since man is still to be determined."<sup>18</sup>

While the rather vague intuitional ethics of existentialism has generally been seen as a weakness, Sartre does specify three transpersonal and more or less universal moral judgments that an existent may make: that others deceive themselves and choose in error; that it is morally wrong not to see "freedom as the foundation of all values" and not to "will freedom for freedom's sake"; and that it is wrong not to see that "the freedom of others depends upon our own."<sup>19</sup>

One of the better books on existentialism is the collection of essays Existential Philosophers: Kierkegaard to Merleau Ponty, with an introduction by the editor George Schrader, who finds a permanent truth and value in existential ideas, noting that "Existential philosophy is evidently supported by a deeply-seated concern on the part of twentieth century man" and that (keeping in mind the theme of the alienated soul from Plato to Heidegger) "The quest for knowledge and certainty is the manifestation of an urgent and deeply seated human need. It is supported by an existential concern and

subject to the paralyzing effects of anxiety.”<sup>20</sup>

Schrader helps to lay a foundation for an existential sublime: “Dread as the experience of the contingency of being is an ever-present possibility for awakening in man a sense of transcendence. . . . Thus to be aware of one’s own being is to have some intimation of death as the possibility of not being.” Furthermore, to be aware of anything as being “is to be aware of its sheer presence as such and to marvel at the fact that it is something rather than nothing at all. It is with the sense of awe, wonder, and mystery that all inquiry begins.”<sup>21</sup> It is not surprising that “being” could have a sublime component in that it is, in the Kantian sense, a unifying concept of reason representing something vast and baffling to the understanding and the imagination, and also something destructive in that human mortality is entailed. Schrader’s suggestions point to a sublime aspect for everyday life and particular things, but only if there is ground for awe and mystery.

These Sartrean existential concepts are relevant to the programs of Rothko, Newman, and Still, who all felt a strong but secularized moral imperative; viewed their works as ethically instrumental; rejected religious, philosophic, and ethical systems; insisted on radical individualized freedom; insisted on the artistic postulation of values; and sought a sublime subject rooted in the immediacy of lived experience. Existential ideas were in the air, and these painters found them compatible with their own instincts and inclinations.<sup>22</sup>

The same can be said for new concepts of myth, especially the myth elements incorporated into Jungian psychology. Jung himself was the beneficiary of a rich collection of seminal studies in the theory of myth. Sir James Frazer’s The Golden Bough was widely read, focusing on various European myths of the sacred mistletoe associated with priest-kings upon whose succession depended the health of a society. Jung and others also benefited from the myth theory of Ernst Cassirer plus a large body of important works in anthropology which focused on myth as a key to the essential structure of primitive societies. It is reasonable to single out Jung because his theories were especially welcomed by artists and by theoreticians in the humanities due in part to his broad cultural perspective, and due also to his colorful and dramatic theory of archetypes, which allowed him (like Sartre) to popularize his concepts and give them

the impact of a general cultural saturation. Almost all interpreters of abstract expressionism list Jung (and Nietzsche) among the most powerful influences on this school. Thus far the studies of abstract expressionism have called attention to the importance of Jung, but have given only a few sentences or paragraphs to the essential features of his thought. However, a more thorough but condensed description is required if we are to locate the deepest correlations between Jungianism and the works of Rothko, Newman, and Still. Since Jung did not produce any comprehensive essay summarizing his concepts, the summary must be pieced together from several key works: The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, Symbols of Transformation, Psychology and Alchemy, and Aion.<sup>23</sup>

Coming closest to general outlines of his system in The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, Jung declares: "In addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche . . . there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of preexistent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents."<sup>24</sup> Jung adds that "there are as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life," and that probably the archetypes "are the unconscious images of the instincts themselves, in other words . . . patterns of instinctual behavior."<sup>25</sup>

Jung explains that one of the chief archetypes is the Anima, which is both man's dream of the ideal woman and also man's intuition that he contains female qualities that must be integrated in a mature self. The Anima stirs with power when any woman (first the mother) makes an unusual impression on a man; the Anima is symbolized chiefly by male/female pairs and deities; and men are compelled to project this image over and over.<sup>26</sup> The Anima tends to defy conventional sexual morality because of the strength of the psychic energy gathered around it.<sup>27</sup>

The God archetype is raised very high in the Jungian paradigm, along with the figure of Christ (a strong difference between Jung and Freud). In Jung's view the God intuition "identifies the deity with the numinosity of the unconscious," and all God

images express "the unified wholeness of man."<sup>28</sup> The sense of numinosity in the self is its sense of divinity, and the God concept implies the wholeness of self in part because it is the psychologically necessary construct for assuming the unity of the cosmos, that intuition which the Greeks first began to clothe in logos rationality. In Jungian thought, the integration of the self always depends on the elevation of the archetypes to the level of rational comprehension. Reason, however, becomes harmful if it denies or represses the archetypal passions. A genuine reciprocal dialectic must develop between reason and instinct—precisely as Nietzsche taught that the Dionysian and Apollonian powers must bow to each other, while the Apollonian spirit establishes the essential order and coherence. Jung believes, however, that Christianity succeeded only for a time in a wholesome spiritualization of the dark instincts. It was able to do this, Jung declares, because it had sexual male/female symbols and other powerful archetypal images at its center.<sup>29</sup> Christ, Jung assumes, was a splendid hero archetype who "exemplifies the archetype of self."<sup>30</sup> As an archetype, the self is our instinctive passion for what Yeats called "Unity of Being," our necessary obsession with wholeness and integration. The very fact that the Christ symbol called out the primitive images of fish, serpent, and buried Logos proves that Christology successfully attached to the underlying archetypes.<sup>31</sup> Had Christianity not misconstrued these symbols, it could have pointed properly to the unknowable essence of an incarnate God.

Unfortunately, however, the rational side of the Christian mind, in Jung's rather Nietzschean analysis, made some fatal errors, chief of which was the locating of divinity outside the self in an external God, external Christ, and external rituals and sacraments. If an unconscious value is removed from the self and located outside, that sacred content "forfeits its own life."<sup>32</sup> To Jung it is extremely dangerous for a culture to take this wrong turn. If the rationalized, spiritualized theology of Christendom (all to the good) is paralyzed by this outward projection of value into Church forms or the Bible itself, then Christianity becomes a hollow shell and the psyche is turned over to the buried powers of primitive barbarism, and if Christian forms cannot really dwell in the inner man, the inner man cannot be touched and changed.<sup>33</sup> Christianity, then, has failed in its deepest purpose, making it almost impossible for the modern Western

psyche to achieve integration, since "It is the prime task of all education to convey the archetype of the God-image . . . to the conscious mind."<sup>34</sup>

In Jung's thought polarity plays a central role: "the self is a complex oppositorum precisely because there can be no reality without polarity."<sup>35</sup> The most obvious example is paired male and female sex symbols whose meaning often is the healing beneficence of a proper union between the masculine consciousness and the feminine unconscious—an interpretation showing that Jung, unlike Freud, avoids narrowly sexual categories.<sup>36</sup> The Anima also functions as an archetype for the life force, carrying the sense that life has meaning, and pointing to Jung's principle that any powerful intuition of deep meaning will always call up, always attach itself to very ancient primordial forms.<sup>37</sup> Jung urges not a return to the past but a penetration into the deep places of a living psyche which cannot help but resurrect ancient patterns of unchanging psychic necessities—"Christian civilization has proved hollow to a terrifying degree: it is all veneer, but the inner man has remained untouched and therefore unchanged."<sup>38</sup> The polarities postulated by Jung entail a permanent awareness of mystery, of uncertainty, of concealedness, which the Enlightenment foolishly and dangerously attempted to remove, Jung declares, adding that wholesome religious dogma must always embrace paradox, the loss of which, in a religion, brings spiritual impoverishment.<sup>39</sup> Polarity retains the proper and wholesome sense of awe and mystery, and Jung comments that in religious matters "I . . . prefer the precious gift of doubt, for the reason that it does not violate the virginity of things beyond our ken."<sup>40</sup>

Jung, much like Nietzsche, combines symbol with myth: "Myth is the primordial language natural to these psychic processes, and no intellectual formulation comes anywhere near the richness and expressiveness of mythical imagery"; thus mythology is a "treasure-house of archetypal forms."<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche called the crucified Christ the most sublime symbol, and Jung observes that "The Christ symbol is of the greatest psychological importance in so far as it is perhaps the most highly developed and differentiated symbol of the self, apart from the figure of Buddha"—although Christology, Jung adds, does not yet include the full desiderated richness of symbolic

efficacy.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps Jung believes that the Christ symbol has not yet been adequately correlated to sex or nature, to subjectivity, and to aesthetics. Jung's interpretation of Christ in terms of existential integration of the self might have encouraged Newman to undertake his Stages of the Cross series, and encouraged Rothko to undertake the chapel project at Rice University, though Jews in general concede that Jesus is the greatest of the prophets. Jung again comes close to Nietzsche in a comment relevant to the Christ figure and other hero models: "What we seek in visible human form is not man, but the superman, the hero or god, that quasi-human being who symbolizes the ideas, forms, and forces which grip and mold the soul."<sup>43</sup> Rothko, Newman, and Still certainly could have been encouraged by Jung to locate a fresh sense of myth and heroism in the existential deep structures of the artist's own psyche.

Of importance to the theory of myth and symbol are Jung's claims about sun, fire, and number symbols—sun is the most inevitable symbol for God; fire-making is a symbol of sexuality; the number three has strong psychic suggestivity including the masculine principle; and the number four suggests the feminine and wholeness.<sup>44</sup> From a Jungian perspective one might consider sun, light, fire, trinities, and quaternities in the formal designs of Rothko, Newman, and Still. For Jung the soul can be elevated and perfected in subjectivity only if there are operative symbols and myths which activate a limited set of universal archetypal images bound to basic instincts. Nietzsche would probably agree to some extent, but would want more space and freedom for future novel psychic obsessions. Jung follows Nietzsche in declaring that "supreme values reside in the soul."<sup>45</sup>

To round out Jung's paradigm, a few of the important archetypes should be named other than God, self, warrior-hero, Anima, and Wise Old Man: Animus is woman's vision of ideal man plus her own rationality and masculinity; Shadow is the inner power of evil, which we must not deny; Mask or Persona is the impulse toward social conformity; and Earth Mother is the attraction to Nature.

Jung offers, then, a limited set of archetypes which are activated by a limited set of universal psychic obsessions, archetypes which enjoy permanence and autonomy, and also bring danger in that each is like a spaceless inner tornado of energy and desire, difficult to integrate into an harmonious self, and capable of destruction if not restrained

in an ordered whole. The pattern is quite similar to Nietzsche's Dionysus and Apollo, but elaborated through modern depth psychology.<sup>46</sup> The important thing to keep in mind (and the thing not stressed by those who connect Jung to the abstract expressionists) is that the redeeming theory of psychic unity through archetypes must be set beside Jung's analysis of the hollowness of the modern soul, Jung's version of that sense of prevailing spiritual bankruptcy and wasteland which was shared by Rothko, Newman, and Still. The retreat of the sublime activates an agonized desire for its renewal. In a time of spiritual poverty, the psyche, Jung declares, instinctively searches for depth, a journey most often symbolized by a descent into dark water.<sup>47</sup> This may be relevant to the profoundly dark panels in the Rothko chapel in Houston.

In terms of theory of the sublime, Jungian psychology offers several areas for potential transcendent break-through: into the numinous aura of psychic depth, into a highest integration of self, and into a set of timeless psychological universals. Obviously the turbulence and destructive danger of the archetypes link Jung to the dynamical sublime. Obviously his archetypal symbols yield the cultural order constituting the Nietzschean sublime, and probably Jung displays sufficient majesty of thought to qualify for sublimity of idea. His archetypes are somewhat like Kant's sublime ideas: unifying concepts of reason allowing us to handle cognitively some rugged powers baffling to understanding. Since Jung's field of relevance is wholly psychological, not theological, he occupies the zone of the existential sublime, to which he adds timeless forms that link the modern self to the primitive self. To the extent that Jung offers a natural supernaturalism he has links with the romantic sublime, but for him nature is only one of a set of archetypal objects of desire. While rationalism is at times too much depreciated by Jung, the philosophic man is caught by the Wise Old Man archetype, and Jungian salvation is impossible until the rational mind properly understands the forces in the unconscious. Jung's rationalism aligns him with Kant, Nietzsche, and Sartre, but he would vigorously reject any version of atheism. He speaks strongly not for God but for the idea of God. Jung resembles Kant, Longinus, and Nietzsche in that intense passions underlie the sublime experience, yet a subjective triumph of Apollonian reason gives the strongest sense of elevation, exaltation, and sacredness. Since the regulative ideas of God, symbol, myth, instincts, and integrated

self--like space, time, cause, attribute, mode, and relation--are brilliant human creations, studies of the sublime should give more emphasis to what we might call the brute sublimity of a strong idea, clearly recognized by Longinus, Kant, and Nietzsche.<sup>48</sup>

Even though Rothko, Newman, and Still may not have pursued systematically the thought of Sartre and Jung, they clearly did absorb from their surrounding milieu the existential attitude and the new conceptions of myth in relation to culture. These two background streams come together as these painters seek a new foundation for myth grounded in the immediate existential condition.

Taking a wide perspective based on these investigations of Sartre and Jung and on the preceding explanations of theory of the sublime in Longinus, Burke, Nietzsche, Kant, Weiskel, Crowther, Lyotard, and Ferguson (and prior to detailed approaches to Rothko, Newman, and Still) it is necessary to sketch briefly an adequate working theory of the sublime. All these theorists allow us to postulate that an authentic positive sublime experience requires a sense of astonishment at something extraordinary and grand which poses a difficulty in comprehension, resulting in some transcendental ascent, some threshold crossing, that carries feelings of awe, elevation, and exaltation. The astonishment can be either hot or cool, either emotive, or cerebral and calmly meditated. Obviously something grand in this sense could exist in nature, in art, in the supernatural, in human character and conduct, in historical events, in grand ideas and projects. Following Crowther, this definition modifies Kant to allow intrinsic sublimity for external items such as vistas of nature or art objects, does not rule out Kantian sublimity through ideas of reason, and assumes that the sublimity will have to register in the self as a subjective comprehension. Kant covered a huge amount of the relevant ground by recognizing a mathematical sublime of size and distance plus a dynamical sublime of force and energy.

In terms of a required transcendental ascent, obviously there are many possible levels and types of transcendence falling between raw perception and mystical union with deity. Also, penetration to depth must be recognized along with elevation to height, if the requisite conditions are met; in both cases, a major threshold is crossed. The postulation of some shock, check, and difficulty, joined to something complex and ungraspable, differentiates the sublime from the smoother and harmonious mode of the

beautiful. However it might be possible for a beautiful thing to have concealed depths which could activate a sense of the sublime, and if this happens, perhaps the best explanation is to assume two different modes of perception in close proximity, both relatively disinterested. Myths as well as personal, social, and historical narratives may have sufficient power to attain the sublime, including narratives of sections of the story of art or philosophy, along with other cultural narratives, such as the story of science. Also, we should agree with Longinus, Kant, and Nietzsche that a raw idea can be noble and sublime.

A zone of transcendence occurs in the threshold crossing from particular to Platonic universal, or from the sensate to the aeonic, as preferred by Crowther. For Nietzsche, moments of crossing come when the will to power ascends to the domain of symbol and myth, when man projects superman, when chaos is elevated to order and coherence. For Lyotard crossing opens into possible future Utopian visions of a moral ought. We should recognize a moral sublime, not only in heroic and astonishing moral choices of individuals, but in the difficult threshold crossing from selfishness to moral law, and in the elevation to general public good intended by art, philosophy, and criticism. Since the decision of how to spend each hour is a moral choice, there is no way to isolate fully any sphere of experience, conduct, or thought from a moral component. In a general sense, most art objects are symbols of the good, even though we approach them in a relatively disinterested manner.

Just as there are many possible zones of transcendence, there are multiple possibilities for shock and difficulty. Burke pointed to intellectual difficulty and the jolt of terror; Kant to a strain on inner faculties; Nietzsche to the shock and check to the will offered by the meaningless cruelty and destruction of the Dionysiac state of nature; Weiskel to overloads of signifier or signified and to psychic trauma; and Lyotard to the shock of collapsed social narratives and collapsed epistemological confidence. However, a sufficient shock could come more modestly from seeing some normally mundane thing in a surprising new way--the shock of a recognition scene, assuming that there are accompanying feelings of awe and wonder. Essentially, a sublime experience is possible when there is a threshold zone between the self and a significant Other.

An adequate theory of the sublime must recognize a variety of modes, an anatomy

of modes. It must be recognized that there will be modal overlap—just as we would find in any other discourse area. For instance, an existential sublime might or might not overlap with a religious sublime or a negative sublime. Positive modes of the sublime should include the ideational, the religious, the moral, the Burkean-Gothic, the Kantian (a version of the ideational), the Nietzschean, the romantic, the existential, the Jungian-mythic, the ontological, the noble, and the sublime of light/color. Among negative modes of the sublime would be the comic, the ironic, the counter, the mock, and the rhetorical (in the sense of merely rhetorical). This is not to imply that these modes would have no positive values, because often they do. Negativity is used in the sense that these modes often work to undermine, and are negative when this is the dominant concern. This list is tentative and not fully comprehensive. One could name a psychological sublime, except that almost all the modes have a strong psychological element. However in Weiskel's sense one could posit a "merely" psychological sublime.<sup>49</sup> A political sublime could well be named (either positive or negative) but I would see this as a sub-type of the ideational. Perhaps in the future scholars will produce a reasonably comprehensive anatomy of modes of the sublime.

As we have seen, the ideational sublime of raw idea can be enhanced by artistic style. A good example (other than Kant's Isis Temple passage) would be this quatrain of Emily Dickinson:

The Brain is deeper than the sea—  
 For--hold them--Blue to Blue--  
 The one the other will absorb--  
 As Sponges--Buckets--do--

The ability of the human brain to hold an infinite number of concepts and thereby to absorb all ocean life may be seen as a sublime idea, reinforced by the stylistic compression and bold comparisons of blue, bucket, and sponge. The most valuable direction for treating the sublime in Rothko, Newman, and Still is through the ideational sublime intensified by style. However, other modes are also crucial. From a global perspective, the religious sublime would loom very large.<sup>50</sup> The moral sublime can be grounded partly on sacrificial human conduct, partly on the raw sublimity of moral concepts, partly on the threshold crossing from selfish sensate life to the higher realm

of moral law and idealism, partly on the ubiquity of ethicality, and partly on the general intention of artists to constitute a public good. Lyotard's sceptical mode involves a strong moral sublime in that the thrown-out founding phrases of a culture establish a moral ought. As ethical and ideational factors complicate the art work, the resultant difficulty (as Crowther emphasizes) increases sublimicist effects and values. Nietzsche gives high place to sublime moral fictions in the integration of a culture. Also, it would be foolish to dismiss Plato's belief that all parts of creation and human life come under the hierarchical dominance of the concept of the Good. The moral sublime obviously overlaps with the ideational in that moral choice is usually based on ideas.

The Nietzschean sublime is distinctive in connecting will-to-power to the artistic fictions of art proper and also to science and philosophy viewed as art constructs, and distinctive too in the supreme role of myth in presenting the sublime art symbols to culture. Nietzsche deserves credit for realizing that entire cultural projects, at their highest, will be sublime projects. Implicit in Nietzsche's view (and also noted by Longinus and Kant) is the idea that political and historical conflicts can be a ground for sublime experience.

The romantic sublime may be differentiated by its emphasis on the role of imagination (not reason) in bridging over the threshold between self and the cosmic unity of nature, with stress on the wild grandeurs of nature.<sup>51</sup> The Burkean-Gothic mode comes into play when there is a dominance of terror and pain, both bodily and psychological.<sup>52</sup> An existential sublime should also be recognized. We have noted Crowther's suggestion that Burke's emphasis on bodily emotional states and threats to life warrants the treating of Burke's model as an existential sublime, and we have noted Crowther's thesis that contemporary shocks and terrors in films and television can provoke a rejuvenation of vital faculties, counteract boredom, and engender existential courage. Sartre allows for an existential sublime in the threshold crossing into transcendent future perfected selfhood, and also into the moral sublime of responsibility for the choices of all other people. There is a sense in which a Jungian sublime would be existential, in that the divine Other must be located within the individual psyche and its immediate life.

The specific idea of the mythic sublime was inaugurated by Nietzsche and attached

by Jung to archetype theory. The Christian story of sacred history still has formidable mythic power in Protestant and Catholic circles. Cassirer has widened the concept of operative myth to include various secular and social narratives. For any mythic sublime, a threshold is crossed between the temporal and the enduring, the myth being construed as a timeless symbolic form that rules over the temporal and finite. Lyotard believes that the grand narratives we could call mythic have all collapsed. Therefore the sublimicist sensibility must be kept alive while we await some new founding phrases that would legitimate a new acceptable myth. So far, Lyotard is not being connected to the mythical sublime, but the connection should be made. There is a basis for one kind of ontological sublime in Heidegger's analysis of Being, and in other thinkers who emphasize wonderment in the face of the beingness of the world.<sup>53</sup> Also the ontological reciprocities in the thought of Crowther make a place for some difficulties and tensions which, as Crowther sees, can be resolved in a sublimicist manner. That is, the ontological realm is implicated in the synthesizing sublimicist theory of Crowther.

The modes of the noble sublime and the color/light sublime are also important, especially so for approaching Rothko, Newman, and Still. Recognized by Kant, the noble sublime occurs in a calm and measured manner, involving not hot passions but a cool and rational wonder about something overwhelming. Kant (as did Longinus) ranks the contemplative noble sublime higher than the intense passional varieties. The measured coolness of Rothko and Newman aligns them with the noble sublime. Burke clearly perceives the sublime of light/color, giving favored status to dark and light contrast and to rich dark colors. The sublime of light/color attaches to complex movements of luminism in Western art, and attaches to Turner as well as to the color-field abstract expressionists.<sup>54</sup>

While Crowther's conception of the sublime is highly positive, he has not been as much concerned with the many modes of the sublime as he has with broad patterns shared by most of the positive modes. Crowther has focused on what the sublime experience is good for, which is reflected in his emphasis on human needs, on the highly self-conscious state of vivid appreciation in aesthetic and sublime experience, on the rich enhancements generated by the sublime experience, and on the necessary bondings to culture, morality, philosophy, and existential embodiment. More than any

other theorist, Crowther reveals the fullest perception of the nature, scope, and special value of the sublime—an essentially philosophic project, and while he recognizes the attractions of negative modes, he finds ways to attach them to positive values so as to weaken the presumed scepticism.

Negative modes of the sublime must be recognized, though they belong more to postmodern thought than to the modernist mind-set of Rothko, Newman, and Still. However, their sublime subjects have a negative thrust in that as paintings declare certain values, they war against others. Furthermore, the sublime, involving as it does an internal stress, an overcoming of difficulty, contains a movement of negation which can be utilized in broadly negative ways. Among negative modes may be included the ironic, the mock, the counter, the comic, and the rhetorical. We have seen Weiskel's claim that the contemporary materialistic and sceptical mind will require that the sublime perspective be joined to irony, that even when some transcendental Other is tentatively envisioned, the element of dubiety will be maintained—as if we would say that we hope there are universal moral laws but might be wrong, or as if a modern lover would say to his beloved that he thinks he loves her, though there is an element of doubt, or as if we would say that even though there is no God, we will defend the honor of the idea of God. An ironic sublime would operate somewhat along these lines. The imprisonment followed by release, the saving kind of positive sublime when the difficulty yields to a resolution generating awe and exaltation, the overwhelming entity yielding an intensified awareness and enhancement of cognitions, faculty powers, and at-homeness in the world, all these positive joyous vectors would be curtailed in the ironic sublime, not eliminated but diminished. It is not surprising that an ironic model would be offered in a time that talks so much of the retreat of the gods and the rejection of all higher idealistic worlds, and in an age so devoted to the critical intellect. Even with the first generation abstract expressionists, we should keep irony in mind, since Rothko lists it as one element in his works, and there is irony in Clyfford Still's program. The neo-geo painter Philip Taaffe has stated that people today desperately need the sublime, that we are living in "a sublimity-deprived society," and that contemporary painters might choose to "construct a mock-sublime to summon the sublime by indirection, because teasing or entertaining the sublime is just another way of aspiring toward sublimity. I'm interested in a sublimity which encourages laughter and delight in the face of profound

uncertainty.”<sup>55</sup> Taaffe has in view the ironic, mock, and comic sublime. While Nietzsche separated the comic from the sublime, Longinus allowed for a comic sublime in his remark that laughter counts as a strong emotion. Raimondo Modiano observes that *Don Quixote* was recognized in the eighteenth century as a comic sublime epic, which, in theory, would graft the sublime to low and ordinary subjects: “This negation of the sensible by the supersensible which constitutes the sublime is in turn rejected by the comic which reaffirms the objective over the subjective.”<sup>56</sup> Partly explaining the political and Marxist interest in the sublime, Gary Shapiro points to Marx’s theory that the final phase of some political-social world form will be a collapse into farce, so that a comic sublime perspective can elucidate the farce and encourage a counter-movement to a radical new social structure.<sup>57</sup>

The rhetorical sublime becomes an inevitable mode when so many thinkers are attracted to the belief that language exerts total control over everything human, including all of our sense of self-identity and our formulations of epistemology, ontology, and science. We can never say anything except what language allows us to say. In this model, language is the god that creates all aspects of the human world, everything is an arbitrary linguistic construct, a creation out of nothing. In such a paradigm, all sublime effects would become merely linguistic, merely rhetorical. There could be a language of sublimity, but it would have to be seen as a word game, not as any kind of ascent to higher realities above the linguistic-social order. In my opinion, such a thesis can yield no more than a mock sublime. The possibility of any real transcendence now or in the future is rejected. If we think that sublimicist language can achieve no more than a small fireworks display of words, then we would see little reason even to enjoy the fireworks. Of course truth, metaphysics, and sublimity would be back in business if the claim is made that word games can tell the truth about non-linguistic structures—a position which (considering the ten major theorists treated) would be held by Longinus, Burke, Kant, Sartre, Jung, Crowther, and possibly Weiskel, but not by Nietzsche, and apparently not by Ferguson or Lyotard. There is no sense at all in Rothko, Newman, and Still that their sublime subjects have no external reality and are no more than linguistic fancies.

This over-view of the definition and modes of the sublime should be

supplemented (for a treatment of painters) by a reminder of some of the specific forms and patterns singled out by Longinus and Burke for expressive value when joined to a proper sublime subject. Longinus offers organic unity, silence, question and answer patterns, alternations between one and many, seriality, infusions of past into present, metaphor, hyperbole, strong passions, and cool thoughts. Burke offers *terribilia*, obscurity, darkness, difficulty, light, strong dark colors, emptiness, privation, silence, solitude, modifications in power, vast size (we may add scale), strong verticals, jaggedness, ruggedness, and one item not previously mentioned, penetration into depth.<sup>58</sup>

This working theory of the sublime is, to some extent, a kind of summation of the thinkers covered in part one of my study. To this summation should be added a few general comments on Sartre and Jung. They reinforce some of the general arguments that undergird my study in the following ways: they supplement the wave of positive philosophic affirmation that characterizes the idealism of Longinus, Burke, Kant, Nietzsche, Crowther, and some emphases of Lyotard. The materialism connected to Freud is resisted by the more spiritual and humanistic framework of Jung, who helped to encourage hope and belief in Rothko, Newman, and Still. Jung's sense of transcendence and religiosity probably gave confidence and universal depth-psychology content to the sublimicist aims of the three painters. Sartre also postulated universal human conditions and offered his own humanistic paradigm with several threshold crossings to higher ground. Sartre proclaimed his philosophy as an optimism which gave each person maximum freedom, yet also charged each life with maximum moral seriousness and force, so that the long tradition of the moral sublime traced through Longinus, Kant, and Nietzsche receives new life and strength through Jung and Sartre, as does the ideational sublime receive energy from the rationalism of Sartre and the archetypal ideas of Jung. In this grouping, Nietzsche stands alone as construing metaphysics and morals as fictions, yet he too makes optimistic and universalist claims, and even approaches the traditional Western center in his concept of necessary fictions. The point is that the pervasive affirmation and spirituality that have dominated the accumulating theory of the sublime gained some new psychological and philosophic stimulus in Sartre and Jung, a blending that deeply marked the thought climate of the age of abstract expressionism, a blending that promotes art historical efforts to

understand and appreciate Rothko, Newman, and Still by taking their own ideas seriously in terms of transcendence, spirit, and affirmative philosophy, allowing us to meet these painters on their own chosen ground and not wrongly to relegate them to some wrongly conceived “obsolescent” stretch of time now rendered irrelevant by postmodern doubt. And thus we may now turn, in part two, to the elucidation of exactly what their chosen ground consisted of, in relation to various thresholds of transcendence and various modalities of the sublime.

**PART TWO**

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**THE SUBLIME IN ROTHKO, NEWMAN, AND STILL**

#### Four - The Sublime in Rothko

The general procedure for the specific treatment of Rothko, Newman, and Still will be first to consider their own statements, then turn to secondary sources, and then examine some particular works. In the case of Rothko, the Tate Gallery published a group of his writings as part of the exhibition catalogue Mark Rothko: 1903-1970.<sup>1</sup>

In 1938 Rothko, co-authoring a brief catalogue preface with Bernard Braddon, states that what the abstract expressionists shared was “their capacity to see objects and events as though for the first time, free from the accretions of habit and divorced from the conventions of a thousand years of painting.”<sup>2</sup> While showing in this attack on tradition a thrust of the counter-sublime, the deeper tone is that of a raw existential present, suggesting the influence of Sartre, whose concept of total freedom includes freedom from past traditional restraints. In 1943 Rothko writes an important letter to the art editor Edward Jewell, first declaring that his The Rape of Persephone tried to express the enduring “abstract concept” of the timeless “essence of the myth,” and his The Syrian Bull also offers “a new interpretation of an archaic image” on the assumption that “Since art is timeless, the significant rendition of a symbol, no matter how archaic, has as full validity today as the archaic symbol had then.” Obviously we see here the Jungian point of view of archetypal symbolic concepts that are ever new, plus the important idea that the myth is reconstructed on the basis of immediate existential conditions, as Rothko makes clear when he asserts that his new versions of the myth (conveyed abstractly) involve “unprecedented distortions.”<sup>3</sup> This conception of the mythical sublime requires an existential base. Also noteworthy is the emphasis on “abstract concept” because the abstract expressionists set themselves off from other

movements by emphasizing their ideational subject matter. For this reason their work falls primarily under the ideational sublime, with considerable overlays into other modes. Their “expressionism” does involve strong passions, but the passions are aroused chiefly by, called out by, ideas of an impersonal and eternal sublime subject—an emphasis setting them off from German expressionism.

Rothko adds that these painters see art as “an adventure into an unknown world” full of “risks,” using the free “imagination” to cause the audience to “see the world our way—not his way.”<sup>4</sup> This adventure language suggests the striking and extraordinary domain of the sublime, and the sublimity of the imagination (as opposed to the sublimity of nature) was proposed by Longinus: “Wherefore not even the entire universe suffices for the thought and contemplation within the reach of the human mind, but our imaginations often pass beyond the bounds of space,” and these subjective extensions of “what is striking, and great” allow us to “discern the purpose of our birth.”<sup>5</sup> Rothko’s sense of great “risk” has behind it the daring of Nietzsche’s vision, plus the Sartrean risk of choosing.<sup>6</sup> And Nietzsche’s model of a total sublime art project imposed on society by the artist’s will is a possible influence on Rothko’s plan to make the viewers “see the world our way.” We should invoke the Nietzschean sublime to explain this prophetic strain (of using will to change world) in Rothko, Newman, and Still—but of course there are other background elements, such as cubism and Mondrian, and the general modernist search for newness of style.

Rothko’s letter goes on to state that “We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. . . . We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.”<sup>7</sup> Rothko is moving toward a sublimity of scale in the absolutist flavor of “unequivocal,” and his ideational paradigm is manifest in the terms “complex thought” and “truth.” The abstract expressionists do not turn postmodern by celebrating illusion and rejecting truth. At the end of his letter Rothko drives home his sense of a sublime project: “There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.”<sup>8</sup> “Tragic” brings in Nietzsche’s myth theory to blend with this Jungian flavor. It is important to note that Rothko, while

accepting Nietzsche's model of will and tragic vision, does not accept Nietzsche's rejection of truth and universal value. The abstract expressionists saw their work as penetrations to the axis of reality and to enduring truth, not as comforting necessary fictions. Therefore they take much from Nietzsche, but not everything.

Rothko makes valuable comments in a 1948 radio broadcast, pointing out that "The modern artist has . . . detached himself from appearance in nature," understanding that even in portraiture the great painters of the past rejected realistic appearance, pushing aside the actual model to seek "an ideal which embraces all human drama rather than the appearance of a particular individual." Rothko adds that the modern painters carry farther the move away from the natural world but retain the classical interest in character and emotion, which are "the human drama."<sup>9</sup> The existential commitments of the abstract expressionists force them to retain "human drama" for their center, even though they move from figuration to abstraction. Rothko's remarks suggest that there was no sweeping animosity for past masters—as would be required by Bloom's counter-sublime. This same sense of roots in the past will be seen in Newman, and to a lesser extent in Still. Also, Rothko's rejection of the forms of nature takes him away from Wordsworth and the romantic sublime of Friedrich and Turner.

Rothko elaborates further on his perception of his mythical subjects and his alignment with Jung: the myths are symbols that "modern psychology finds . . . persisting still in our dreams . . . and our art," and we seek "the roots of the idea" in "our own terms" and "through our own experience" as "something real and existing in ourselves."<sup>10</sup> This existential grounding encourages the general idea that myths can take a contemporary shape—old wine in new skins. Rothko's locating of myth in the existential self is carried further by Newman and Still. Rothko adds that the ancient myths come from a period similar to modern life: "the constant awareness of powerful forces, the immediate presence of terror and fear, a recognition and acceptance of the brutality of the natural world as well as the eternal insecurity of life."<sup>11</sup> Since Rothko was familiar with Burke, he invests tragic myth with the Burkean sublime of terror, while giving it an existential direction—exemplifying the typical overlap between various modes of the sublime.

In a 1945 statement Rothko (again rejecting the strong counter-sublime) declares

that "I quarrel with surrealist and abstract art only as one quarrels with his father and mother"—rejecting abstraction if it is seen as mere formalism, and rejecting surrealism if it trivializes the human spirit by confining it to "phantasmagoria of the unconscious," to "hallucination," and to "memory." Also in opposition to claims for the dream world, Rothko declares: "I adhere to the material reality of the world and the substance of things."<sup>12</sup>

Clyfford Still receives an early analysis from Rothko, who links Still to the abstract expressionist "band of Myth Makers," yet "his is a completely new facet of this idea, using unprecedented forms and completely personal methods" to by-pass formalism and create "new counterparts" for ancient myths in his unique expression of "the tragic-religious drama which is generic to all myths at all times"—an expression whose forms Rothko calls vital "organic" entities which shape "a theogeny of the most elementary consciousness, hardly aware of itself beyond the will to live—a profound and moving experience."<sup>13</sup> Rothko is right to stress the strong Nietzschean individual volition in Still and the highly "personal methods." While the religiosity of Rothko, Newman, and Still is rather vague and muted, it is genuine, and they help to make the religious sublime a major component in the American sublime.

In 1947 Rothko published an essay which has been given the title of the opening words, "The romantics were prompted." The opening sentence declares that the romantics often did not reach true transcendent ground in their search for exotica, while the isolated modern artist, often scorned by society, has some good fortune in rejecting the security of community ties and the familiar world, because free of such mundane relations, "transcendental experiences become possible."<sup>14</sup> Rothko adheres to the general theory of the sublime, that the experience is extraordinary, and adheres also to the Kierkegaardian assumption that important work is always done alone, not in a group. Rothko delivers a remark widely quoted by his interpreters: "I think of my pictures as dramas: the shapes in the pictures are performers," and "Neither the action nor the actors can be anticipated, or described in advance. They begin as an unknown adventure into an unknown space. It is at the moment of completion that in a flash of recognition, they are seen to have the quantity and function which was intended." This is a miraculous event, and when the painting is finished and severed from the painter,

then for him and the viewers the picture should be “a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need.”<sup>15</sup> Several things are important here: his works contain human drama and are not merely formalist; they have the risk and venture of the unplanned movement into the unknown; there is a sudden moment when idea and form come together; and the completed work operates as an astonishing resolution to an eternal human need. We should see here the existential sense of a fresh raw point of origin, the insistence on idea as subject, and the search for the pattern of a sublime, astonishing revelation and resolution. There is to a limited degree a sense of an “action painting,” the painterly acts being those by which the idea itself begins to take shape. Probably there is an influence from Sartre’s thesis that values are manifest only in action. Action in this existential sense is different from the label “Action Painting,” which Rothko repudiated as “antithetical to the very look and spirit of my work”—probably meaning that his work is serene and long pondered, not dashed off in spontaneous movements.<sup>16</sup>

Rothko adds that his shapes break with the visible world, have their own volition and freedom, “without need to conform with or to violate what is probable in the familiar world,” and that his drama could not be presented through the familiar world “unless everyday acts belonged to a ritual accepted as referring to a transcendent realm.”<sup>17</sup> Since his paintings are designed to function as cultic space in the absence of public cultic rituals, Rothko operates on the important assumption that an abstract painting can have an essence as icon, which would constitute the painting as a threshold site for transcendence to sublime ground. Such a symbolic painting functions like a sacred myth.

Elaborating his point, Rothko observes that archaic people gave clear public expression, gave “official status,” to transcendental (cultic) experience, but modern painters cannot use the everyday public world: “With us the disguise must be complete. The familiar must be pulverized in order to destroy the finite associations.”<sup>18</sup> Rothko benefited from the realization that abstraction could by-pass surface reality, lending itself to the realm of idea and transcendence. The abstract nature of music can offer a similar advantage. Rothko observes that the drama of transcendence cannot be enacted “Without monsters and gods,” and in those epochs since the retreat of authentic myth,

artists who imitated the familiar world could not cross the threshold of transcendence, could only produce their most poignant image: “the single human figure—alone in a moment of utter immobility. . . . the solitary figure could not raise its limbs in a single gesture that might indicate its concern for the fact of mortality. . . . Nor could the solitude be overcome. . . . I do not believe that there was ever a question of being abstract or representational. It is really a matter of ending this silence and solitude, of breathing and stretching one’s arms again.”<sup>19</sup> This passage is often quoted but seldom analyzed. It says that in the absence of cultic myth, mankind is returned to the realm of mere objects, can stand in the loss and isolation, but cannot raise his arms in a symbolic sign that his mortal existence should be connected to the higher zone of the sacred and eternal. Rothko declares that he will find a way to make such symbolic signs without using commonplace visible forms or public religious rituals (now inoperative). He will create cultic space from his existential situation. It is important to observe that this insightful essay was written in 1947, the year in which Rothko achieved his mature style of ghostly blocks of floating color rectangles. The Tate Gallery exhibit offered one of these (Untitled 1947), and two more from 1948 (Multiform 1948 and Number 151948). The point to be emphasized is that Rothko’s theory about new abstract symbols for a sublime subject was declared in the same year as the emergence of his mature style, and we have no choice but to connect the theory to the hallmark paintings. In spite of what some theorists say, the painter’s intent is a crucial item when it is known. Any adequate aesthetic theory will have to construe a painting as an intentional object. The fact that interpretations must be validated by the actual painting has never entailed that the intent should be ignored.

The Tate collection of Rothko’s writings also gives a short passage from Tiger’s Eye in 1949: “The progression of a painter’s work, as it travels in time . . . will be toward clarity, toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea,” and that “memory, history, or geometry” might be such obstacles.<sup>20</sup> Obviously, starting with Manet and Cézanne, many modern painters have been reducing and simplifying, the process carried to limits in Mondrian, and in Rothko, Newman, and Still, though not as far as White on White. What we might call the special virtues of abstraction have been emphasized by Robert Motherwell in his conception of abstract

expressionism. Having taken graduate work at Harvard in philosophy, Motherwell has commented that the Harvard philosophy department was heavily influenced by Whitehead, whose principle “the higher the degree of abstraction, the lower the degree of complexity” made it easy for Motherwell to adapt to abstraction.<sup>21</sup> In chapter ten of Science and the Modern World, Whitehead treats abstraction in relation to mathematics and abstract universals, claiming that the abstract ideal forms are logically necessary to explain reality, so that “the understanding of actuality requires a reference to ideality.” Though abstraction necessitates a transcendence into the ideal, the transcendent and eternal form is not divorced from the concrete particulars, but enters them as a mode of “ingression” (for instance, sphericity enters by ingression into a red apple). Whitehead also had his version of an ontological sublime in that a given abstract universal “cannot be divorced from its reference to other eternal objects and from its reference to actuality generally.” Furthermore, Whitehead declares a religious sublime similar to the proof of God from necessary being: the individuation met in reality requires a fixed transcendent principle to dictate individuation, and only the concept of God would provide a sufficient center of leverage.<sup>22</sup> The important thing to note is that Motherwell records the awareness of the abstract expressionists that their abstract style was validated by the powers of abstraction in science, mathematics, and philosophy, plus the awareness that the acceptance of modern science does not rule out intuitions of a divine absolute.

Rothko, Newman, and Still emphasized the aesthetic value of scale, which is relevant to horizons of the sublime. In 1951 Rothko explains that he creates large paintings in search of the “intimate and human” because the larger work tends to absorb both the painter and the viewer: “you are in it,” actualizing “a spiritual basis for communion.”<sup>23</sup> Scale for these painters brings in monumentality plus hints of the mathematical sublime, and also the ideational sublime when grandeur of scale correlates to grandeur of idea.

Rothko’s last public statement about art (an especially valuable item) came in a 1958 lecture at the Pratt Institute. Transcript notes were taken by Dore Ashton, and some are included in the Tate retrospective. Rothko observes that past figural painters (like himself) were seeking not to describe real persons but to suggest “an ideal which embraces all human drama.” The abstract artist carries this concept further in that “The

whole of man's experience becomes his model, and in that sense it can be said that all of art is a portrait of an idea."<sup>24</sup> As usual, Rothko makes clear his search for the ideational sublime, here a search for ideas that embrace the general human situation seen in terms of drama. Rothko's frequent use of the idea of drama derives partly from Nietzsche's stress on Greek drama plus the inherent drama of the will-to-power as actor on the human stage, and partly from the existential sense of the anguish and drama of daily choices.

Irving Sandler also made use of notes from Rothko's lecture, but fortunately for scholars, Rothko's latest biographer, James Breslin, gives almost the entire lecture in pieces interspersed with comments. Using Breslin's text, important details become available. Rothko begins by emphasizing that he has sought impersonal themes: "I have never thought that a painting has anything to do with self-expression" and "Knowing yourself is valuable so that the self can be removed from the process."<sup>25</sup>

Rothko continues by giving his "recipe" for art as seven ingredients: a tragic preoccupation with death; sensuality; tension as conflict or curbed desire; the use of "wit and play"; the irony of self-effacement; "the ephemeral and chance"; and "Hope. 10% to make the tragic concept more endurable."<sup>26</sup> We should take the last item at face value, assuming that even in the darker last works there is some positive optimism in a largely tragic aura. The preoccupation with death and destruction would derive in part from Nietzsche's Dionysus, Greek drama, and existential anguish, as well as from personal experience. Rothko's emphasis on sensuality and conflict are both important, both related to Nietzsche and to the general modernist appreciation of polarities carried by art forms. Rothko's phrase "curbed desire" points to his long broodings over measure and proportion, suggesting that his ratios are meant to convey, in a Nietzschean sense, the ordering and restraining Apollonian impulse. Very few interpreters have found much "wit and play" in Rothko, but perhaps he had a general ironic sense of his own limited and repetitious manner, along with the irony of his own self-effacement. As to "chance," that could connect to Nietzsche, to Duchamp's use of chance, to Greek tragedy, and to whatever Rothko takes from automatic art, even if it is no more than the exploratory first laying down of a color. And obviously an appreciation for chance often comes from one's own experience. We should go straight

to Nietzsche's theory of Apollo and the sublime to explain Rothko's "make the tragic concept more endurable," since this is, for Nietzsche, the whole sublime purpose of art symbols and myths.

Rothko's lecture includes an appreciation of Kierkegaard's emphasis (in Fear and Trembling) on the symbolic value of the Abraham and Isaac story, Rothko interpreting it as an allegory of the artist type: "as soon as an act is made by an individual, it becomes universal. This is like the role of the artist." Also Rothko saw himself in Abraham's social isolation, secrecy, and silence.<sup>27</sup> As previously noted, the abstract expressionists were impressed not by Kierkegaard's Christian piety and Christian leap of faith, but rather by the more general existential import of Kierkegaard's subjective intensity, his inwardness, his existential agony.<sup>28</sup>

Rothko delivers the important remark that his works are facades which "open one door and one window or two doors and two windows."<sup>29</sup> We can hardly over-estimate the importance of this revelation. As his works approach minimal colors and monochrome, there would be one window and door. The works with more than two color slabs would offer two windows and two doors. Furthermore, the confinement to a one-two-three-four imagery may well carry considerable ideational freight, possibly a consonance to Pythagorean numerology, to the numbers in golden section logic, to the earth-air-fire-water set, to numerology in the Kabbalah, and to the three and four cultic symbolism sketched by Jung. However, even if we cannot with confidence invoke these wider aspects as part of Rothko's ideational sublime, we can with confidence assert the major interpretive key for relating Rothko to the sublime: his works symbolize portals as doors and windows that represent the crossing of thresholds onto transcendent and sacred ground, and this hopeful and positive note is never destroyed by the accompanying tragic vision.

Rothko goes on to declare that he is not Zen, dislikes the over-stress on "primitiveness, the subconscious, the primordial," and is "not interested in any civilization except this one. The whole problem is how to establish human values in this specific civilization." His temporary use of ancient myth in his early works was "unsatisfactory," and now his paintings "are involved with the scale of human feelings, the human drama, as much as I can express."<sup>30</sup> In keeping with the sense of myth

offered by Jung, Rothko recommends no return to tribal mentality, but rather a search for universal values still alive and relevant in the modern situation. He always thought of his pictorial forms as actors conducting a contemporary human drama.

The lecture was followed by questions and answers. Rothko declares that he is not a colorist, but uses color and light to express “a new view of the world,” and “If you have a philosophic mind you will find that nearly all paintings can be spoken of in philosophic terms.”<sup>31</sup> These are further pointings to the ideational sublime. He adds that a painter can have a personal message that is not self-expression (which would be “boring”), and in this sense the term abstract expressionism is not adequate, since he is “anti-expressionist.”<sup>32</sup> He means that he shuns limited private confession, adding that self-expression involves too much non-reflective violence, a “stripping yourself of will, intelligence, civilization. My emphasis is on deliberateness. Truth must strip itself of self which can be very deceptive.”<sup>33</sup>

Obviously Rothko’s stress on calm reflection fuses his ideational sublime with the noble sublime, a fusion signaled by the following important comment: “Large pictures take you into them. Scale is of tremendous importance to me—human scale. Feelings have different weights; I prefer the weight of Mozart to Beethoven because of Mozart’s wit and irony and I like his scale.”<sup>34</sup> The musical sense of the weight and ratio of human feelings presented by human scale is a crucial key for interpreting Rothko’s meditative sublime. His interest in approaching the state of music is probably related to Nietzsche’s emphasis on the relation of music to pure will and music’s closeness to the Dionysian impulse, but in a Nietzschean sense Rothko may properly talk of ratio and measure because the orderly form of the music introduces the voice of Apollo to tame the irrationality of Dionysus.

Breslin does additional service by providing some passages from an unpublished and never completed draft of an essay Rothko wrote about Nietzsche. The painter claims “that the poignancy of art in my life lay in its Dionysian content, and that the nobility, the largeness and exaltation are hollow pillars, not to be trusted . . . unless they are filled to the point of bulging by the wild.” It seems clear that for Rothko the measure and pondered ratio of his “pillars” should not negate the counter-assertion of Dionysian wildness. Rothko adds that Dionysus “has the secret of direct access to the

wild terror and suffering and blind drives and aspirations which lay at the bottom of human existence," while Apollo shows this wild rawness "filtered and made endurable by presenting itself thru a series of reflections, reflection being meant in both ways." In balancing these polarities the question of form becomes "the question of measure," and "I have imprisoned the most utter violence in every square inch." This would certainly be the case if, as is clear, Rothko symbolizes the general Dionysiac frenzy of life and the direct access to it by music. Rothko declares that his works are his best effort to "achieve the greatest intensity of the tragic irreconcilability of the basic violence which lies at the bottom of human existence and the daily life which must deal with it"—an art project which Rothko calls comparable to "the ritual celebrating of the power of a God whose potential is destruction, who must be propitiated by the very image of this potential if one is not himself to be destroyed." Of the clash of Dionysus and Apollo, Rothko reveals that he hopes to create "the moment of their greatest antagonism when they are constrained by some outward force (the artist) to inhabit together this limited space."<sup>35</sup> From Rothko's known familiarity with Nietzsche we might have postulated these principles in Rothko's art, but this essay makes it impossible for interpreters not to connect Rothko to the Nietzschean sublime. The sublime in Rothko should be seen as a blending of the ideational, noble, existential, mythical, Nietzschean, moral, and religious sublime—the very kind of admixture we would suspect in a well-educated, philosophically-minded painter.

Breslin's study occasionally supplies other statements by Rothko, and these should be carefully assessed, such as Rothko's comment that the Seagram Building Murals (which Rothko withdrew and later sent nine to the Tate Gallery) have an "exalted, even sacred character."<sup>36</sup> Throughout his life Rothko expressed doubts about his achievement, worrying that his 1961 Museum of Modern Art and traveling show might amount to "nothing."<sup>37</sup> Relevant to Kierkegaard and Sartre (and Nietzsche also), a friend of Rothko recalled that in the WPA and Hitler years, the painter often expressed his concern about "whether or not joining a group was going to make him change his art or lose his identity." Breslin cites an entry in a notebook of Rothko showing that in the thirties he was reading Plato, Kant, and Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy. Breslin adds that around 1940 Rothko read Frazer's The Golden Bough. Sally Avery recalled

hearing Rothko discuss Plato well into the thirties. Leaning on conversations, Breslin observes that "If anyone praised the sensual beauty of his paintings, Rothko pointed to their spirituality; but if someone else hinted at spiritual properties, he defined himself as a materialist."<sup>38</sup>

To one of Rothko's classes at the California School of Fine Arts, the student Clay Spohn brought some questions and recorded Rothko's answers: that art should be a "philosophic expression"; that modern art should move toward "esoteric reasoning"; that art can reveal the absolute; that young painters should study "psychology, philosophy, physics, literature, the other arts, and writings of the mystics"; and that the most interesting painting expresses "Philosophic or esoteric thought."<sup>39</sup>

In conversations with Alfred Jensen, Rothko declared that "When a person is a mystic he must always strive to make everything concrete"; that he admired the sensualism in Mondrian's colors; that his paintings either "push outward" or "rush inward"; and that "When I recognize myself in a work, then I realize it's completed."<sup>40</sup> The last item probably implies a sense of human scale and the artistic achievement of an idea, not an expression of private ego.

Breslin offers a remark from Rothko that he does not think in terms of space, and offers the observation of Louise Bourgeois that Rothko "always sounded like a religious official. His demeanor was that of a prophet." Elaine de Kooning reported that his conversations had a "messiah" tonality, a sense "that he had discovered something great." On hearing that Meyer Schapiro in front of a class wept over the Holocaust, Rothko declared, "He's so sentimental. I can't stand it."<sup>41</sup>

Breslin repeats some of Rothko's conversations with William Seitz: that "Intuition is the height of rationality. Not opposed"; that "I want pure response in terms of human need"; and that "My new areas of color are things. I put them on the surface. They do not run to the edge, they stop before the edge."<sup>42</sup> Since Rothko declared that he was not interested in space, this partly explains why he does not suggest infinite space by taking his forms to the limit of the canvas (unlike Newman). In a letter to Motherwell cited by Breslin, Rothko mentions "a respect for human foreboding and tragic intuition which are so precious to the artist."<sup>43</sup> There is no reason not to accept this idea as an

adequate explanation for the dark tonalities of Rothko's work. The idea of a tragic sense of life is part of Rothko's ideational sublime, and with a glance toward Burke, Nietzsche, Kant, and Lyotard, obviously a general "tragic sense" is formless and unrepresentable, involving both a shock and the resolution through philosophic acceptance, thus involving both a pain and a pleasure, and involving a tribute to reason for conquering a potential field of terror by bringing it under a holistic rational concept.

Breslin records that Rothko labeled as "acute" an early scholarly essay by Hubert Crehan, "Rothko's Wall of Light"--to be treated later. In a conversation with Alfred Jensen Rothko said that his forms do represent man, woman, and child, a remark relevant to the triptych panels in the Houston chapel, whose trinities probably carry some Joseph, Mary, and child implication; obviously a lurking family set would point strongly to human scale and human needs. Critics in general have ignored this possibility, though they have emphasized how zealously Rothko perceived his works as his "children." A conversation with Stanley Kunitz is cited in which Rothko declares he hates nature.<sup>44</sup>

Rothko's friend John Fischer records that in his first trip to Europe (1950) Rothko was much impressed by the sealed door and window motifs in the small-room vestibule of Michelangelo's Medici Library, and his friend Dan Rice records that on his second European trip (1958), Rothko "responded more to architecture and music than to painting"--suggesting again that portals and musical measure are important concepts behind his ghostly chunks of luminous color. When the German curator Werner Haftman visited Rothko to discuss the Seagram murals, he remembered Rothko's comparing his aims to the Sistine Chapel, speaking vaguely of "transcendental experience," calling his works "mythical actions," and praising the surrealists "for having rediscovered mythical possibilities in everyday life."<sup>45</sup> These are important revelations that Rothko, after moving away from ancient myth, still construed his works in terms of a different kind of myth, something rising from an immediate existential base.

Harvard's president Nathan Pusey, visiting Rothko to work out a deal for a set of murals, recalled that Rothko linked some plum-colored austere paintings to Good Friday and the Easter resurrection, an important revelation that prior to the Houston

Chapel commission, Rothko was willing to handle Christian symbolism, probably willing because of its relation to universal human needs.<sup>46</sup> Rothko hung five large panels (all with the rich crimson ground that Burke had named for sublime potential) in an elegant Harvard dining room, but he was concerned about utilitarian contamination and catering to the rich.

Dore Ashton had close personal relations with Rothko, and presents some of his remarks in her study About Rothko. She notes that in Rothko's early visits with Milton Avery and his wife, "the long evenings were spent in discussions, often of literature—poets such as T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens—and, according to Sally Avery, some philosophy. Rothko, she says, was reading Plato." Ashton gives Rothko's comment in a letter to Katherine Kuh that for audience he prefers an unsophisticated but sensitive observer possessing spiritual needs, "For if there is both need and spirit there is bound to be a real transaction." Ashton reveals that Rothko often, in private, called his works "portraits" of "states of the soul," an important idea that other interpreters have not utilized. She gives the painter's remarks that in the Rice chapel he wanted to "make East and West merge," and that he was influenced by Origen and other early church fathers, for whom everything "went toward ladders." Ashton shrewdly notes that the first Church fathers were attractive to Rothko because orthodoxy did not then exist, and these thinkers tended to be in rebellion against fixed traditions. The "laddering" concept relates Rothko's color slabs also to Plato, Plotinus, and neoplatonism. Ashton reveals that Rothko often said he would not work for a synagogue, and she connects this attitude to his Nietzschean heritage. She records Rothko's preference, when he was in Rome and Europe the second time, for the more conceptual mysteries of the early Renaissance, and she gives the important admission of Rothko, in a letter from his friend Gabriella Drudi, that his works develop from long ponderings (at the Museum of Modern Art) of the Matisse masterpiece Red Studio, Rothko stating that "from those months and that looking every day all of my painting was born." Finally, she records Rothko's remark in a letter to her that his late dark paintings in black, purple, and brown suggest "all the crosses we load on our own shoulders when the world settles for things without crosses."<sup>47</sup> Here again Rothko shows his typical blend of spiritual idealism plus tragic awareness.

An unpublished recollection of Rothko by Robert Motherwell has just been published, in which he mentions frequent statements by Rothko that a group of his paintings shown together would function “as if each individual picture was a solo voice in an opera”—a remark related to Rothko’s life-long passion for Mozart. Motherwell thought that he and Rothko, the Celt and the Jew, were perhaps held together by “unrestrained metaphysical anger”; that the late Rothko moved toward “poignancy before the unknown voice”; that he several times said “mine is a bitter old age”; and that his conversations revealed that “a work was fully realized if he could endure it, if it were not a lie.”<sup>48</sup> We may assume there were two kinds of “endure” for Rothko: the Nietzschean quest for sublime art forms that allow mankind to endure the horrors of existence, and Rothko’s art-morality question of his own ability to endure his own productions. The sense of a moral sublime in Rothko needs to be built up from several vectors, some social and some personal.

To turn now from Rothko’s own words to analyses of critics, a reasonable starting point is to present two kinds of interpretations that should be rejected: the view that Rothko’s work in his whole mature phase is ambivalent, contradictory, self-negating; and the view that all talk of the spiritual sublime is meaningless empty jargon. Negation and equivocation are emphasized by three interpreters. Ashton (while conceding some orphic and Platonic elements in Rothko) believes that his final faith was ambivalent, probably Godless, and obsessed with death.<sup>49</sup> Brian O’Doherty sees Rothko as self-negating, cut into contradictory halves, baffled by the search for transcendence and the failure to reach it, the Houston panels failing to reach any sublime transcendence.<sup>50</sup> Breslin’s biography takes a similar direction, declaring that Rothko’s ambivalence is related to childhood trauma, that the portal motif is an invitation to a mysterious sublime yet also a wall of inaccessibility, and that Rothko’s despair dominated his last phase and negates positive meanings.<sup>51</sup> These three interpreters are failing to use paradox as the key to allow tragic and hopeful vectors to coexist in Rothko’s work, and failing to understand Rothko’s rejection of personal confession.

The second dubious interpretation of Rothko is to brand all sublimicist and transcendental talk as empty jargon, a stance Robert Hughes approaches when he

doubts that Rothko could sustain a sublime vision, warns against all of the “clickety-clack” about the sublime, thinks all the transcendental rhetoric might be a hollow shell.<sup>52</sup> Ian Dunlop agrees, calling the sublimicist notions of Rothko and Newman “metaphysical pretensions” and “bogus religious overlay.”<sup>53</sup> Also, Donald Kuspit’s scepticism about the sublime is well known, centered in his belief that abstract modern painters take refuge in the illusory sublime because they cannot comprehend or deal with the real social world and its pressing issues.<sup>54</sup> Kuspit may have been influenced by André Malraux’s The Twilight of the Absolute, which treats modern art as a retreat from transcendence.<sup>55</sup>

In any case, these nay-sayers who are sceptical of the sublime in abstract art are a minority, and the main stream of criticism has accepted Rothko’s aims more at face value. Rosenblum’s study in 1975 emphasized the serious secularized religiosity in the romantic tradition from Friedrich to Rothko, declaring that Rothko chose spirit above matter, created a mystical luminosity akin to Turner, and achieved in the Rice chapel a perfect example of spirituality outside the channels of orthodox creeds.<sup>56</sup> A few years later, in 1978, Diane Waldman produced her long catalogue essay on Rothko, proclaiming that he developed his own version of Mondrian’s abstract expression (through “balanced asymmetry”) of Platonic transcendental idealism attached to strong sensuousity; that he sought “the incorporeal reality of the sublime”; and that his best works elicit awe and mystery in creating “reminders of an order beyond man and nature,” though the dark works in the last period are “brooding, forbidding, tragic.”<sup>57</sup>

In 1982 Anna Chave produced her doctoral dissertation on Rothko’s subject matter, not as penetrating as we would prefer, but very helpful, asserting that his timeless dark/light polar symbolism accords with the long tradition in Zoroaster, Judaism, Christianity, Apollo, and Dionysus; that he tends to give darkness the upper hand, but not always; that his layered paintings utilize a strong “high and low, above and below” symbolism; that the uppermost color shape “might, for example, be at once a metaphor for the highest zone in the macrocosm,” which would be heaven, and also symbolize head and intellect, and also the highest “resurrected state” of a “ritual male”; and that his most essential subject matter “was the human drama, human experience,

emotions and values.”<sup>58</sup>

In his much-praised study of abstract expressionism, William Seitz (not himself favoring negativity, alienation, and impasse) observes that Rothko launched a quest for the final stasis of an absolute, yet followed the ideas of Nietzsche in that the “Antitheses . . . are neither synthesized nor neutralized in his work, but held in a confronted unity which is a momentary stasis.” Seitz intelligently notes that polarities, in principle, may be resolved either as permanent hostilities, or as a harmonious marriage of opposites, or by a dissolution of the contraries. There is a general sense in which Rothko paintings suggest all three patterns, which would not be surprising in that we often see all three in marriage and other relations. Seitz observes that in the era of Rothko, Newman, and Still, ambiguity had become a strong value, and the abstract expressionist painters sought a structural clarity that derived from “a tension of oppositional forces”—a condition which avoided overt religious meanings, yet recognized that the on-going “personal quest for a transcendental reality, and for an absolute, has in no sense abated.” In such a metaphysical program, “Beauty becomes secondary” and “Reality and truth are the terms that best designate the absolute of abstract art.”<sup>59</sup> Seitz does not say so, but obviously he has sketched the classic ground of the ideational sublime set apart from beauty. In addition to encompassing dualities and focusing on truth and reality (including mystical reality), Seitz later adds deep thematic concerns with organicism, naturalism, and humanism, emphasizing (correctly) that the abstract expressionists created an almost wholly European movement, heavily indebted to romanticism, realism, Cézanne, Cubism, Mondrian, and expressionism, all of these reflected in France at the turn of the century.<sup>60</sup> Seitz, however, downplays too much the great influence of American life and the rich world of New York art, and he might well have traced the genealogy of abstract expressionism back through the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, Greece, and Jewish and Christian beginnings.

Another major work, Stephen Polcari’s study of abstract expressionism, treats the movement as “an art of historical and mytho-religious character addressing the spiritual life of the West,” and accepting Nietzsche’s ideal of overcoming nihilism in a redemptive pattern “to affirm and at times regenerate Western life.” The painters, Polcari asserts, were seeking a new basis for affirmative vision even though they were

affected by the pessimism of thinkers such as Spengler and Malraux, and were full of a sense of profound crisis, intensified by World War II. They took from surrealism, Polcari adds, not its key beliefs but its search for a radical new liberated model for self and society, launching from surrealist automatism but adding their own subjects, not in an effort to subvert reality, but rather to universalize their themes through metaphor, to “found the personal in the universal.”<sup>61</sup> Polcari finds a “secularly spiritual art” with two main themes: “to be caught in a web of difficulties and to seek to overcome them through an inward transformation and rebirth.”<sup>62</sup> In my view this suggests one key impulse in modernism, which is a search for new, satisfying, universal foundations of order, value, and meaning.

Polcari states that these painters derived from the flood of myth theory the concept of a mythic hero who “symbolizes the group’s problems, struggles, and triumphs in his own actions.” They took from Nietzsche, Polcari declares, not his cyclic pessimism, but the concept of the creative Apollonian artist rejecting imitation and utilizing myth and tragic suffering. Rothko is presented as a classicist, “a serious student of ancient culture, particularly Greek painting and architecture,” who often visited the Near Eastern and Greco-Roman rooms of the Brooklyn Museum—yet “Rothko’s classicism is a Nietzschean Dionysian archaism new to twentieth century art and thought.” Polcari rightly connects the shapes in Rothko’s mature style to Newman’s concept of the ideograph, a visual “vehicle for an abstract thought-complex,” and he rightly finds in the mature works a “dialectic” which, musically, utilizes “contrapuntal rhythm.” While emphasizing the pessimistic tonality of Rothko, Polcari properly sees that it does not cancel the positive vision carried by the sacred doorway motif, and that the bleakness was mitigated because at all stages Rothko “offered images of the enduring history, continuity, and sacredness of human life.”<sup>63</sup> More than other interpreters, Polcari connects Rothko to the entire Western tradition from Greece through Nietzsche to Joyce, Eliot, Jung, and the whole fabric of modernism.

Having now used several major mainstream studies to establish an affirmative spiritual ideational core for Rothko (and thereby having set aside interpretations that either reject the transcendental sublime zone or find in Rothko a program of cancellation, equivocation, and failure), let us return to the statements of the painter to

work out the features of his engagement with the sublime.

The most basic feature is Rothko's insistence on metaphysical subject matter wedded to mystery, awe, and transcendence, the defining essence of the ideational sublime. While numerous critics agree that this mode constitutes the center for the program of Rothko (as well as Newman and Still), most critics have been reluctant to be specific about the ideas which are adumbrated by Rothko's ghostly blocks of color. The following list is offered as a promising set: there is a sacred absolute behind the world; human life is greatly bitter, tragic, and painful, but there are universal and constant vectors of joy, hope, and belief; the wild and passional Dionysian forces of life must be celebrated, yet through art and thought they must be given balance and order; polarity in a Nietzschean sense (not negative paradox) is a basic law for understanding reality and psychology; modern abstract art is a powerful new aesthetic style, yet it retains deep bondings to the whole of Western culture; abstract paintings can function religiously as cultic space; paintings should be intelligent about scale and the scale should embody the typical human emotions of contemporary life; art works and the cosmos and the vision of artists rest on measure, ratio, and proportion construed in a musical manner such that art approaches the condition of music; art works should not be confessional but should rest on an irony of self-effacement; the sacred ground of reality, the zone of godhead, remains shrouded by mystery, concealedness, and enigma; the creative artist should impose his values on society in a Nietzschean project; existential selfhood and lived experience is the basis of art projects; even in extreme abstraction, sensuality must be celebrated along with abstract thought, the sublime must be concretely embodied; myth theory is productive if it can be clothed in new contemporary garments; color and light are symbols for human drama and transcendental realities; the creative artist is a mythic cultural hero; and the abstract symbolization of new values in a new creative style born from artistic freedom strikes a major blow against materialism, unrestrained capitalism, social conformity, Marxist totalitarianism, orthodox religions, and collectivism. Certainly Rothko clearly revealed quite a sufficiency of specific metaphysical beliefs to actualize an ideational sublime, and each one of these ideas carries the nobility of thought and the unrepresentable subject appropriate to a search for modes of the sublime. And in the Longinian sense, Rothko's intellect is good enough to demonstrate the sublime capacity for grasping noble

conceptions.

Rothko's unpublished essay on Nietzsche, joined to his many references to Nietzsche over the whole of his life, makes it indisputably clear that the painter fully absorbed the Nietzschean sublime and clearly understood the Apollonian and Dionysian polarities, the centrality of tragedy and myth, the cultural heroism of the bold artist as will-to-power, and the Nietzschean definition of the sublime in The Birth of Tragedy, the work Rothko most carefully studied.

Rothko blended the existential sublime into his program, as did Newman and Still, being well aware of Sartre's main ideas and those of Kierkegaard, and absorbing them in the sense of individual freedom, in the sense of a personal vision that was morally attuned to be constructive for other existents and for society, and in the hostility to social groups and collective movements. The non-Christian rationalism of Sartre becomes a decisive factor which tips Rothko more toward Sartre than Kierkegaard, though the Dane's isolation, anguish, and inwardness were clearly influential.<sup>64</sup> The evidence of the existential center would be Rothko's use of Kierkegaard's version of the Abraham and Isaac legend; the life-long anguish over the "authentic" and morally honest, uncorrupted quality of his painting; the sense of personal fulfillment, the crossing of a threshold into psychic wholeness through secret inwardness and creativity; and also the stripping away of past conventions to reach a raw, living, existential base. The committed acts of abstract expressionist painting must be seen in the light of Sartrean acts which legitimate character and conduct, under the full burden of choosing for self and for others. The willingness of Rothko and his circle to work in isolation was fostered by Sartre's concept of each self as alone, without a divine sponsor or a preformulated life plan, a situation which, for Sartre, makes free being absolute being. The Sartrean threshold crossing onto transcendent ground which Rothko accepted is demarcated in the previously quoted passage of Sartre: "Man is all the time outside of himself: it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist. Since man is thus self-surpassing, and can grasp objects only in relation to his self-surpassing, he is himself the heart and center of his transcendence."<sup>65</sup> Also we should keep in mind that Sartre, like Nietzsche, offered a

strong pessimism and sense of death lighted by a redeeming hope and joy.

The strong humanism of Sartre would reinforce Rothko's often stated subject of the "human drama." Also Sartrean is Rothko's statement that the modern artist benefits from being stripped from the past, being alone, being able to explore ahead into an unknown as, in Rothko's words, "transcendental experiences become possible." This is the ever-new sense of open risk and venture with which the existentialist greets each day. Also existential is Rothko's remark, "When I recognize myself in a work, then I realize it's completed."

Rothko's deep interest in myth brings into his paintings the Jungian-mythic sublime. We have noted Rothko's comment that even in his specifically mythic paintings he sought the universal, generic "essence" of myth, and that the myth must be reconstructed in "our own terms," as "something real and existing in ourselves." This is precisely the theory of Jung--that the universal archetypes carrying the myth are all alive in each living person. Rothko called Still one of the band of "Myth Makers." The question then becomes: what myth structures might operate in Rothko's late works which are devoid of specific allusion to mythology? It is helpful to remember Cassirer's point that secular modern narratives are working as unrecognized myths. These strands of myth and symbol theory lead to two principles which invest Rothko's work with the mythical sublime: that when any narrative becomes cultic it becomes myth, and when any art space becomes cultic it becomes a religious or quasi-religious icon. Following these principles, Rothko's luminous paintings are numinous paintings with spiritual iconography; also several new narratives take on genuine myth status, such as the story of an artist's life if the artist is seen as a questing culture hero; and such as any narrative segment or whole of the history of art. That is, the story of Rothko's life may carry mythical value, and so may the story of abstract expressionism. This latter principle is clearly declared by the contemporary painter Philip Taaffe, when he adopts as a painterly project the using of the story of first generation abstract expressionists as a "theodicy," as "a series of inspired moments," a segment of the story of modernism, which is itself a "field of inquiry" that can be construed and experienced as a "theological history to be examined and made lucid."<sup>66</sup> Taaffe has worked out some of the implications of Jungian myth theory and applied it to abstract expressionism. Even in an individual's memories, the remembrance of things past in the life of a family; the

remembrance of special private spiritual pilgrimages and readings and viewings; and the growing story of a given marriage all obviously take on a narrative cultic value. Indeed, the space of a person's house, if made sufficiently rich and pleasing, becomes often a cultic space more resonant with aura than the local churches. Myth-making goes on at many levels. This, then, is the claim made for interpreting Rothko: a mythic and religious sublime is deliberately sought and achieved by a cultic sense of the artist as questing hero, the cultic sense of an artist's life story being embodied in the works, the cultic use of art space, and the possible cultic use of favored segments of art history as sacred narratives, especially as these constructs are set beside Rothko's often repeated concern for an absolute transcendental subject seen in a new existential way and expressed in immediate phenomenological terms.

The coming together of the mythic and religious sublime is revealed clearly in Rothko's 1947 essay "The romantics were prompted," especially the often-quoted but usually misunderstood passage about the isolated human figure in art of the past. Rothko is not analogizing his color blocks to the isolated human figures of Friedrich and others. Rothko's point is that these isolated human figures cannot raise their arms toward the supernatural because from the Renaissance on there has been no authentic myth to connect the temporal to the eternal. Also, if art remains figural, this frustrated human figure will remain the typical structure. But, Rothko adds, abstract art pulverizes this bankrupt everyday world and allows, by the special powers of abstraction, a soaring power which realizes the crossing of the threshold into cultic transcendence.<sup>67</sup>

Because of Rothko's setting nature aside and espousing an impersonal personal vision, we should not connect him strongly to the romantic sublime, though there are some important bondings, as suggested by Rosenblum. In Bloom's theory of the counter-sublime, the young new artist should try to destroy his major predecessor, but Rothko does not show such vehemence, though there are some hostilities which might allow a less violent model of Bloom's theory. Rothko's art, like Newman's and Still's, keeps in view certain forces in culture and commerce which are always under attack, suggesting also some needed alterations in Bloom's model. If the counter-sublime is broadened to include a sense of enemies and declarations of culture wars, it becomes a useful part of theory of the sublime, an essential part when we try to understand the lone soldier mentality of Still, with powerful enemies close at hand. The beautiful

cannot handle warfare and destruction well, but the sublime is suited for such a task.

Also, we must connect Rothko to the sublime of color/light and to the moral sublime. All interpreters focus on the crucial role of color in Rothko's program, and all accept Rothko's view that his color functions as metaphysical symbolism. Rothko approved of the early article on his use of color by Hubert Crehan (1954), the critic's claims being that the paintings contain symbolic "flashes of affirmation and bolts of doubt"; that the color forms abolish line to convey "the essential oneness of things"; that Rothko achieves a new version of the mystical handling of light throughout biblical and Western culture, reviving this ancient visionary concept of light as "the commonest figure of speech for spiritual essence"; and that while conveying forebodings which may be related to the light of atomic explosions, Rothko also symbolizes that "it is still possible for us to discover serenity in the midst of turbulence."<sup>68</sup>

Occasionally critics treat Rothko's color in merely visual terms, but this is rare.<sup>69</sup> Waldman states that color is his vehicle "for transcendental meaning"; that he achieves a kind of Rembrandt light; that "Red fascinates Rothko above all colors" and may symbolize ritual, fire, blood, life, death, and spirit; that in spite of a general sameness of style he achieves "seemingly infinite" variations in color forms and nuances; and that the blacks and reds of the Houston Chapel connote life, death, and spirit.<sup>70</sup> Chave observes that Rothko moved away from bright colors as being too "seductive" and thus detracting from his subject matter. Kozloff has a second article on Rothko's color, noting the astonishing quality of chromatic glow that comes from within, "as auto-luminous." Kozloff explains why he does not connect color to meaning: he finds the color effects often "directionless, unmotivated," and intellectually and spiritually frustrating. Ashton thinks that Rothko was focused not on color but light: "to create light, generate light by overpainting, masking, thinning, and thickening, and working for the musical effect, the *vibrato* to which he responded in the most poignant of Mozart's late work." She adds that he responded in Europe to the "hermetic" handling of light in Byzantine chapels. Polcari believes Rothko learned more about color from Matisse than from Still, especially the effect of a color wall in *The Red Studio*. Breslin notes that "by the diluting the paint to the verge of disintegration, Rothko created his unique luminosity," and that the painter often spoke of "breathing paint on canvas."

Ann Gibson asserts that Rothko, Newman, and Still, as they simplified their colors, achieved a cultural chronological regression to a mystical sense of cosmic oneness typical of primitive life and children. The three painters are presented as being influenced in this move by Nietzsche, the painter-theorist John Graham, and the myth theory of Joseph Campbell. Gibson cites passages in which Merleau-Ponty speculates that colors have unique sacramental value in bridging between body and cosmos, that, in Merleau-Ponty's words, "Color is the place where our brain and the universe meet." Gibson concludes that "To Newman, Rothko, and Still, it [color] was the vehicle by which the mechanism of regressive time could be activated to enable one to attain transcendent union with the cosmos and oneself."<sup>71</sup>

Ending his catalogue essay on Rothko, Irving Sandler declares that the painter uses color to express the urge for self-transcendence which "not only has not lessened but can stir passions as intense as those in any past age," and that Rothko interpreters must carefully ponder the color effects, "the unexpectedly joined hues, the slight, and continually slighter, modulations within the large area of any single surface, and the softness and the sequence of the colored shapes" which are "means, not ends." Robert Rosenblum's remark, given earlier, in chapter one, should be recalled--that Rothko's tiers of color, "these infinite, glowing voids carry us beyond reason to the Sublime." In an article Polcari connects Rothko to a concept of Novalis: that light is the "breath of life" for the universe. Although keeping to his main thesis that Rothko's forms both invite and frustrate, O'Doherty believes the light represents "spiritual desire" and the color slabs function semantically like paragraphs. However, it is better to say that they function by ratio and measure, and function as portals. Motherwell's comment, given in chapter one, that the abstract expressionists turned the surrealists' automatic doodle to something "plastic, mysterious, and sublime" should be set beside his remark that their chief instrument was "light that counts above everything. Not colored light, but color that gives off light-radiance," and "The supreme gift, after light, is scale."<sup>72</sup>

In his article "Rothko and Belief" Peter Schjeldahl declares that sublimity is the only term adequate to describe Rothko's spiritual subject, that Rothko proceeded "as if sheer color, mediated by a design adjusted to give it maximum impact and versatility," could reach the zone of the sublime, and that "a dramaturgy of color, a sense of its

infinite capacity for poignance and shock, is the fundamental Rothko talent, the ground of his absolute originality." Evan Firestone believes "that the selection of color to convey meaning in Abstract Expressionism was frequently, and necessarily, conventional"—assuming that we would associate red with life, black with death, radiance with paradise, etc. Therefore Rothko and his circle "were the heirs to a modern tradition of color symbolism that dates to the early nineteenth century." Some corroboration for this claim for conventional symbolism is offered by Claude Cernuschi, who gives a comment Rothko made to Marjorie Phillips about a painting: "The . . . tone of the lower section of the canvas could symbolize the normal, happier side of living, and in proportion the dark, blue-green rectangular measure above it could stand for the black clouds and worries that always hang over us." Cernuschi understands that this high/low and bright/dark polarity could suggest metaphysical oppositions such as freedom/necessity and finite/infinite, and that in the later works the darker and bleaker side of the polarities receives a larger weight. Georgine Oeri finds in each work the "dichotomy between wholeness and separation," with color being "the substance by which that is substantiated which has no substance."<sup>73</sup>

Donald Goddard suggests that Rothko's colors insinuate earth, air, fire, and water, the sense of "fundamental matter." Ashton, in an article, claims that "it was Rothko's portion to take what was most moving about the love of light in the painterly tradition (Rembrandt more than Fra Angelico) and transport it into our century." Lawrence Alloway asserts that Rothko invokes "Neo Platonic memories of light as the energy of the creator." An effective statement about this general Western mysticism carried by symbolic light is made by James Snyder when commenting on a paradise painting of Bosch: "For the mystics, heaven was Light and the Unknown, and the ascent was the dissolving of one's ego into the oneness of God. . . . The source of all is pure light, pure color," and Bosch's Ascent into the Celestial Paradise, with its tunnel of radiant light, "is one of the most awesome and poetic representations of this mystical return to One, the Source, the Light, ever created in paint."<sup>74</sup> The interpreters of Rothko are giving him a similar role in the twentieth century, though the paradise vision, while genuine, is accompanied by a sense of polar tensions and foreboding, by an existential sense of death, and by the decline of traditional mythic faith. Burke was

the major theorist of the sublime who first emphasized the importance of the sublime of color and light. We cannot be more specific about Rothko's metaphysical meanings than to declare that his color and light point to a possible oneness behind reality and to a sacred ground of being approached with awe and ultimate concern. The portal symbolism, his most important motif along with radiance, should be construed as an invitation to cross the threshold into the outer mystery, and Rothko's increasingly dark colors imply that the crossing is beset with agony and difficulty. Yet it was also Burke who noted that increases in difficulty and enigma are themselves sources for the sublime. Because of the considerable degree of ominous and fearful symbolism, and because Rothko was familiar with Burke's theory, the Burkean sublime is woven into Rothko's work, as it is into Still's.

It remains to connect Rothko to the moral sublime and the noble sublime. When moral principles operate, the sublime stands near because there is an ascent, a threshold crossing, from the practical and actual into the ought and ideal, a crossing often touched by the sense of eternal and sacred things. Also, a moral precept exists in the invisible domain of the unrepresentable, and is a very powerful force which often includes pain with pleasure, posing a difficulty. In a broad manner, the first generation abstract expressionists all believed that society was in crisis, and their paintings were instruments for an ethically motivated process of healing and saving. A spiritual vacuum, a spiritual void, was to be alleviated by their concepts, values, and abstract forms. Set beside this broad ethical perspective was a second moral vector: their passion for honesty, their rejection of false feeling and commercialism, their sense of integrity in materials and style, their search for reduced and purified forms—a kind of painterly morality in addition to social morality. Furthermore, as we have seen, the existentialism that dominated the era of Rothko, Newman, and Still called for deep moral awareness, the responsibility to choose for all other existents.

No one has insisted on the moral base of abstract expressionism as much as the philosophically trained Motherwell, who makes constant reference to this element: "the art that interests me asserts man's moral courage, intellectual daring, radiant sensuality"; "The question of objects in painting is unimportant because the real subject of paintings is moral attitudes"; purity of expression "is an effort to be truthful about human realities at any cost"; "Modern art is a specific ethical enterprise in relation to specific historical

necessities . . . on the part of men who deeply love painting to preserve its integrity and truth"; the painter's struggle "has inexorable moral values—no nostalgia, no sentimentalism, no propaganda, no discourse, no autobiography, no violation of the canvas as surface . . . no cliches, no predetermined endings"; "to modify one's art is to modify one's character"; the question for a painter "is whether he has a vision"; even if Duchamp did not treat the holy, "he did find an ethic beyond the 'aesthetic' for his ultimate choice"; Picasso made a harmful ethical decision with "his romantic personality dominating the painting, as with Wagner"; and "The ethical concept as expressed by Kierkegaard hit me."<sup>75</sup>

During our waking hours the moral sense (like rationality, common sense, sense of stability, comic sense, intentionality, and other states of mind) cannot be broken or divorced from other elements because the decision as to how we spend each hour is a moral choice, like the writer's choice of subject or the scientist's choice of experiment. Although we live in an epoch unwilling or unable to produce robust and effective ethical systems, our failure does not diminish the noble status of moral value, and does not diminish the categorical imperative to produce ethical theory. It is enormously to the advantage of Rothko, Newman, and Still that they sought and attained a moral vision and brought into their art the moral sublime.

The noble sublime, the cool and reflective sublime of thoughtful brooding raised high by Kant, should be seen as a hallmark for Rothko's oeuvre. Most interpreters emphasize the long hours of contemplation in front of each work, resulting in what? Resulting in some small adjustments in measure, ratio, proportion. Rothko's noble sublime resides, above all, in his application of measure construed in a musical sense, as if his color slabs and portals were musical phrases fixed by laws of harmony. Ashton, who was close to Rothko, records that he was always thinking about proportion. Polcari is right to note that Rothko would have felt in The Red Studio of Matisse not only the color-wall effect but also the "architectonic" quality, which influenced Rothko more than the forms of Still. Waldman declares that "Rothko's sensibility is in many respects close to Mondrian's," showing "attraction to order, stability, rectilinear structure and balanced asymmetry" in a "developing sense of the need to express a Platonic ideal."<sup>76</sup> In any discussion of measure and ratio one must

emphasize the probable presence of Plato and Pythagoras, the sources for the idea that the cosmos receives its order from elemental ratios between primary geometric forms such as triangle and pyramid. The Pythagoreans thought that all profound polarities were patterns of measure and proportion. Their ideas were confirmed by their discovery that an octave could be raised or lowered by halving or doubling the length of the vibrating string. Such reasoning gave them warrant to speak of the music of the spheres, which Rothko may have in mind, but he certainly has in mind that basic human emotions associated with the sublime, in his own words, have different "weight." When Rothko named specific emotions he included "ecstasy" and "doom," an important pair reinforcing the deepest theme of combining some optimism with considerable pessimism, in the manner of Nietzsche.

Simply to assert the importance of emotions of the sublime conveyed in the mode of the noble sublime via long-meditated and impersonal adjustments of ratio and measure does not, of course, solve all the problems, because it will be difficult, always, to be certain exactly which abstract ideas and which emotions are bonded to which specific color ratios and adjustments. Nevertheless, to use this concept as a key to Rothko's aims does take us a long way toward understanding the nature of his sublime subjects and the stylistic devices which carry and enhance them. As suggested earlier, these measured color blocks of Rothko, as he declared, relate to the motif of doors and windows, of portals that invite a threshold crossing. Numerous critics hold this idea, an example being Breslin's claim that for Rothko "a portal makes a place of transition, a crossing (sometimes a ritual crossing) of borders, a site of physical movement and emotional crisis, of coming and going, leaving and returning, loss and reunion--some of the principal themes of Rothko's life and work."<sup>77</sup> There are powerful portal motifs all through Western art, and in numerous bible passages.<sup>78</sup> From the late 1940s to the Rice Chapel, as Rothko moves away from traditional myth to a new sense of existential and phenomenological mythicality centered in subjective immediate experience and conveyed through iconic symbols of abstract color in a cultic space using flatness and frontality, his works have been unified by a sublime subject and the imagery of portals.

In summary, we have suggested that Rothko's paintings have complex but probable relations to a number of the important modes of the sublime. Perhaps any

stress on creative genius should be connected to the romantic sublime, though Rothko's hostility toward nature has been the justification for not including a strong degree of romanticism, a decision also justified in that Rothko does not celebrate wild passion, but rather strong feelings that are rationally weighed and constrained.

Some specific Rothko works may now be considered in relation to the established relevance of various modes of the sublime, not in an extremely detailed way but in a search for most salient features. The four works selected are Multiform (1948), plate 26 of the Tate catalogue); Orange and Yellow (1956, plate 54); Black on Maroon (1959, plate 65); and the Houston chapel (1965-67).

Multiform (1948) is chosen because it is one of the earliest works launching Rothko into his mature style. Essentially, seven colors are used in fuzzy-edged slabs: yellow (laced white); blurred dark orange and light orange; dark plumish blue (with some streaks close to black and laced white); yellow-orange; and crimson (laced orange). There are also animations of various streaks and dots, and a small greenish-yellow patch. Even in this early work we sense portals; ascension; passionate exaltation; ratios; metaphysical radiances of inner light; tragic tonalities in plum-blue and crimson; joyous tonalities in white, orange, and yellow; a dialogue of polarities; and a veiled mysterious subject not fully presentable. We sense the special domain of the sublime—not simple beauty but a profound aesthetic object given the jolt of ideational complication. The intrinsic difficulty of fully abstract art forces us to seek, in the Kantian sense, ideas of reason which supply some unity to the aesthetic manifold. The difficulty itself provides the check, the shock, which the interpreter hopes to overcome. Since Rothko was fully cognizant this early about Nietzsche, about his own concept of measure, about theories of the sublime, and about the prevailing thought climate for existentialism and myth theory, all these intellectual currents are the background for these seminal works. As usual for Rothko the darker colors tend to come at the top, and there is no reason not to take this as rather conventional symbolism, an iconology giving the doomed and tragic awareness more of what Rothko called "weight" in his metaphysical use of abstract forms. It seems reasonable not to connect the black, plum, and crimson tones with the tragic vision of Nietzsche and Sartre (along with Rothko's troubled private life), and also with the Jungian concept of penetration into the darkness of psychic depth before integration can be

achieved (and certainly implied is the integration of Jungian polarities as well as Apollonian and Dionysian forces).

There is a secondary counter-sublime in that Rothko's aloneness plus his rejection of realism plus his use of difficult abstract forms are certainly designed to negate Marxism, collectivism, conventional religious dogma, commercialized capitalism, and middle class taste. The unclear edges, the conceptual difficulty, and the black, plum, and red colors relate to the theory of Burke, while the ideational content relates to the emphasis on reason by Longinus, Kant, and Sartre. The seven different colors in this work draw attention because Rothko will soon move to sets of two, three, and four as he simplifies his strategy.

What Rothko means by human scale is not fully clear; however, it would include an aim for monumentality of scale plus a humanistic weighing of values attuned to deepest human needs. In this early painting there certainly is a celebration of strong human scale, aiming for a combination of monumentality with the transcendental radiance and grandeur suited to the subject of sublime ideas. It may well be, as Chave claimed, that the high/low feature of Rothko's forms carries a head and body implication, which would mean that the painter emphasizes thought and idea.

The second painting, Orange and Yellow (1956), is chosen to represent the domination of a joyous mood, which Rothko often sought, plus the painter's growing simplification of means. It is easy to over-emphasize the pessimistic strain in Rothko. Even in the late period of his black and gray series, he was at the same time producing light and bright works, and he exhibited a great sense of joy over the chapel project of his last years. Orange and Yellow shows a pale orange ground as border, with faint streaks of pale white that set off the edges of the two main color slabs. Rothko declared that his forms are demarcated, given measure by not spilling out over the edges. The bottom color block here is rich orange with deep concealed whiteness, and the top rectangle is rich yellow with deep concealed whiteness, and the two forms are separated by a narrow white zone laced with both yellow and orange bleedings. It is almost never pointed out how frequently Rothko approaches the 3x5 ratios of the Golden Section. Numerous canvas sizes and panels in Rothko's Rice chapel come close to these proportions. One probably should connect this to ancient Greek ratio theory, which was itself greatly affected by human scale in that the Golden Section was seen in the

proportions of the human body. In Orange and Yellow both color slabs are close to the Golden Section, and so is the overall shape of the canvas. Even though Rothko's forms are horizontal, their stacking in a vertical ladder ascent is important for his sublime subjects. The threshold crossing is upward, in the vertical pattern noted by Burke. Rothko's habit of deeply concealed dim flares of inner light also suggests the sublime penetration to depth named by Burke and emphasized in the depth psychology of Jung, and others. The fact that Rothko's light is not natural light, but an emanation from within, offers an iconology of cerebral light along with a sacred emanation meaning related to Plotinus and the general Western, Christian, and Jewish mysticism of light. This radiant painting celebrates the empire of light. And it may be the case that Rothko's distinctive blurring and mysterious bleeding together of margins carries a vision of an absolute, a One reached by ladders of emanation. Emanation theory would have a special value for Rothko, Newman, and Still because it brings a sacred grounding different from those of Christian and Jewish orthodoxy. For these painters, one great merit of Plotinian emanation theory is that men and women must strive to attain their own ascent to Nous, and the redeeming agency is intellect, which would harmonize with the search for the ideational sublime. When Rothko's works are dominated not by dark tones but by intense orange and yellow, the painter's vision of hope and joy, his ten percent hope, should give the clue to the meaning.

The third work, Black on Maroon (1959), represents a further simplification of means as the color values come closer together, revealing Rothko's general move toward darker colors, and revealing also that Rothko did not reject vertical color slabs, though he typically chooses horizontal stacking. This work is elected because the sense of doors and windows is overwhelming. Indeed, it may well be that Rothko preferred the horizontal slabs because the door and window symbolism would not be so obvious, and his mysteries would be better protected. Black on Maroon displays the deep colors favored by Burke, and reveals the dark tragic vision of Rothko. The black pillars are stained over the maroon ground, and enough edging is left to give the forms measured weight. The twin door motif in the middle, in radiant lavender, invites a threshold crossing toward light, toward some reality clothed in enigma. In terms of polar combination of joy and doom, even if we associate black with death or suffering, the black is over the plum ground, and the plum ground extends wider than the black slabs.

Also, Rothko's pure abstract forms are indeed like segments of music, reaching harmonic meanings with no imitation of objective reality. Black on Maroon is strong in two and four logic, with a triadic hint from the plum ground. Even if there is no close connection, we could still see an analogy to Pythagorean numerology and also to Jung's theories of the pre-ordained tendency to connect powerful beliefs to these simple number codes. Most critics assume that there is little sexuality in Rothko. This is improbable. We should include male/female relations in his symbolism of polar forces that complement and do not cancel out. Also, we should allow sexual meaning to the portal symbolism.

The Rothko chapel cannot be photographically presented, but Breslin gives a partial shot in his figure 48. Almost all interpreters emphasize the genuineness of the attainment of the religious sublime. Ashton claims that Rothko, like Mallarmé, always sought some "orphyic explanation of the universe." She does admit that the deepest meaning of the Rice chapel might be the sense of the absence of God, but that this should be seen as a spiritual state. However Waldman quotes Rosenblum's assertion that "the very lack of overt religious content here may make Rothko's surrogate icons and altarpieces, experienced in a nondenominational chapel, all the more potent in their evocation of the transcendental." Waldman states that Rothko was full of joy about the project, that his central theme is the passion of Christ, and that he fuses the "finite and the infinite," the "sensuous and the spiritual." Polcari suggests that all the panels suggest the Stations of the Cross; that when there are three panels grouped with the center panel elevated, there are hints of Crucifixion and Deposition scenes; and that "The chapel paintings climax Rothko's life-long subject: the absorption of the individual by his spiritual environment." Alloway says that in the chapel triptych pattern there are "unbreakable associations to Christian art and to number symbolism," plus a new secular element, "an assertion of the heroic stance of the artist within the traditional themes"--a valuable point in that Rothko certainly would preserve in all of his works his discovered existential sublime and his acknowledged Nietzschean project of imposing his values on the world, just as Matisse did in his chapel at Vence. In her article Ashton reminds us that in his research for the chapel project, Rothko pondered the writings of the church fathers and their three-fold scheme of literal, ethical, and allegorical meaning, and made "painstaking research for the proportions of the Houston Chapel."

Joseph Liss gives Motherwell's assertion about the Houston panels, "No, they didn't look funereal to me," and Rothko was so happy that when Motherwell met him on the street, "he threw his arms around me." Liss adds that he too found Rothko very happy with the chapel project. In his writings Motherwell observes, in relation to Kafka: "the void need not be terrifying. It can indeed vivify, when contrasted as an image with the fragility of human life."<sup>79</sup> Previously noted is Breslin's view that the chapel panels are self-negating and defeatist, a view that some others, such as O'Doherty, would share. However these negative voices are very much in the minority, and the general tendency is to call the chapel a success as a celebration of sublime spirituality in modern terms.

A few details about the Rice chapel are noteworthy. As one enters, the wall ahead has three large amorphous dark maroon panels, about 5 feet by 15 feet, close to the Golden Section. They set recessed in an apse, with no containing borders. Also, the center panel is brighter, with more internal color play, and slightly larger. On the opposite west wall of the octagon building is a matching triptych in black, with thin and straight maroon borders, the side panels being smaller. On four other walls are single dark panels, one having faint horizontal bars. Obviously the forms resemble portals and doors. As the viewer turns to leave the central room, the last single panel seen has a black rectangle on a maroon ground, but the bottom maroon border occupies about one-fifth of the canvas, and the colors meet at the height of the human chest. This last panel has very faint concealed white tones, and Breslin (who, as has been noted, calls it only a "momentary resolution" in order to maintain his general thesis that the chapel is dominated by the tonality of loss and despair) concedes that the forms of this final panel are not repeated elsewhere, and it "asserts singularity." Breslin maintains his negative analysis even though he repeats this Rothko remark about the chapel: "You can be engaged into the study of proportion or the response of your own meditative moods," and "It is all a study in proportion."<sup>80</sup> This is quite a significant statement by Rothko, meaning that viewers can seek a highly human-scale response in terms of their own states of soul, which should include various combinations of joyous, peaceful, or tragic conditions. Or, in a more objective and philosophic manner, they may contemplate the metaphysical, the ideational suggestivity of the handling of ratio and measure. This combination comes close to being ideal for the purposes of any chapel.

Taking for granted the allusions to Christology (the altar-piece tonality) of the chapel murals, and taking for granted the certain desire of Rothko to convey a wide range of mystical and spiritual value outside of specifically Christian tradition, including oriental and contemporary secular spirituality, one may seek other interesting features. Rothko uses clean rather than fuzzy edges, offering one more reduction toward simplicity, and suggesting, semantically, a kind of clarifying finality for this vision. This is a good time to mention seriality as one of the resources for sublimity named by the classical theorists. Throughout his life Rothko was eager to have his paintings shown as a set in one room. This serial concept allows the paintings to work together like various voices in a unified operatic work, and also allows for an incremental ladder-like ascent toward eternal things. Two other patterns (named by Longinus) are also prominent in Rothko's aims: the grand motif of the one and the many (also implied by the single room with eight walls), and the bold pushing of the past into the present. We would see more emphasis on some of these principles from classic sublime theory if the Rothko interpreters had absorbed the major studies. Longinus also singled out for sublime expressivity the fact of organic unity, meditative silence, question and answer patterns, metaphor, and strong passions—all of these present in the Rothko chapel and preceding works. From Burke's theory the following affective features are also strong in the Rice chapel and previous works: terror, obscurity, dark/light combinations, dark colors, emptiness, privation, solitude, vastness, verticality, and penetration into deepness. Attention should be focused on the last panel in the chapel. The sense of human scale is sharper, the optimism of color is greater. It seems reasonable to take this panel as a testimony for humanism, for the cry of a man with arms raised toward transcendental realities, an assertion of human will-to-power, an assertion of man as measure, an assertion of existential freedom and human triumph.

Certainly Rothko is still working for a mythical sublime, a generic sense of mythicity located in modernist experience and the lived immediacy of existential hope and anguish, and also for an ontological sublime if we assume that his rectangles, duos, trinities, and quaternities testify to the basic stuff of the cosmos, as well as to basic flux carried by the sense of radical change in the new abstract aesthetic, and by field imagery.

The moral sublimity of the Rothko chapel is indisputable due to its positive

spiritual purpose, yet other ethical aspects also exist. As Motherwell insisted, the entire abstract expressionist program had its own intrinsic morality of a quest for uncontaminated new forms of expression wedded to a ruthless honesty about feeling and form.

Finally, to reinforce the general thesis that Rothko belongs most essentially to a combination of the noble and ideational sublime, it is appropriate to list again some of his key ideas that invest these three paintings and the chapel with the ideational sublime: behind the world lies a sacred absolute; life is greatly bitter and painful, but there are also valid grounds for hope and faith; Dionysian and Apollonian powers must be celebrated and balanced; polarity combined with measure and ratio constitutes a great cosmic and human law; modern abstract art is a radical break, yet it retains major bondings to past art; measure and ratio function musically and allow abstract art to approach the condition of abstract music; art should be impersonal not confessional; the sacred is shrouded in enigma; the creative artist imposes his values on society; existential lived experience is the chief source for values; sensuality must be related to concepts; new approaches to myth are needed; color and light are powerful symbols; the creative artist is a mythic hero; and materialism, Marxism, and unrestrained capitalism must be resisted, along with empty traditional religious conventions. To this set (certainly not exhaustive) may be added a theoretic rejection of anecdote, narrative, imitation, sentimentality, nostalgia, and local color. Rothko firmly held a set of major ideas adequate to become the basis for an ideational sublime, ideas woven into the aesthetic patterns of his paintings and of the Houston murals.

Having ended this chapter with the Rice chapel, it is appropriate to note one further range in Rothko's religious program: abstract art offers extremely satisfying ways to honor Godhead and yet protect the purity of an eternal absolute. That is, since abstraction can avoid anecdote and human figures and local scenic realism, it can minimize the anthropomorphic and superstitious elements in a given religious form. The nous-centered religion of Plotinus tries to achieve such a purification. The point has already been made that Rothko's abstract ladders suggest the emanation theory of Plotinus, emanations tied to rationality. Recalling Rothko's advice that young painters should study Western mysticism, we might suspect that Rothko had Plotinus in mind, and that emanation logic is a semantic feature of Rothko's technique of inner light and

color fusions which do not negate formal separations. A general emanation pattern is also logical for Rothko since it is a key aspect of Jewish mystical writing (which influenced Newman more than Rothko). Rothko might have been influenced by the Kabbala to use emanation as a pattern.<sup>81</sup> Reason and emanation may be seen as coming together in the Houston chapel in a theologically astute manner.

The perspectives of Weiskel, Crowther, Lyotard, and Ferguson would allow varied readings of Rothko. From Weiskel's point of view, one could bring to the fore the counter elements and the ironic masking of the private self, yet the Jungianism of Rothko works against Weiskel's Freudianism, and the negative features of Rothko's works are overshadowed by the strong affirmative currents. However Rothko would support Weiskel's claim that the sublime requires a more than human transcendence. Perhaps Weiskel would recognize the predominance of optimism and spirituality in Rothko and thus assume (like Rosenblum in Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition) that Rothko did not move out of the romantic sublime into the more negative postmodern sublime.

Crowther's perspective is praiseworthy because—comprehensive enough to embrace the crucial ground for understanding Rothko—it would allow for the painter's moral seriousness, his ideational and noble sublime, his intent to enrich the capacities of viewers, his utilization of suffering and tragedy, his aesthetics of rational contemplation, his perception that abstract art mounts a critique of capitalism and social structures, his sense of physicality and existential embodiment, his sense of strong relations to history and culture, his sense of reciprocity between the sensory and ideational, his belief in the redemptive power of art, his sense of psychological constants and trans-finite modes of experience, and his efforts to meet deep human needs.

Lyotard's approach would call attention to some of the painter's valuable features: Rothko offers what Lyotard describes as the essence of the sublime, the "ungraspable allusions to the invisible within the visible"; he would support Lyotard in resisting all dogmatic positions; his moral dimension would accord with Lyotard's sublime moral ought; he would agree with Lyotard that art should satisfy basic human needs; he would agree that experimental art should renew our sense of existential wonder; and he would agree that the crucial zone for sublimity is the ideational. Rothko's paintings, however,

would not accord with Lyotard's dismissal of all large legitimating narratives, since Rothko is situated not only in Western theory of the sublime but also in the grand narratives of enlightenment, democracy, and liberal humanistic freedom. And, in that the work of Rothko, Newman, and Still was designed as positive affirmation to fill the spiritual void of fading orthodox religions, Rothko would not accept Lyotard's sceptical claim that nothing positive can now be offered. And the abstract expressionists would be in accord with Lyotard's view that modernism and idealism should continue as the main stream.

Assuming that Ferguson's method would be to look for problematic sites of contradiction, she might well support those readings of Rothko which claim that the voids negate the putative sublimity, adding up to a nothingness. Also a Ferguson approach might lean heavily on Rothko's irony of self-effacement, seizing upon that as a sign of the destabilizing of the concept of self, which would be a misreading, since Rothko's setting aside of the private ego is designed only to reach the impersonal ground of universal contents, and does not function to problematize either selfhood or external objects. Abstract expressionism is an assertion of ideas and subjectivity, but it is not a denial of contact with external objects. Rothko, Newman, and Still never speak in these terms. Also, a Ferguson type of reading might pay careful attention to the language statements of Rothko, hoping thereby to shift the ground away from the paintings toward rhetoricity, and seeking in the painter's words some elements that could contradict and problematize the paintings. Thus Ferguson, Lyotard, and Weiskel may be used for partial insights into the oeuvre of Rothko; yet, their approach can encourage misreadings when positive contents are forced into an extremely negative framework. Rothko's works do not allow their own recognitions of doubt and negation to overpower the stronger components of affirmation carried in both measured form and sublime content. Strongly negative readings are strongly negated by Rothko's ratio and proportion, and his portals are the opposite of sealed windows. As I have argued earlier (in my general approval of Crowther's perspective) Crowther's model, so far, does not give a full enough appreciation of the high place of religions and moralities in sublimicist, and to that extent, does not do full justice to strong religious and ethical themes in painters such as Rothko.

Thus in any full and fair appraisal of Rothko, interpreters should pay attention to

the structures of positive belief; the spirituality; the reasons for resisting politicized art; the sense of cultic space, ratio, and human scale; the idea of self-effacement; the motif of the artist as questing culture hero; the special powers of abstraction; the rejection of traditional orthodoxies; and the special power of the portal image.

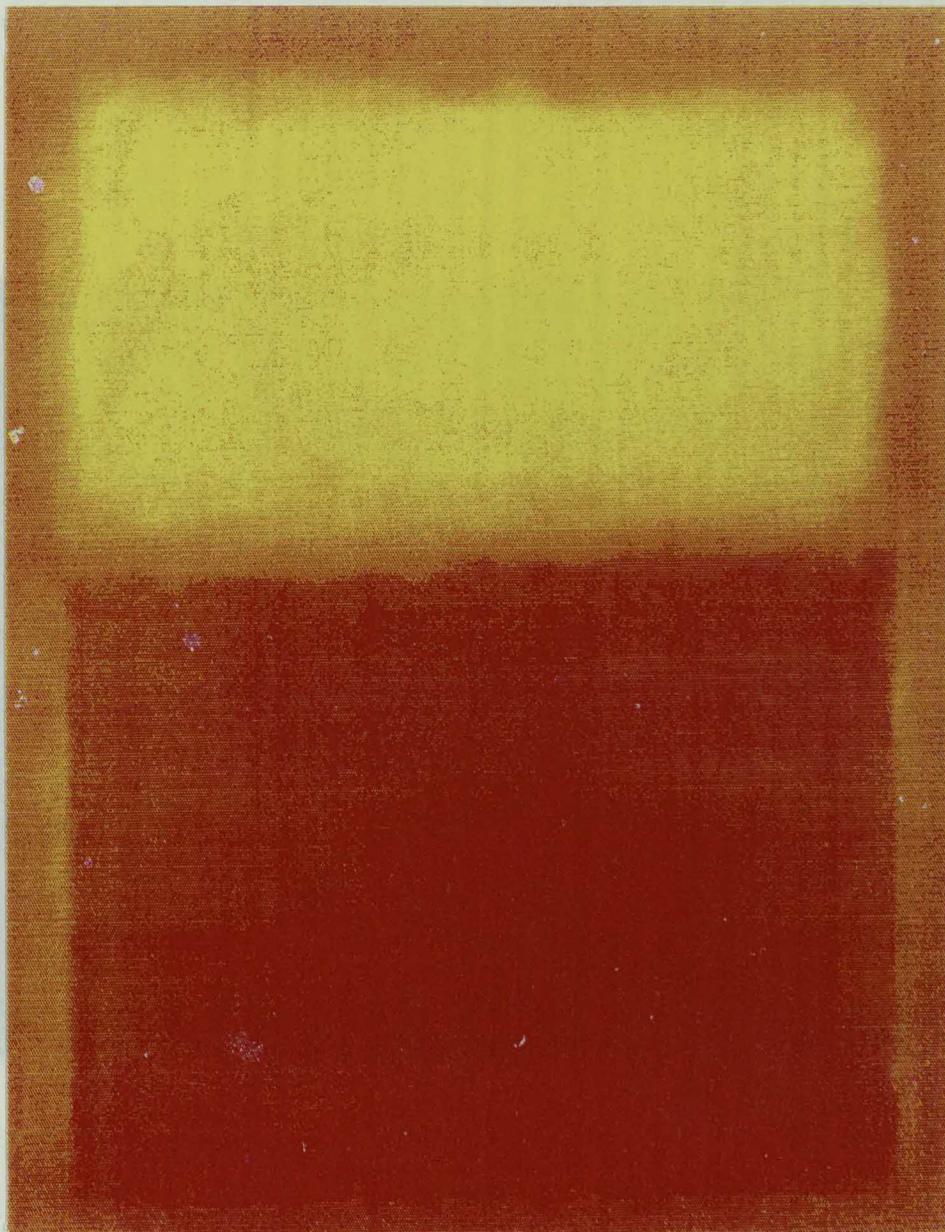
As we have seen, there can be some fundamental disagreement over the best way to interpret this portal, and also the dark colors that Rothko prefers. The predominantly affirmative interpretation which I have favored is based on the general sense of value affirmations that emerges from Rothko's many statements about his program. And I have argued that these positive implications continue to be the dominant ones all the way to the ecumenical chapel at Rice University. Yet Rothko has called attention to the darker motifs in his work, the suggestions of tragedy, doom, and terror. Interpreters could assume that these factors deserve greater emphasis, could assume that the very vagueness and murkiness and veiled aspect of Rothko's works could convey the unreachability or unknowability of whatever absolute might exist behind the veil, behind the portal which could be seen as much as a barrier as an access. Additionally, a middle ground could be taken, the presumption that the veiled effect points both to an access and a concealment, and such a middle ground interpretation would, I think, accord better with everything we know about Rothko. I have favored tipping the scales to the positive side because of accumulated evidence, and I have shown that most of Rothko's interpreters favor this approach--which may owe something to the generally optimistic flavor of the American mind. However, we should recognize that an alternative and more pessimistic reading is possible.

Such ambiguities are relevant to a later chapter in this study which raises the difficult problem of discriminating between the generally hopeful voice of modernism and the generally less hopeful voice of postmodernism. The situation of Rothko will be found in other major modernist painters: an interweaving of negative and positive elements, an interweaving of the power of rupture with the power of tradition. These paradoxical features abound throughout the whole pattern of American and European art in the twentieth century. If Rothko, Newman, and Still are the heirs of a modern European tradition of mystical and spiritual ascent toward the absolute, they also inherit the anguish of German expressionism and the bitter flavor of Dada and futurism. This chapter on Rothko points to such issues, to be treated later.

For now, the chief intent has been to present a generally positive reading of Rothko and to make a case for locating in Rothko's paintings the following modes of sublimity: ideational, existential, Nietzschean, religious, Burkean, moral, counter, noble, and light-color. The assumption is that all of these modes lace together in Rothko's search for new ways to approach absolute subjects in a pattern of transcendence.



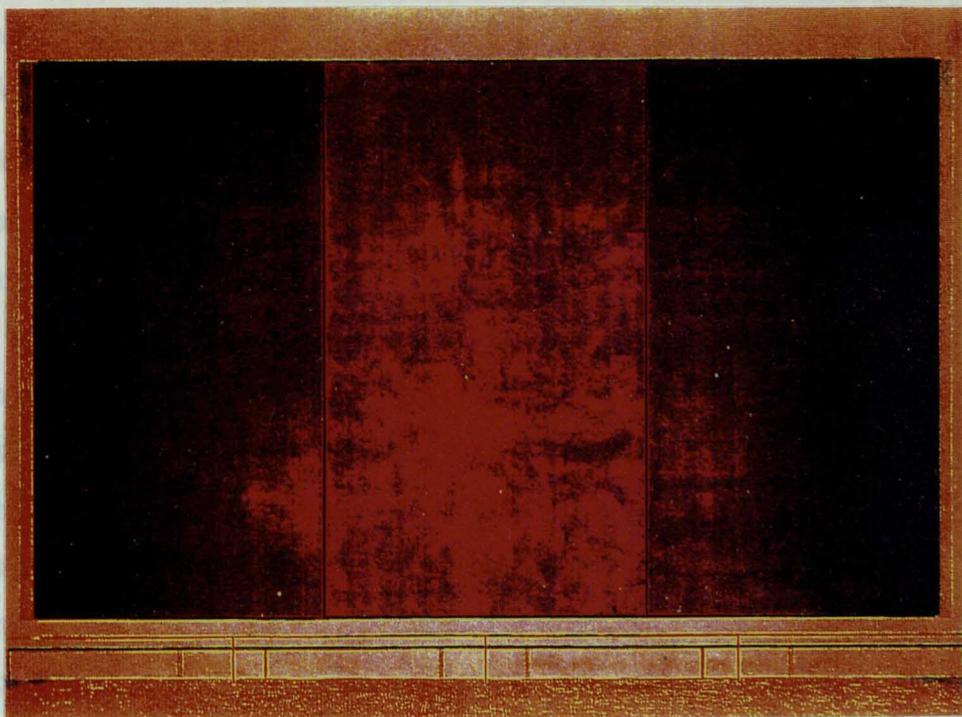
Rothko - Multiform 1948  
Oil on Canvas 89x65  
Estate of Rothko



**Rothko - Orange and Yellow 1956**  
Oil on Canvas 91x71  
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York  
Gift of Seymour H. Knox, 1956



Rothko - Black on Maroon 1959  
Oil on Canvas 90x105  
Tate Gallery: Gift of the artist



Rothko - Center Triptych - 1966  
Ecumenical Chapel  
Rice University, Houston, Texas

## **Five - The Sublime in Newman**

The chapters on Newman and Still can be briefer than the treatment of Rothko, since there is no need to cover the same ground again. Interpreters of Newman are now in an ideal situation to treat his general program because of the 1990 Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews.<sup>1</sup> Using this work, one can readily follow the development of all of Newman's most important concepts. However, some amalgamating must be done in that the chronological data is distributed under six chapter headings: The Artist-Citizen, The Artist-Critic, The Artist-Thinker, Statements, Correspondence, and Colloquies. A study of these writings and interviews suggests that a sound analysis of Newman's concerns can be sought under fourteen pivotal concepts that Newman keeps returning to over the years: (1) the crisis situation for American painters in the thirties and forties; (2) the way out of the crisis by a neoprimitive avant-garde creation of a bold new art with universal metaphysical subject matter conveyed through subjective, ideographic, and abstract symbols; (3) a stress on strong feelings in art, but feelings aroused by metaphysical ideas, and this emotive/cerebral art constituting a direct pointing to the desiderated truth, a direct ontological participation in the truth rather than any kind of indirect representation of it; (4) a search for the sublime rather than the beautiful, for exaltation of spirit in a secular mode of muted religiosity stained by terror and tragic awareness; (5) a strong sense of existential humanism, of authentic place of being, and of existential freedom; (6) this existential center leading to an important art concept of humanized scale created by drawing; (7) this existential center also leading to a metaphysical art motif of total selfhood lifted out of social and natural environment and poised under a space dome of

all four unbounded horizons; (8) a sense of a new mythology with Jungian tonality yet derived not from the past but from contemporary sources; (9) a generally anarchistic mind-set which rejects dogma and fights against excessive social control and dehumanization characteristic of Fascism, capitalism, and Marxist authoritarianism; (10) a distinct theory of art history; (11) a preference for titles of paintings that suggest metaphysical meaning; (12) a life-long effort to clarify his divergence from surrealism, from Mondrian, and from the formalism of Bell and Fry; (13) a distancing of himself from direct political and social reform; and (14) comments on the sense in which there was or was not a genuine New York School or a school of abstract expressionism. Obviously there is some overlap among the fourteen areas, but Newman himself has marked them out as topics for repeated treatment.

From Newman's perspective, the crisis situation of the thirties was generated partly by art history and partly by social history. Painters were moving away from realism, as witnessed by surrealism and the full abstraction of Mondrian. Yet Newman spoke of impasse. While "the new painters were dissatisfied with realism," they could not accept formalist abstract art that seemed to deny subject matter, and they could not accept the fantasy dream world of surrealism, though the surrealists were right to stress "the importance of subject matter for the painter."<sup>2</sup> Newman thought the new painters were standing naked without a proper subject or method, had to fall back on subjectivity, and could not use any traditional social or religious symbols.<sup>3</sup> Newman also felt that most preceding artists had sought to produce paintings which were beautiful objects. But his generation was also dissatisfied by beauty, which is a product of form, not of subject matter. In looking back at this situation, Newman states that they could not paint a beautiful world because "we realized that the world wasn't beautiful."<sup>4</sup> But much earlier, in 1945, Newman had declared that the new painters were seeking a "non-voluptuous" art "to get rid of, to slough off, the skin of 'beauty,'" and this project "involves a denial of Western European art."<sup>5</sup> In addition to this impasse in the world of art, Newman also stressed a crucial element in the cultural situation: the bleakness about society engendered by World War II with its horrors and the atomic bomb and the ideological oppressions by the Nazis, the Marxists, and capitalism. Newman declared in 1948 that while Egyptians faced an unknown

ontological terror of death, life, and eternity, the modern painters faced a recognized social terror of a world gone wrong, and "What we have now is a tragic rather than a terrifying situation," a new sense of fate like "the tragic position of the Greeks." Newman declares that the modern painters must not make the mistake of the Greek artists and seek an ideal beauty but must instead imitate the Greek writers and "tear the tragedy to shreds."<sup>6</sup> So far the interpreters of Newman have failed to make the extremely important connection such concepts have to Nietzsche.

Given then the predicament of a new sense of tragedy plus profound dissatisfaction at the available subjects and methods of the legendary preceding modernist painters, Newman, like Rothko and Still, struggled to create a new method and new subject matter. For Newman the proper subject was metaphysical ideas and the proper method was the subjective, abstract, participatory, ideographic symbol. More than any other topic, Newman emphasizes the question of subject matter. As early as 1926 Newman scribbled on a brown paper bag that "The artist emphatically does not create form. The artist expresses in a work of art an aesthetic idea which is innate and eternal."<sup>7</sup> It is not certain whether or not Newman takes his "aesthetic idea" directly from Kant, or from his own situation and milieu. Like Rothko and Pollock (and partly influenced by Nietzsche, Jung, Cassirer, Eliot, Joyce, and others who raised high the world's primitive myths) Newman perceived a close analogy, in 1944, between his twentieth century art of ideas and the work of primitive artists. Primitive artists captured spiritual content, and "their art by the same magic illuminates the work of our time" and helps clarify the modern abstract artist's aims by the primitive "sense of dignity, the high seriousness of purpose," and by "the tangible expression of man's innermost, intangible, spiritual aspirations." For Newman the primitive artists were metaphysically and aesthetically sophisticated in their pursuit not of the real external world but of "the elemental mystery of life," and their works "were the same sublime creation of highly sophisticated artists with the same doubts, the same wonderings, and the same search for salvation, that same indomitable courage which activates men and spirit today." Newman declared that their high sense of moral purpose reached a "sublime plane."<sup>8</sup>

Also in 1944 Newman, in an essay on modern art, declared that modern abstract painters have made a neo-primitive return "to first principles," creating art which is "an

expression of thought, of important truth, not a sentimental and artificial 'beauty.' It established the artist as a creator and searcher rather than a copyist." Newman adds, "It has been charged that modern art is abstract, intellectual. So are Einstein's theory, the quantum theory, and cosmic theory."<sup>9</sup> This is an important comment in that Motherwell was stressing Alfred North Whitehead's praise of abstraction in science, mathematics, and philosophy, and claiming that the extreme simplifying and reducing in scientific and philosophic abstraction gave the abstract expressionists a sense of the value of abstract art as a vehicle for ideas. Newman goes on to assert that "the art of the future will . . . be an art that is abstract yet full of feeling, capable of expressing the most abstruse philosophic thought."<sup>10</sup> A year later, in 1945, Newman observes that such subject matter is universal, not personal or regional, and not political, in the sense that "no one agitates for American, French, or Mexican 'mathematical tradition.'"<sup>11</sup> Thus Newman, like modernism in general, sought a universal truth and an international style, two elements which demarcate modernism from postmodernism--though just how much division there really is remains unsettled.

Sometime in 1944 or 1945 Newman produced an unpublished essay on painting and prose, observing that the Western European primitive artists enjoyed the authentic sublime subject, being concerned "with the creation of gods, with the expression of forces with numinous beings," yet Christianity negated this authentic ground by an excessively "rationalized religion," and Judaism negated the free creative ground by "outright taboo," and for these reasons any new kind of religious dogmatism would be a "blind alley."<sup>12</sup>

Also in 1945, in a letter, Newman emphasizes that the new American painting "is concerned with metaphysical implications, with the divine mysteries," and that "to create numinous beings these men have created new symbols, new images, a new plastic language."<sup>13</sup> Around 1950 Newman interestingly rejects deliberate ambiguity in art ideas, declaring that "One thing is certain: ambiguity as a deliberate act . . . is an anomaly and an evasion. . . . Clarity alone can lead to freedom."<sup>14</sup> Newman frequently notes that the proper new transcendental subject matter is "an expressive art yet not of the painter's personal feelings."<sup>15</sup> In 1947 Newman claimed that the American artist

“transcends his abstract world to make that world real, rendering the epistemological implications of abstract concepts with sufficient conviction and understanding to give them body and expression.”<sup>16</sup> This embodiment in art symbols brings metaphysical ideas into the felt existential domain as an incarnation into real presence, not as a description. Newman adds that the painters give reality to intangibles, achieve a kind of “mysticism,” and “To put it philosophically, the European is concerned with the transcendence of objects while the American is concerned with the reality of the transcendental experience.”<sup>17</sup> Newman is close to Kant’s idea-based theory of the sublime, and close to Nietzsche’s sense of the artist as creator of religious and metaphysical values, but he does not share Nietzsche’s belief that all truth is fiction.

Enough has been said to highlight Newman’s sense of an abstract art embodying metaphysical ideas. Now, what kind of abstract symbol can pull off such a magic trick and be a magic of reality, not fantasy? We need a subjective but impersonal abstract symbol that achieves an ontological capture of a transcendental reality. Experts on the theory of myth and symbol may be able to show how such a concept originated in the works of Nietzsche, the French Symbolists, Jung, Levy-Bruhl, Sir James Frazer, Cassirer, Tillich, and others. Newman worked out his own way with this complex background around him.

Newman records that in 1948, he produced his first exploratory “Onement” work, nothing but one line in the center of a canvas, and he pondered it for a full year, realizing that somehow this abstract symbol that came into Onement I “confronted” him with “a life of its own.”<sup>18</sup> Newman at one point calls attention to the idea of pure poetry, in which words function “purely and abstractly in the manner of music.”<sup>19</sup> Even if words (ordered by grammar and syntax) never actually achieve such purity, it is possible for painting. Newman’s symbol comes from personal subjectivity, but embodies universal and impersonal ideas. And “when a personal symbol is integrated with the abstract idea, it has the living element within it that will carry the living thought.”<sup>20</sup> This mysticism of abstract symbols would resemble the way in which, in biblical Logos theory, all particulars of creation incarnate the Logos; this Johanne doctrine is quite a good example of secular but spiritual symbolism in the sense of direct participation required by Newman. He calls this “a vision of the world of truth in terms

of visual symbols,” and also calls it “a kind of symbolic logic,” and “an attempt to achieve feeling through intellectual content.”<sup>21</sup> If Mondrian’s art was too cool, this is an impassioned art; yet the passion flows not from any personal life problems, rather from the recognition of sublime metaphysical verities. Newman is stalking bigger game than personal romantic confessions.

In a revealing remark in the 1947 letter to Greenberg, Newman notes that a non-Euclidean formula in geometry is not like Einstein’s formulas because the latter are “symbols that evoke in a stenographic fashion the imagined idea-complex that is Einstein’s vision of a cosmos. . . . We must evoke his world, recreating his reality from his non-material stenography.”<sup>22</sup> Even if this is not a very clear statement, it does at least point to Newman’s interest in a kind of art symbol which could evoke and illuminate higher realities at the cosmic and universal level.

In 1963, Newman asserts that he wants to see an art work not as a mere object but as an “entire sentence.”<sup>23</sup> Sentences make philosophic predications about truths, and Newman hopes for the same power in an abstract painting. This does not imply that the essence of the painting could be given in a sentence. It could not be, since such a reduction would remove the direct pointing. “Direct pointing” offers a helpful phrase. In the art of Zen Buddhism, the painting as direct pointing means that the painting literally is the revealed state of enlightenment, to be grasped at once as existential ontology. Finally, in that 1970 last statement prior to his death, Newman comments that his paintings are not like windows showing the way to something else; rather, “The beginning and end are there at once.”<sup>24</sup> What all of these passages accomplish is to reveal Newman’s working out of his early 1945 intuition that primitive art, like the abstract work of Gottlieb, utilizes abstract “pictographic” forms functioning as symbols to elevate “the aesthetic self to the ecstasy man feels whenever face to face with deep insight.”<sup>25</sup> Obviously the “deep insight” and “ecstasy” would pertain to metaphysical appropriation of an authentic sublime subject. Finally, there are the explicit comments in Newman’s 1947 piece “The Ideographic Picture,” defined by Newman as a direct conveying of ideas by symbolic figures in which an “idea-complex . . . makes contact with mystery.”<sup>26</sup>

Various remarks already given reveal that Newman wants impassioned art rather than calmly rational art. In 1969 Newman offers "For Impassioned Criticism," favoring Baudelaire's intense and partisan criticism and rejecting criticism more cool and "scientific."<sup>27</sup> The 1944 article "On Modern Art" for La Revista Belga contains the claim that the new art "is abstract yet full of feeling."<sup>28</sup> In the 1945 memorial letter for Howard Putzel, Newman calls for an art "concerned with numinous ideas and feelings."<sup>29</sup> Newman proclaims that the first man was an artist who gave "yells of awe and anger at his tragic state."<sup>30</sup> Strong passions attach to all the previously mentioned aspects of ecstasy and exaltation in Newman's subject matter. In an interesting 1966 conversation with Thomas Hess concerning Newman's series of paintings The Stations of the Cross, Newman insists that the intellectual and emotional cannot be separated.<sup>31</sup> A year later, while addressing a conference on art and religion, Newman claims that while the young recent painters, like the hippies, may seem to show no strong beliefs, their work projects an emotional longing for religious feeling.<sup>32</sup>

Other than comments already given, Newman offers many insights into his search for the sublime, the grandest possible subject, and a predictable one for painters not devoted to beauty. Perhaps the logical place to begin is Newman's 1948 essay "The Sublime is Now," his last article for Tiger's Eye. The year 1948 is important, because this is the year in which Newman discovers his own mature style. In a note to this essay Mollie McNickle states that in preparing it, Newman, who had studied standard texts on the sublime in college, "refreshed his memory of the standard texts on the subject: Longinus, Kant, Hegel, Burke."<sup>33</sup> If this is true, a firm ground is laid for connecting Newman's paintings to these theorists. In the essay, Newman judged that in their concept of the sublime absolute, Longinus, Kant, and Hegel kept too close to the Greek sense of beauty and formal qualities, but Burke did not, and "to me Burke reads like a surrealist manual."<sup>34</sup> Newman is not fair to Kant, who marked off the rugged sublime from the formal perfection of the beautiful. Newman reveals a preference for Gothic and Baroque sublimity in that these modes show "a desire to destroy form."<sup>35</sup> From the Renaissance up to impressionism, Newman declares, the impulse toward the

sublime was wrongly centered in the Greek obsession with ideal beauty, but the impressionists could not reach a needed new vision because they lacked “an adequate substitute for a sublime message.” The ugly strokes of impressionist painters did launch modern art in that “The impulse of modern art was the desire to destroy beauty.”<sup>36</sup>

In Newman’s view modern artists are struggling to regain a genuine sublime subject. Although “living in a time without a legend or mythos that can be called sublime,” some artists “are finding the answer” and “are reasserting man’s natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to absolute emotions.” These artists are not, like the Greeks and the Middle Ages, making “cathedrals” out of man or Christ, but are making them “out of ourselves, out of our own feelings.”<sup>37</sup> It would have helped Newman had he understood that Kant and Nietzsche both located the sublime in human thought and feeling.

Attention has been drawn to comments in which Newman gives to primitive artists an authentic sublime subject. In “the Plasmic Image,” written in the mid-forties, Newman assumes that surrealism was too man-centered to reach a sublime vision. However, “the present painter is concerned not with his own feelings or with the mystery of his own personality but with the penetration into the world mystery. His imagination is therefore attempting to dig into metaphysical secrets. To that extent his art is concerned with the sublime. It is a religious art which through symbols will catch the basic truth of life, which is its sense of tragedy.”<sup>38</sup> In this same essay Newman declares that the primitive painter and modern painter both face directly “the mystery of life” and present “wonder” and “terror” before this mystery “or the majesty of its forces.”<sup>39</sup> Again, Newman’s interest in forces rather than distances suggests that his chief interest lies in the dynamical sublime. This sense of force was strong in Newman’s essay “The Sublime is Now,” wherein he assumes that in the absence of a public sublime myth, the revolutionary modern art reaches sublimity “in its effort and energy” to discover some saving strategy. Mondrian’s effort is seen as reaching the sublime realm, but “The geometry (perfection) swallowed up his metaphysics (his exaltation).”<sup>40</sup> It is important that Newman perceives a close bond to Mondrian, but wants a stronger sense of emotive exaltation.

Newman records (in relation to The Stations of the Cross) that he felt close to the

sublime level of Michelangelo and Turner in striving “to paint the impossible.”<sup>41</sup> An especially interesting comment appears in Newman’s address to the congress on religion and art when Newman declares that the sublime sacredness of a work of art might well depend “on the quality of the work of art, on its uniqueness, on its rigor.”<sup>42</sup> This is a new insight, a late one, and it suggests Henry James’s famous remark in one of the prefaces to his novels that a work cannot “bear witness” to its high subject unless it has great formal and stylistic perfection. Such a principle would demand both significant form and significant metaphysics—a very productive theory to hold.

The remaining items in the list of fourteen do not require as thorough a treatment as did the topics of subject matter, symbolic method, emotive content, and sublime aims. Two elements come together in Newman’s sense of existential selfhood and existential place. A catalogue statement of 1965 declares that “The self, terrible and constant, is for me the subject matter of painting and sculpture.”<sup>43</sup> A year later in the catalogue statement for his own showing of The Stations of the Cross, Newman explains that his basic theme of the cry of Jesus that God has forsaken him becomes transmuted into the tragic cry which is “the story of each man’s agony,” and that the alienated selfhood of Jesus constitutes “the human condition since Adam.”<sup>44</sup> An important remark combining Sartrean existentialism and Newman’s space dome concept occurs in a 1962 interview: “Anyone standing in front of my paintings must feel the vertical domelike vaults encompass him to awaken an awareness of his being alive in the sensation of complete space,” and yet he rejects the subject of his personal self as being anecdotal.<sup>45</sup>

In the 1965 B.B.C. interview with David Sylvester, Newman offers the somewhat Sartrean comment, his hope that his paintings have “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. . . . the disdain for the self is something I don’t quite understand.”<sup>46</sup>

Accompanying Newman’s sense of the sublime existential self is his sense of place for the self. Again in the B.B.C. interview, Newman declares: “One thing that I am involved in . . . is that the painting should give man a sense of place: that he knows

he's there, so he's aware of himself." Newman adds, "To me, the sense of place not only has a mystery but has that sense of metaphysical fact."<sup>47</sup> Newman elsewhere states that facts belong to art because artists "create reality," and do not imitate nature.<sup>48</sup> Obviously, one of the metaphysical ideas that Newman captures in his abstract symbols is the concept of spatially embodied selfhood. The mystery and sacredness of place emerges as the core motif of Newman's design for a Jewish synagogue, the creation of an altar place of existential freedom where one is alone with God, and "under the tension of that 'Tzim-Tzum' that created light and the world, he can experience a total sense of his own personality before the Torah and His name."<sup>49</sup> Also, in his address to a 1967 conference on art and religion, Newman claims that any artist who creates a genuine sense of place reaches a spiritual dimension, and "the Jewish medieval notion of Makom is where God is."<sup>50</sup> The "Tzim-Tzum" concept refers to the theory in Jewish Kabbalah lore that in order for God to generate a space for the cosmos, He contracts his own sweep of being to make that space. Existential embodiment also stands behind Newman's important doctrine of scale in paintings, scale produced not by color but by drawing, by line. A 1965 catalogue statement contains Newman's declaration: "The freedom of space, the emotion of human scale, the sanctity of place are what is moving."<sup>51</sup> Also, Newman asserts that in his Stations of the Cross, "I wanted human scale for the human cry."<sup>52</sup> A 1962 interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler contains Newman's remark that he is not a colorist, that his "passionate" subject is reached "primarily in my drawing."<sup>53</sup> A 1966 interview gives Newman's comment that scale is realized "in separating the painting from the sense of environment."<sup>54</sup> Various comments about scale appear in a tour-of-the-Louvre conversation between Newman and Pierre Schneider in 1969. Of Uccello's painting Battle, Newman says that the scale is good because "content and form are inseparable"; that Ingres could paint but could not draw because he "had no sense of scale"; and that in The Raft of the Medusa "the scale is marvelous."<sup>55</sup> Newman's doctrine of scale obviously concerns not size but ratio and proportion as they actualize a sharply human perspective of value and idea which is autonomous in the painting, not fixed by any

external perspective of the physical environment—a kind of “man is the measure” concept.

Newman’s distinctive space dome and four unbounded horizons idea appears in the 1962 Seckler interview: “Since childhood I have always been aware of space as a space-dome. . . . For me space is where I can feel all four horizons.”<sup>56</sup> All of Newman’s pivotal ideas relate to the sublime (as is the case with Nietzsche), and this connection is clear when Newman makes a remark in the interview with Hudson which has the sense of the sublimity in Friedrich’s paintings. Newman observes that his sense of scale is like being on the tundra where there are no mountains to block the infinite horizon, and “the feeling of space involves all four horizons,” and “when you are standing on a beach or on a plateau or on the tundra, you get a tangible, almost fearsome sense of space.”<sup>57</sup>

Newman does not often speak of mythology, but it is an important concern. Attention has been given to his belief that the modern painter of the sublime does not enjoy a public sublime mythos and must struggle to achieve a personal myth. In the memorial letter for Howard Putzel, Newman sees the new American art as essentially “a religious art, a modern mythology concerned with numinous ideas and feelings.”<sup>58</sup> In his catalogue foreword in 1946 Newman states that the modern abstract painters “are creating a living myth” for their age.<sup>59</sup>

Newman’s anarchism flows from his rejection of all coercive dogma, whether political, social, or religious. In 1968 Newman writes a foreword to an edition of Kropotkin’s anarchist Memoirs of a Revolutionary, claiming that “What is particular about anarchism is not its criticism of society but the creative way of life it offers that makes all programmatic doctrine impossible,” and noting that “Anarchism . . . is the only criticism of society which is not a technique for the seizure and transfer of power by one group against another.” Kropotkin is seen as a lover of “personal freedom,” and as “the existentialist man observing his own drama,” and as one “deeply concerned with the dehumanization which was happening as a result of the industrial revolution.” It is in this sense that Newman several times called his work subversive of capitalism, and he pins this down in his 1966 remark that capitalism is challenged because “if my paintings were properly understood, society would change.”<sup>60</sup> Newman clearly rejects

any art of direct political aims because authentic works make their own aesthetic challenge to misguided societies.

Newman's theory of art history has already been suggested in his tracking of the sublime subject from the primitive artists to the Greeks and on to the impressionists, surrealists, and Mondrian. Newman designs his art history in terms of an exalted sublime subject properly conceived by primitives and Egyptians, turned off track by the Greeks, perceived better in the Middle Ages and Gothic, wrongly turned toward the Greeks in the Renaissance and until the impressionists, wrongly turned by the surrealists to dream and fantasy, made too scientific and cold by Mondrian, and now coming into a proper new passionate phase in abstract expressionism. The key element for Newman is to reject the physical real world in search of existential exaltation before mysteries of being and powers of metaphysical concept.

Newman's theory of titles appears when he states in the 1984 documentary film interview that his titles are an effort to create a "metaphor" for his meanings.<sup>61</sup> This concept is valuable for any analysis of Newman's work. Perhaps enough has already been said about his quarrel with the surrealists; he disliked their drift into fantasy and dream, their use of recognizable objects, and the dogmatism of their allegiance to Marx and Freud. Mondrian erred in being too rational and too much concerned for geometric beauty. Naturally Newman would reject the formalism of Fry and Bell. Newman asserts that the doctrine of significant form has become a harmful new academy.<sup>62</sup> Fry and Bell were important because in reaction against them, Newman developed his aesthetic of subject matter. Newman's hostility to direct political art has been explained in his support of anarchy, and the anti-political stance also follows from a concern with the sublime and with revolutionary ideas, not revolutionary social action.

Newman's own perspective on the idea of a New York School is somewhat vague. In 1947 he claims that he, Gottlieb, Rothko, and Still constitute a "new indigenous school."<sup>63</sup> Yet in 1965 Newman claims that he and his cohorts were not "a cohesive bloc," that none of the suggested labels are appropriate because each painter is so "powerfully personal," and that the only common ground was "the creation of a new, free, plastic language."<sup>64</sup> However, this much of a common ground seems to justify the label of abstract expressionism.

Clearly Newman's own statements connect him to a number of the modes of the sublime. As in the case of Rothko, Newman's constant insistence on the primacy of metaphysical ideas places him essentially in the ideational sublime as this direction develops from Longinus, Kant, and other sources. Newman's approach to sublimity through idea reveals some features which differentiate him from Rothko: a clearer concept of the ideographic symbol; a clearer personal conception of art history as it is structured by concern for the sublime; a firmer rejection of the beautiful in favor of the sublime; and a stronger desire for alignment with modern science.

The concept of ideographic symbol emerges in previously noted comments of Newman--that the proper fusion between personal symbol and abstract idea will carry the thought in a lived, existential manner; that in such a symbol strong feeling merges with intellectual content; and that a kind of semantic sentence is created by these pictographs through which one "idea-complex . . . makes contact with mystery." The strong feelings (not arising from irrational passions) are those generated by some idea put forward semantically as a sentence-like truth claim. To use an example from Newman's work, Vir Heroicus Sublimis is based on an emotionally stirring abstract idea: that a person can raise his life to a heroic and sublime level. The painting consists of a large 96x216 inches slab of rich bold red given enough variety to be sentence-like by four slender zips, one charcoal, one white, and two pale red. As an ideograph symbol, we can say that Newman's vast crimson slab is a color/light sublime entity; and the crimson is phenomenologically rich in the very qualities of life, energy, and grandeur; and the four zips are affirmative in their verticality and are constituents of polarity and variety sufficient to suggest a complex human personality as a general force, not as a private subjective ego. Even if we stop here and do not add that the vast red field might symbolically participate in a cosmic One as the validation of sublime encounters, we still have enough to justify Newman's thesis of a "magical" pictograph whose white magic is to fuse emotion and sensory form into the essential substance of the abstract idea. Pale pink or pale blue could not have been used by Newman for this work, and if the zips were not there, we might have a possible symbol for a hidden One, but would not have the realization of polar complexity that can not only represent a human being, but can represent a sublimity of human character set in polar relation to a transcendent absolute. Reasoning of this sort does reveal an acceptable logical

foundation for Newman's important speculation about the ideographic symbol--acceptable enough to give credence to the painter's project. This is not to say that philosophers could not come up with arguments against an art symbol having such semantic and epistemological features. However, all such debates should be settled on a probability scale, and Newman can lay claim to strong probability. It has long been accepted that art symbols successfully embody metaphysical concepts, and icons such as the cross or mandala have always been construed as carriers of a white magic. Following Crowther, one could argue that this revolutionary use of an abstract symbol constitutes precisely that adjustment to social change that keeps symbols culturally alive and opens a saving dimension when symbols grow stale from conventional overuse. That is, the aliveness and new potency of a good symbol is phenomenologically present in Newman's bold new forms. Newman's symbols mean something sublime in terms of a lived existential emergence.

In turning from ideograph to Newman's scheme of art history, the ideational sublime again becomes prominent through Newman's belief that the art projects of different ages should be evaluated in terms of a transcultural concept: whether or not the artists aspire to an exalted sacred zone of transcendence, whether they keep to this highest ground and turn away from the beauty of external objects or optic impressions of nature or geometric formalism or any other subject (such as politics, materialism, or egotism) which would not encourage the ascent to the eternal and sacred. This framework offered by Newman is strongly stained by Nietzsche's sense of a general sublime culture project, and by Nietzschean and Jungian thought about the absence of a true mythos for the modern artist. The presence of the Nietzschean sublime also appears in Newman's belief that the modern tragic awareness of a world gone wrong places the modern artist in the same perspective as the tragic Greek dramatists.

Newman connects his ideational sublime also to modern science, especially in his statement that Einstein's vision of the cosmos is not vivified by his stenographic mathematical signs and formulas, whereas an art symbol can successfully "evoke his world, recreating his reality"--meaning that Newman's art takes cognizance of the cultural change engendered by relativity theory and quantum theory. This is a grandiose claim for abstract art, but Newman finds it plausible. It is reasonable, then, to suggest that the color field abstract expressionists can convey something of the existential,

phenomenological quality of the structures of reality postulated by modern science, and further, that the color field makes contact with the field theories of modern science, and that abstract art forms are especially suited to convey the scientific truth of abstract mathematical sentences. Newman's mind was working in this direction. It might also be the case that when abstract painters from Mondrian to Still reject narrative and anecdote, they are responding to the universalized and timeless patterns of scientific thought, which fit well with the timeless zone of sublimity, myth, and archetype. One could argue that a new scientific sense of quanta of energy is incorporated not only in the activated color fields of Rothko, Newman, and Still, but also in the energy swirls of Pollock and de Kooning. In any case, we must underline Newman's interest in art that can reach both spiritual and scientific absolutes, an ideational center not so conspicuous in Rothko and Still, but certainly not absent. Also, we should keep in mind (following Longinus and Kant) that major scientific concepts, as raw ideas, might qualify as sublime ideas.

The fourth element in Newman's ideational sublime is the firm and conscious rejection of the beautiful, revealed in his claim that the quest for the specific beauty of natural forms has been a wrong turn in art history. This point of view also marks Newman's Tiger's Eye essay on the sublime, wherein Burke is praised for his sharp contrast between smooth formal beauty and the rugged contours of the sublime. This is a good place to connect Newman to the Burkean/Gothic sublime, since, in this essay, Newman raised Burke above other classical theorists and declared his own affinity for Gothic and Baroque sublimity, in which isolated forms are shattered under the pressure of soaring ideas. Also Burkean is Newman's emphasis on strong passions as suitable for sublimity, and even if there is less long brooding over ratio and measure in Newman than in Rothko, Newman is still in the territory of the noble sublime because his forms are geometrized and the strong feelings are triggered by ideas, not by instinctual urges. It is an obvious truth that strong ideas call out strong feelings.

These vectors from the ideational, Nietzschean, and Burkean sublime are joined by a conspicuous alignment with the Jungian and existential sublime, seen especially in the Tiger's Eye essay when Newman declares that the modern abstract painters do not make sacred art based on Greek realism or on the life of Christ, but rather make their cathedrals "out of ourselves, out of our own feelings," creating from this ground a new

kind of effective mythos. As Newman states, the modern painter is like the primitive artist in the need for myth, yet cannot use ancient myth. It is not necessary to elaborate this point, which has been developed in relation to Rothko. We may simply note that, in a Sartrean fashion, the matrix for the new myth is lived personal existence, and, as in Jung, the divine absolute is shifted from external location and placed within the powers of the human psyche. Also, in Cassirer's logic, the life of an artist-hero could establish a secular narrative that becomes culturally effective as a myth, a story connecting the human to the sacred. This new version of secular myth is interestingly adopted by the neo-geo painter Philip Taaffe in a 1987 interview, offering his conception of a mythical narrative theodicy which "extracts an exegesis or makes a story from a number of sacred, inspired, or supernatural events. In doing so, these sacred events become amplified, more lucid, more approachable. Perhaps we should see modernism as a field of inquiry in that sense." Adding that in his own mythic theodicy of modernism, Newman, Rothko, and Still are major figures in his narrative of sacred moments, Taaffe follows the principle that new myth is where one finds it.<sup>65</sup> The existential and phenomenological grounding of Newman's mythic awareness is suggested by painting titles such as Right Here (1954) and Not There—Here (1962).

Newman's search for a light-color sublime (every bit as strong as Rothko's) reveals itself in a series of titles such as Horizon Light (1949), Queen of the Night (1951), Day One (1951-52), White Fire I (1954), Primordial Light (1954), Black Fire I (1961), Noon Light (1961), Shining Forth (1961), Profile of Light (1967), Voice of Fire (1967), White and Hot (1967), and Shimmer Bright (1968). Furthermore, in leafing through Newman's major works in Harold Rosenberg Barnett Newman,<sup>66</sup> it is obvious that the painter's strongly favored colors are the ones that Burke connected to the sublime: crimson, rich blue, black, and radiant white.

The moral sublime is embedded in Newman's paintings in several obvious ways, chiefly the core idea that modern art must serve the social good by creating a new mythos of transcendence to replace the fading orthodox religious structures—a sublime project indebted to Nietzsche, Jung, and others, a project shared by Rothko and Still. Additionally, Newman shares Rothko's moral passion to attain aesthetic forms of rightness, forms simplified and cleansed for the honor of candor and truth to modern

experience, a kind of morality of brush stroke and plastic surface akin to that of Mondrian, and carried forward by Noland, Kelly, Stella, and Will Barnet.

While a counter sublime of attack dwells in Newman's art (carried by the warfare his paintings wage against the past rhetoric of beauty attached to objects of nature, along with warfare against anecdote, romantic personal confession, totalitarian forces, materialism, and regionalism), these counter-currents are subordinated to the positive tonality of his strong religious sublime. In Newman's case (in contrast to Rothko) there is a conspicuous Jewish element that should be neither ignored nor exaggerated. We have noted Newman's interest in a spiritualized space in touch with God, which the painter connects to the medieval Jewish concept of Makom, a place where God is. We have noted Newman's interest in "Tzim-Tzum," the Kabbalistic doctrine that God contracts his own being to generate a space for the cosmos, a space for the coming of light and world. In describing his own design for a synagogue, Newman declares his vision of a space to which each person can go, where "he can experience a total sense of his own personality before the Torah and His Name." In another text, Newman concedes that younger artists were losing a sense of the sacred and the moral, but that, still, they struggle "to create a sense of place so that the artist and the beholder will know where they are." Newman's own sculpture Zim Zum II is an effort to create such a space.<sup>67</sup> The sculpture consists of a paired row of large zig-zag panels of Cor-ten steel, the folds apparently representing the contracting of deity to create space for the universe. Obviously, in light of these remarks, Newman's works aim for a cultic religious space in which existential selfhood stands before the Creator, and the space acts in the manner emphasized by Crowther to produce a sense of hospitable belonging in the world—a coming together of body-hold and world-hold.

Since Newman's remarks do point directly to the Kabbala, some brief observations on Jewish mysticism are appropriate. The basic doctrine, The Tree of Life, establishes a tree-like sequence of emanations from the Creator. The topmost level is called the Crown, closest to Godhead. Under that come three triads, described by Edward Hoffman as Wisdom, Understanding, and Knowledge; then Judgment, Mercy, and Beauty; then Victory, Glory, and Foundation; and finally one bottom category called Kingdom.<sup>68</sup> One prominent scholar of the Kabbala, Gershom Scholem, asserts

that these levels carry additional meanings of love, power, compassion, lasting endurance, and majesty. These ten stages are called the Sephirot. Scholem explains that “although the Sephirot are emanated successively from above to below, each one revealing an additional stage in the divine process, they also have a formalized structure.” Scholem reveals that some scholars think the Tree of Life was structured in three levels of intellect, soul, and nature in response to the levels of the cosmology of Plotinus and neoplatonism. There was some interplay because the Christian neoplatonist Pico della Mirandola founded a Christian school of the Kabbalah in order to blend some of its mystic concepts with Christian belief.<sup>69</sup>

Hoffman notes that under the category of beauty comes the highest divine presence that can be glimpsed during earthly life; that commentators connect the third triad to form, specific shape, and procreation; and that the bottom entity, kingdom, is construed as a female counterpart for the male creator, an emanation closest to normal human life, so that “link by link . . . we are inseparably connected to the most hidden and exalted dimensions of being.”<sup>70</sup> Some Kabbalistic books, such as the Zohar, abound in sexual imagery. There are scattered noble passages rich in sublime content, for instance in The Lesser Holy Assembly book of the Zohar: “And he separateth Himself ever more and more; He is separated from all things, neither yet doth He altogether separate Himself, seeing that unto Himself all things adhere, and that He Himself adhereth to all; He is the Most Holy Ancient of all ancients, the Concealed with all the Concealments.”<sup>71</sup> There are also large segments of the texts which are murky and too fanciful. In his introduction to The Kabbalah Unveiled, Mathers observes that evil (as in Plotinus) is associated with matter, and ten classes of devils are evolved to match the ten Sephirot.<sup>72</sup> All of this kind of primitive thinking is what Plotinus tried to avoid. In the Kabbala these ten emanation stages (balanced in the perfect man Adam Kadmon) are cluttered with fantasy items, whereas in Plotinus we have an almost scientifically clean progression from creator to nous to world soul to human intellect—just as in the gospel of John, we have a potent philosophically purified creation story going from creator to logos to human intellect to incarnation, a story which can be seen as a rebuff to the superstition in the Genesis creation narrative.

Modern Jewish intellectuals like Newman and Rothko would have to reject much

of the Kabbala, but could be expected to respect the broadest concepts: that orders of emanation structure the cosmos and distribute divine powers into nature and man, so that mankind, by meditation, can ascend the tree of emanation to seek a complete spiritualized integration of the self. These purified core concepts are emphasized by Hoffman as he seeks to reconcile the Kabbala with modern psychology, pointing out that Jewish intellectuals have attached the sephirot to Jungian archetypes; have suggested that the sephirot envisions four basic levels of reality as Force, Pattern, Energy, and Substance; and that these four zones can be related to the theories of modern science. Certainly this is the right direction to take, and it has met with some success, but the burden of superstition is still extremely heavy. The sublime of light operates in the Kabbala: the great Kabbalist Isaac Luria taught that the original vessels designed to receive the holy light of the Zimzum were shattered by its magnificence, resulting in an imperfect world with sparks of the heavenly Light lodged in all things, and laying an imperative on men and women to elevate their own divine spark back to the primal One. Also, in some books of the Kabbala there is a holy color symbolism of blue, yellow, white, red, and red-white. This might be related to Newman, though there is no supporting evidence. The important realization is that Newman appreciated and used some core principles in Kabbalistic emanation theory, but appropriated only broad philosophic concepts far removed from the textual vagueness and elaborate fantasy, much in the same way that modern Christians would appreciate the general cosmological patterns and blend them with the stronger non-Jewish mysticism of the West. It is of some interest that, in the sephirot, the first divine quality emanated is wisdom, a fact that probably ties to the Old Testament wisdom books, which are probably the finest part of the Old Testament, assuming that Isaiah and Jesus inherit the wisdom tradition, with its origin in Solomon. A text like Proverbs has much less superstitious baggage than the books of the Kabbala. A number of Newman's painting titles focus his interest in the religious sublime by clearly suggesting the light of the first day of creation, raising the probability that he views artistic creation as an extension of cosmic creation, as many artists do.

It seems likely that Newman's interest in Kabbalistic cosmology and the contraction of the deity to create space is connected to his reiterated intent to give his viewers a feeling for sacred space and full selfhood stabilized by the sense of a space

dome touching all four horizons, a kind of space interest not met in Rothko. Newman also emphasizes scale, which needs no elaboration beyond the comments in the previous chapter.

Scholarly interpretations of Newman shed valuable light on the modes of the sublime in his works. Michael Zakian has published two articles on Newman and the sublime. Generally speaking, Zakian distorts Newman's theory of the sublime to confine it as much as possible to the physical and social world, and to fully human values, showing a sympathy for materialism, nominalism, Hegelianism, and Marxism. In "Barnett Newman and The Sublime," Zakian sets aside any upper mystical zone by claiming that Newman wants to give each viewer a sense of sublime selfhood and relativistic individual fixing of meaning face to face with the physical world.<sup>73</sup> Zakian limits Newman's sublime narrowly to people simply raising metaphysical questions in the midst of the physical world, and thus transcending "the objective nature of their environment by recognizing their difference from material reality."<sup>74</sup> However, such a reduction ignores Newman's core sense of exalted spiritual mystery and his rejection of the real world. In his second article "Barnett Newman: Painting and a Sense of Place," Zakian connects Newman's sublime to a humanistic Hegelian sense of total unity, yet a unity conditioned by "a comprehensive system of historically shifting mediations," and coming not in a genuine absolute sense but "as a practical intuition attained through a participation with real things," this being possible only in "the totality of current social conditions."<sup>75</sup> Because Newman uses particulars, Zakian concludes that "we see Newman's nominalism, his belief that there are no universal essences, only factual objects and specific incidents."<sup>76</sup> In such an analysis, we learn more about Zakian than Newman. There can be perhaps a fully humanistic social and materialistic theory of the sublime, but Newman's sense of an exalted mystery out of normal space and time cannot be accommodated to Zakian's Marxist materialism (at least it seems Marxist).

Philip Taaffe, the neo-geo painter, in his previously cited statement on Newman, believes that Newman wanted to cancel all the previous rhetoric about the sublime, to "set sail across an ocean of sheer terrifying potentiality," and thus create "a sublime of disassociation, a Great Refusal of the Sublime."<sup>77</sup> Again, this is too narrow, too negative, too wild and woolly to mesh properly with Newman's many statements about

his aims. There is a kind of fresh sense of “terrifying potentiality” in Newman’s art, but there is much more than that.

Crowther offers a shrewdly reasoned article on “Barnett Newman and the Sublime.” Supporting his claims with key statements by Newman, Crowther shows that Newman stands close to the Burkean sublime but also moves toward Kant in that Newman recognizes “the element of rational self-comprehension inherent in the artist’s awesome feelings.” Crowther observes that interpreters should pay more attention to Newman’s concept of an abstract ideographic symbol, that Newman prefers such a symbol to representational art or geometric abstraction, and that we may assume “that he sees non-geometrical abstraction as simply having greater connotative power. It hovers, as it were, in the potently ambiguous semantic space between conventional representational art and pure geometric abstraction.” Crowther has raised the right issue: what are the specific semantic powers of the abstract ideographic symbol? Crowther also notes one problem for the early abstract expressionist work in that biomorphic forms make a bond to the very naturalistic forces that Newman’s sublime wishes to negate.<sup>78</sup> This probably explains why Rothko, Newman, and Still moved away from such forms.

Crowther points to some inaccuracy in Newman’s effort to track the sublime through the history of art, but concludes that such flaws do not invalidate Newman’s core belief “that a mode of abstraction free of overt natural associations is sublime in a more profound sense,” a stand different from that of Kant. Offering one of the few plausible explanations as to why Newman was so struck by his Onement I (a work in which he began his move away from biomorphic forms), Crowther suggests that the central zip “serves to semantically activate the colour field” and thereby intimate a transcendent zone, and we may infer by analogy that “so humankind can only define and express its own finite and rational natures in opposition to the infinite unknown. Reciprocally, just as without its opposition to the zip the colour-field remains undeclared, so too are the infinite and unknown only established as such by virtue of their opposition to humankind’s finite rationality.”<sup>79</sup> Crowther also offers one of the few productive theories of the zip and field symbolism, one which has the advantage of meshing well with Newman’s statements about his spiritual aims. We certainly must

produce a theory of semantic content because of Newman's many claims to symbolize metaphysical ideas, and we must generate some kind of analogy to explain the semantic force of Newman's ideographic symbols.

Crowther further observes that Newman's titles can be best seen only as symbolic analogy, not as any personal confession. Finally, Crowther declares that there are serious weaknesses in Newman's program: his minimal style cannot be developed because any changes would move toward naturalism, even a change to polychrome; it is a fault for an artist not to advance into new directions; Newman defeats the sublime subject by confining it to a rigid style; and artists should stress not a descriptive sense of the sublime but an evaluative sense, since the latter leaves the sublime free to be manifested in any style, such as in a Watteau painting or the peasant boots painting of Van Gogh (which Heidegger stresses as a vehicle of sublime content). In defense of Newman, he did say that whether or not a painter uses abstraction is not the real issue. And as to whether or not a painter or writer must keep on changing his style, that is not an easy question, though Crowther is certainly correct to assume that we expect an artist to assimilate fresh experience in a fresh way. Crowther is also right to assume that a rigid formula for the rugged and variable sublime would not make good sense, though Newman would probably reply that a minimalist set of stylistic devices does not necessarily prevent fresh intuitions of a sublime subject, as long as each painting differs from others through its own unique adjustments. Such a limited set might become a handicap for viewers of the works, and any frustration of serious viewers counts as a flaw in an artist's program. But of course viewers must bring their best intelligence to their viewing. Crowther adds that in Newman's theory of art, "the artistic act in its confrontation with the unknowable, is what marks us out as authentically human, and that reciprocally, it is as the bearer of 'pure ideas' about death and tragedy and other aspects of the unknown that the artistic act finds its raison d'être."<sup>80</sup>

Thomas Hess's full study of Newman should be noted. He emphasizes a dynamic sense of antinomies in Newman, with bold reconciliations in works that are "grand, strong, profoundly moving." Thus Hess locates Newman in the dynamical sublime, correctly observing that the arena of action for Newman is not the world of objects but the "thought world." Hess understands that, unlike Rothko and Gottlieb, Newman had no interest in primitive myth as such, because Newman is wholly modern in point of

view. At one point Hess finds in Newman an instance of the belief that the artist as creator operates like God in bringing coherence out of chaos.<sup>81</sup>

Hess also states that around 1946 Newman showed a renewed interest in the Old Testament, the Talmud, Jewish mysticism, and the Genesis creation motif, and that Newman's zips might suggest beams of light as utilized in Jewish mysticism. Hess locates Kabbalistic rebirth meanings in Onement I as if "God separated light from darkness with a line drawn in the void," adding that the vertical zip might also symbolize first man, and adding further that the onement concept may point to the holy union symbolism used often in books of the Zohar. Making more use of Kabbala lore than anyone, Hess comments, "It is possible that I am pushing the Kabbalist interpretation too far. Certainly Newman never spoke about such a basis for his art—and he loved to talk about his paintings and sculptures."<sup>82</sup> Hess claims that Newman's loss of orthodox faith is part of his tragic sense. He also postulates that there are secret ratios in Newman's works, concealed geometric divisions. Rather often Newman comes close to the five to eight ratio of the Golden Section; however, he would have rejected a close pre-planned formula. Hess declares that Newman seldom approaches the Golden Section, yet the inner segmentation must be considered in order to settle the matter. As Hess interprets specific works he stresses the transcendental spirituality of Newman. For instance, commenting on Newman's important sculpture Broken Obelisk, Hess believes the dramatic meeting of two heavy masses in two sharp points is in part Newman's "re-enactment of the drama of Tsimtsum, the instant of creation."<sup>83</sup> In a comment on Newman's White Fire II, Hess, interestingly, points out that, according to Gershom Scholem, the written Torah is called white fire, and the verbal tradition of added commentary is called black fire. Moses was the only person who saw into the heart of the white fire mystery. Hess observes that Shining Forth comes from the same vision as Newman's series Stations of the Cross: a metaphysical grappling with tragedy and death plus an exalted joy in attaining an affirmative resolution.<sup>84</sup> In separating Newman from the second generation abstract expressionists, the latter are characterized by Hess as "in the main public, hedonist, objective, and theatrical," while Newman's work is "private in subject matter, moral in its choices, subjective and tragic in mode."<sup>85</sup>

In his full length study Harold Rosenberg calls Newman "The outstanding metaphysical painter of the postwar era," though in the 1970s "To espouse grandeur as a value in painting is to arouse suspicion of being either an aesthetic reactionary or a crank." Rosenberg believes that Newman sought the subject matter of the sublime, and points out that Newman, as a modernist, must be located against "the background of world thought." Rosenberg perceives the religious sublime in Newman, calling his basic method "activating the predetermined elements of his plastic vocabulary--his rectangles and bands--as in a religious rite."<sup>86</sup>

Connecting Newman's rejection of images of nature to an emphasis on primitive seeing in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, Rosenberg quotes lines from the poet's Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction: "How clean the sun when seen in its idea./Washed in the remote cleanliness of a heaven/That has expelled us and our images." Such a purging of human imagery relates to the already discussed theological merits of abstraction, which fully apply to Newman as well as Rothko. Rosenberg also calls attention to T. E. Hulme's claim that the absolute values of true religious feelings do not lend themselves to natural images, but to geometric forms. Rosenberg shrewdly concludes that "With geometry changed into a language of passion, Newman was in a position to convert twentieth-century spiritual deprivation into an advantage," purged of obsolete traditional myth and purged of nostalgia, moving directly from existential idea to transcendental subject in the ideograph painting: "The fundamental condition was that the sublime ideal object should have the materiality of real things." Newman is properly seen as desiring "a sense of epiphany without concrete associations." While Rosenberg does not say so, this allows for eternal things not to be contaminated with the local and contingent. Rosenberg defines Newman's epiphany as "the formal sign language of the inner kingdom," as "equivalents in paint of a flash . . . of what had been known throughout the centuries as spiritual enlightenment." The critic supplies a later comment of Newman, looking back on his discussion of northwest Kwakiutl art: "I wasn't talking about Indians . . . I was talking about man's birthright, his urge to be exalted."<sup>87</sup>

Pointing out that when Newman experimented with triangles he needed to negate the natural form of the triangle and make it express a metaphysical idea, thus revealing his general project "to induce emptiness to exclaim its secrets," just as naturalistic color

had to be negated by forcing it to serve ideas, because the sublime itself is “neither yellow nor blue,” Rosenberg reveals a clear view of Newman’s ideational sublime, that the underlying idea produces “a whole greater than its parts,” and that in the Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue series, Newman declares that he can “compel the primary colors to serve his metaphysical ends.” Newman’s emptiness is a “pervading eidolon” functioning as “the translation of the invisible sublime, and it contains the possibility that the spectator will be occupied by the paintings as by a spirit or daimon.”<sup>88</sup>

Rosenberg believes that many of Newman’s works involve the Kabbalistic zim-zum notion of cultic place, a “transcendent Place,” a meaning carried in the “Here” paintings and sculpture, along with the meaning of being in America right now as a declaration of independence from Europe. Yet Rosenberg pushes the Jewishness too far when he reprimands Newman for even attempting a Christian subject such as The Stations of the Cross series. For one thing, Jesus was a Jew and many Jews perceive him as the greatest of the prophets. Also, Rosenberg ignores Newman’s comments that he takes the cry of the forsaken Jesus as an archetypal pattern for everyman, thus bringing Christian material toward world culture and toward existentialism, merging it into the broader Western cultural tradition, and removing it from religious orthodoxy and dogma. This is exactly what a modern liberal Christian would do; Newman’s instincts are correct, not Rosenberg’s. Newman, like Rothko, sought an international style and an elevating, timeless, international sublime subject, in keeping with the ideals of modernism. Rosenberg should have taken a hint from his recognition that when Newman designed a synagogue he canceled the sense of orthodox group worship and emphasized a new sense of existential isolation before deity. However Rosenberg agrees that Hess pushes the Kabbalah influence much too far, because the main theme of Newman is supplied by the painter’s own phrase, “the self, terrible and constant.” But Rosenberg is wrong to conclude that “Regardless of their sacred associations, Newman’s concepts are secular in meaning,” and that he had only a “poetic” interest in theology, just enough to give a “metaphysical hum” to his paintings.” Newman’s ideographic sentences are more ideational than a vague hum. The truth lies halfway between Hess and Rosenberg.<sup>89</sup>

His own spiritual scepticism probably causes Rosenberg to hedge too much in asserting that "For Newman, painting was a way of practising the sublime, not of finding symbols for it." Any metaphysical messages the painter can present are "inaccessible" because they are private and do not rest on any "social cohesion." Rosenberg does not understand that Newman's sublime and absolute emotions kept pure by abstraction are meant to be socially effective as a new existential mythos that counteracts the loss of the social cohesion of orthodox mythology. Rosenberg's last word is that the spectator before a Newman painting may experience an exaltation or may react merely to "cold visual fact" in "a flood of sensations."<sup>90</sup> Yet obviously the bare formalism of the second response is what Newman, Rothko, and Still fiercely rejected. Rosenberg usually inclines toward formalism.

An interesting new study of happenings in the year 1950 in the New York abstract expressionism has been published by April Kingsley, her choice of 1950 determined by the fact that in this year the New York School painters developed a clear sense of their mature style. She emphasizes the religious and ideational center of Newman's work, but is probably wrong to associate Newman's zips with the flare of the A-bomb and the Old Testament pillar of fire that guided the Israelites through the desert. Newman was not political enough for the one or orthodox enough for the other. She also claims that the zip "was Newman," which is plausible only if we connect the zip to impersonal human acts of intellect and choice.<sup>91</sup> Kingsley (connecting to the existential sublime) finds the heart of Newman's thought to be "the primacy of the individual and the absolute necessity for personal freedom," which explains why he "rejected all political solutions right and left." She believes the Newman zip is "an anthropocentric thing with which we identify--erect, straight, firm, and sure."<sup>92</sup> Kingsley gives some support for Crowther's warning about a mechanical formula in Newman's work, declaring that while de Kooning succeeded in moving ahead to new ground, Rothko, Newman, and Still were less successful in escaping "the trap of their own name-brand imagery."<sup>93</sup>

The point has been made that Bonnard's late works may have influenced Rothko's sublime of light and color, though not as much as Matisse. However Jean Clair comments that for the most part, Newman and Rothko should be seen as polar opposites of Bonnard because of their severe abstraction; consequently Bonnard's color

theory is best used as a sharp contrast to Newman and Rothko. Clair explains that Bonnard's perspective is visual and not ideational, aiming at giving everything in the field of vision with no sense of hierarchy or transcendence. Although Bonnard is strongly drawn to portals and windows, his subject is confined to the "shimmering fabric" of the optical field. In the same text with Clair, Antoine Terrasse presents Bonnard's own statement that his "main subject is the surface which has its color, its laws, over and above those of objects." Bonnard seeks color turned into light, but his color-field impressionism is part of nature, not part of the rejection of nature to reach the ideational sublime. Terrasse points out that Bonnard's notes show little interest in metaphysics or morality.<sup>94</sup> Consequently, though Newman and Rothko would have been moved by the color explosion in a masterpiece such as Bonnard's L'Atelier au mimosa, and moved by the sense of the artist as bold agent, they would have no interest in revealing nature through optical surface.

Irving Sandler's study of American art in the fifties also uses contrast to shed light on Newman, Rothko, and Still, emphasizing that the younger abstract painters who came after them were more painterly and less philosophic; were not serious about "transcendental experience, an incantation to the sublime"; connected ethics more to self-development than to eternal things; did not feel the anxiety of existential crisis and were thus more hedonistic and aesthetic; were more confessional and spontaneous, more open to randomness; were more inclined to be colorists; and developed a more formalist rhetoric to oppose the early abstract expressionist passion for transcendental subjects.<sup>95</sup>

David Quick treats Newman's meanings in a doctoral dissertation which (though superficial in handling Longinus, Burke, and Kant) reveals a proper understanding of Newman's dealings with the sublime: "The transcendental meaning of the sublime evoked by a sense of limitlessness was to act as a revelation of the essential self as part of a universal whole"; and "for Newman, the sublime allowed the tragic condition to be confronted without mythos"; and "at the end of the 40's, he brought together his ideas, developed during his study of primitive art, with the aesthetic theories of the sublime to form the basis for his mature art."<sup>96</sup>

With her central and correct thesis that the abstract expressionists sought an

abstract mythic symbol, Alwynne Mackie develops the idea that Newman especially utilizes the symbol of space treated through scale: fullness of space is represented by the all-over effect, and scale is used by Newman to convey "the immensity of the event" as not confined to the picture frame and not related to physical environment, and thus free to achieve transcendence. In other words, excellence of scale gives the work such internal perfection that it takes on a distinctive autonomous power to break out above limitations in space and time. Probably this is what Newman thought when he emphasized scale and the sense of being in relation to the four horizons. Though Mackie emphasizes the mystical, she has very little mystical awareness, and does not try to connect Newman's technique of space and scale with the crossing of thresholds to either existential total selfhood, or to a sacred One, or to sublime and timeless ideas. She offers the mild claim that such a symbolic use of space "would make one aware of one's own being."<sup>97</sup> However, her ideas on scale are helpful.

Encouragement to locate a counter-sublime in Newman comes from various scholars, such as David and Cecile Shapiro and Nancy Jachec. The Shapiros point out that Clement Greenberg's essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" should be considered "the manifesto and program for the art movement known today as Abstract Expressionism."<sup>98</sup> In this essay, Greenberg argues that avant-garde culture was created as a counterforce against debased bourgeois taste and also against politicized socialist and Marxist art. This much is true, but Greenberg is completely wrong to add that these champions of difficult art shunned subject matter. Kitsch is defined as mass-produced art suitable for peasants who have moved to town and become middle class, seeking diversion from boredom through debased or pop art, watering down serious art for popular consumption. Universities and magazines such as The New Yorker, Greenberg claims, are part of the turning of art into popular commodity. Kitsch, "Another mass product of Western industrialization . . . has gone on a triumphal tour of the world, crowding out and defacing native cultures."<sup>99</sup>

Jachec reinforces Shapiro's claims by developing in detail the way in which the abstract expressionists moved finally to embrace democracy as, morally, the best antidote to both Fascist and Marxist-socialist repressions of freedom, with encouragement offered by existentialism, Nietzsche, and the idea of the alienated

individual, leading the painters, with some reluctance, to champion democracy, "choosing to operate within the existing capitalist structure."<sup>100</sup> In short, there is a counter-sublime of warfare in Newman (as in Rothko and Still) which strikes out against not only realism, anecdote, and narrative, but also against kitsch and all forms of authoritarian politics, and also strikes against capitalism and consumerism, but does not advocate the violent overthrow of the free enterprise system by radical politics. The counter-sublime may be seen as strong passions turned against some foe, as opposed to strong passions that affirm. We might recall Lyotard's conception of morality as a destructive force. Considering the options available, it made good moral sense for the avant-garde painters to endorse Western democracy yet not favor all of its features. As Polcari puts it, "The political beliefs of Abstract Expressionists were ill-defined, or rather the artists tended to hold that combination of anarchist-bohemian-conservatism typical of many modern artists," who talked revolution but were actually devoted to continuity and moderate change.<sup>101</sup>

If one took Ferguson's perspective in treating Newman (looking for ambiguities that might problematize the self as autonomous agent, and contradictions that might cancel a transcendent sublime), such a reading would go against some specific remarks of Newman which we have noted: "the disdain for the self is something I don't quite understand," and "ambiguity . . . is an anomaly. . . . Clarity alone can lead to freedom." Of course Newman, Rothko, and Still would all support Ferguson's general desire to maintain idealism against modern materialism. Weiskel's thesis of sublime overload in signifier or signified has relevance to Newman's works. The signified meanings have the surplus of sublime subjects, and the signifying color fields in large scale carry their own shock of superabundance. But Weiskel's anti-idealism and his preference for a secondary negative sublime, if pushed, would distort Newman's positivism and intense spirituality. His especially strong affinities to modern science and liberal humanism would work against Lyotard's false assumption that these large narratives are obsolete. Newman's belief that a painting should operate semantically like a sentence would be illuminated by Lyotard's appreciation of new phrases that artists and thinkers can declare, from the standpoint of the sensibility of the sublime. As was the case with Rothko, Crowther's synthesizing critical aesthetics would mesh

productively with all of Newman's major concerns; Crowther's reciprocity principle would apply to Newman's blendings of sensory form with abstract meaning, self with society, finite with infinite, present with past, creative genius with created work and audience, the ethical with the aesthetic, and the theorized with the existentially lived and embodied. Political correctness receives a further sharp rebuff from Newman in his previously cited remark that he resents the whole business of "transfer of power by one group against another."

Four works by Newman have been selected for analysis: Onement I (1948), Vir Heroicus Sublimis (1950-51), Midnight Blue (1970), and Broken Obelisk (1963-67). Onement I--the eye-opening and mind-opening first work that Newman brooded over for months to determine what wonder he had wrought--is oil on canvas, 27x16 inches, a mahogany field with orange-red flickerings and in the exact center a narrow orange-red zip with rough edges. We have noted Crowther's view that the zip in Onement I creates a semantic reciprocity by which mankind's finite rationality is established in cross-relation to an unknown infinite presence, and "Reading Onement I in these terms explains why Newman was so excited by it. He could express humanity's relation to the unknown not simply by destroying form in the standard manner of sublime art, but by creating an artifact that embodies this relation through a subtle kind of non-representational symbolism."<sup>102</sup> Crowther finds a symbol operating as analogy: zip is to field as human reason is to an infinite unknown. And without the reciprocity, the polar oppositions would not be semantically or ontologically validated. This analysis is much better than the several opinions that have been given which endow the zip with the meaning of first man--a meaning that contains too little. Newman was too clear about first man finding exaltation in front of a mysterious and sacred absolute. Crowther is right to find more than "here stands an everyman." It is plausible that for Newman, the vast field will represent the absolute, and the smaller but crucial vertical zips will suggest the ascending penetrating rays of human intellect charged with passions evoked by sublime ideas. Indeed, much of the passion lies in the penetration of the grand field by what we may call Newman's existential agent intellect, different from the divine agent intellect of pre-Renaissance Western thought. We should also recall Crowther's belief that Newman later negates his desired emotional intensity by repeating a fixed formula in his abstract vocabulary.

We should reject Rosenberg's thesis that Onement I is a fusion by Newman of art and self but says nothing at all, it merely "confronts" us as "an act or an event," and holds a special place in Newman's art because he shucks off his earlier biomorphic forms. However Rosenberg agrees with Crowther that the zip is like a "live wire" creating "psychic animation."<sup>103</sup>

Certainly we should accept Newman's onement concept as revealing a symbolism that probably implicates both a mysterious Nietzschean sacred One and also an integrated human psyche as theorized by Sartre, Jung, and others. The sacred One is related to the Kabbalah and the whole of Western mysticism, and also to Oriental thought. We must assume that Newman has absorbed what he has absorbed. Motherwell and Reinhardt include (from the Studio 35 sessions) Newman's statement that painters should seek illuminating titles: "I think it would be very well if we could title pictures by identifying the subject matter so that the audience would be helped."<sup>104</sup>

Onement I carries a strong moral message in keeping with Motherwell's insights: the reduction, cleanness, geometry, and purity are iconographic statements about integrity and honesty of vision; they work like banners of candor which speak against contaminations from past rhetoric and from debased society. Also, like Rothko, Newman is imposing his values on mankind, demanding their acceptance and victory, in the spirit of Nietzsche. Onement I is a challenge, a declaration of war, and to understand this we need to be able to recapture the early attitude of Newman, Rothko, and Still that abstraction itself could cut clean like a sacred blade. I do not think that we see too much when we see these messages in Newman's works. The blade of abstraction is itself a concept in Newman's ideational sublime.

We should ask why Newman's zip is exactly in the center. It may suggest some original divisions by the creator, night from day and one polar opposite from another, a kind of Yin-Yang clue. Yet we should also recall that Mondrian, seeking polar laws of the natural world (which Newman did not seek) had favored (as did Chinese and Japanese art) an asymmetrical pattern, not a perfect equilibration but a dynamic equilibration. It might be that Newman's strong sense of architectonic harmony in all of his works makes a sentence about his feeling more liberated than Mondrian, less bound to vision and to nature, and thus free to use either perfect symmetry or some asymmetry

as a free act of mind, not as an imitation. If this point is valid, we should conclude, as we did with Rothko, that an element of opposition to Mondrian is present, yet this counter-sublime does not reach the hatred and destruction of the father in Bloom's excessively radical model. Additionally, there is no reason not to associate the dark maroon colors of Onement I with the color sublime of Burke, especially since in Onement II (an echo of Onement I but larger, 60x36 inches), Newman changes the color ground to the rich red named by Burke, with the zip now changed to purple.

Vir Heroicus Sublimis (96x216 inches, and in The Museum of Modern Art) is discussed by April Kingsley, who connects the heroism motif to World War II heroes popularized in films, and also to Truman's bold firing of General MacArthur in 1950, an act which Barnett greeted by shouting "Vir Heroicus Sublimis."<sup>105</sup> Even if Kingsley's thesis has some small validity, a much better perspective comes from Rosenberg, who points out that all through Newman's work are titles pointing to heroic figures, such as Abraham, Achilles, Adam, Dionysus, and Christ, plus the concept of the heroism of artistic creation as parallel to divine creation, plus Newman's constant theme of his own terrible and tragic selfhood: "These metaphysical and heroic experiences were conceived by Newman as analogous or even synonymous with the struggle of art and with his own struggle to conquer his mediums and transform them."<sup>106</sup> Yet Rosenberg's point of view is not broad enough. It would be impossible for Newman to paint a tribute to the heroic human life without having in mind the questing heroes of myth and the use of this pattern by Joyce and Eliot, and also Nietzsche's sublime tragic artist and Nietzsche's superman, as well as the wholly free and morally responsible self of existential thought, whose presence posits nobility not only on Newman as bold artist, but also on each viewer whose own self is rich in heroic potential called out by this huge and stunning work.

The issue of scale is important. Crowther notes Newman's steady increase in canvas size up to 1950: "the increase in the scale of his work does not of itself make transcendent sublimity self-evident. Rather, we require in addition a thorough-going knowledge of Newman's theoretical assumptions. . . . Newman's work (as much if not more so than any other twentieth century artist) depends upon a matrix of aesthetic theory in order to be read authentically."<sup>107</sup> Crowther has properly rearticulated the

ancient principle of Longinus that a given artistic gesture is not of itself sublime, but must be attached to a suitable context of sublime intent. Since an art work is indisputably an intentional object (as a natural stone is not), any acceptable ontology for art must include the intent (ascertained from any and all relevant data). The rejection of authorial intent by various twentieth century intellectuals rests upon a peculiar will to sabotage and cynicism, not upon a reasoned search for adequate principles of interpretation. Longinus especially connected a proper sublime subject to sublimity in idea and intellect, pointing to that very metaphysical matrix in Newman which Crowther emphasizes. The same point is made by David Craven as the conclusion to his article rejecting the idea that abstract expressionism could rest on any merely spontaneous and non-rational gesture in paint: "Just as few if any viewers have experienced the sublime before these paintings without knowing what the concept means historically, so Newman, Rothko, Motherwell, Still and Gottlieb all drew substantially if also very subtly on the formal values associated with nineteenth-century European paintings that dealt with the sublime."<sup>108</sup>

It is helpful to extend Mackie's thesis that internal scalar excellence isolates the work from the external environment, giving it freedom for a transcendental elevation. It would do that and more. Excellence in scale would be a tribute to the pondering intellect, to the instinct for proportion. Also, scale in an abstract work allows an even stronger separation from nature, and thus, in a Kantian sense, a stronger triumph over nature by reason. Newman believed that there is an intrinsic affinity between abstract art, abstract idea, and abstract scientific and mathematical theory. Any point of view (Platonism as well as abstract expressionism) can be strengthened by an attachment to mathematics.

The scale in Vir Heroicus Sublimis is established by the large crimson field animated by four zips, two pale red bands at the sides, and then a clean white and a light charcoal band located so as to mark off a large red square in the center of the huge rectangle. There are no outer edges. The mind of the viewer tends to focus on the organizing strength (the scalar segmenting) supplied by the white and charcoal bars, and the paleness of the two light red outer zips is achieved by letting a first stripe of white show through the pale red, and the light charcoal band allows some underlying red to shine through. There is strong polarity between the white and charcoal bars.

Thus fusion occurs in the zips, as well as through the embracing field. The sense of scale declares the sense of a magnificent mysterious something penetrated by rays of human intellect, carried chiefly by the whiteness in the rays which (unlike rays of white light above the head of Christ in Renaissance paintings) do not come down from above. The carefully studied and almost perfect symmetries suggest not only the integration of the human self, but also the harmony of the cosmos as declared in the perfect symmetry of mathematical equations such as  $E=MC^2$ . Since crimson and the fire imagery played such a great role in Nietzsche's motifs of the life force and German fire music, and since crimson has intrinsic symbolism of power and life, it may well be, as previously suggested, that Newman's crimson field is a direct-pointing ideograph for the energy of Einstein's equation, not an improbable idea because Newman's title denotes the energy of the heroic human life. It would be a mistake to minimize Newman's interest in modern science.

Keeping in mind Jungian and other theories that polarities, trinities, and quaternities have universal symbolic power to suggest harmonies in the self and in the cosmos, it is noteworthy that Vir Heroicus Sublimis has three major sections (like Rothko's Houston panels), four zips, and the duo of the white and charcoal bars. The scale, therefore, resonates with a sense of the minimum structural foundations of self and cosmos, as if Newman, like the God of Pythagoras, can count to four. Such speculations are probable in that Newman clearly adopted Kabbalistic patterns of the fire and light of the first day of creation, and blended this emanation concept with the wider patterns of Western mysticism. The fusing in Newman's zips may well carry the logic of emanation and the power of intellect to climb the ladders upward toward the source. The warrant for offering such readings comes from Newman's often repeated insistence that his subjects are abstract ideas related to the awe and exaltation of sublime vision. The cosmic and timeless implications are heightened because the crimson field has no edgings, encouraging the viewer, as Newman explained, to perceive the self against a four horizon sweep of space, not against any local and natural site. Newman's massive scarlet field offers a profound sense of shock, one of the basic features of the psychology of the sublime, yet the verticals add the human measure which prevents the shock from negating our sense of at-homeness in the world.

Newman's Midnight Blue (1970), coming late in his career, offers a good

example of his working with dark colors and of his general evolution toward more simplification. It is close in spirit to his dark blue Queen of the Night II (1967) and to his Voice of Fire (1967), in which the crimson center band is flanked by dark blue panels. Also rather than oil on canvas, Midnight Blue is acrylic on canvas, its dimensions 76x94 inches, its location the Museum Ludwig in Cologne. It is an interesting work to set beside Vir Heroicus Sublimis because, subtracting the white vertical bar on the left edge and the blue panel on the right edge marked off by the light blue zip, the central dark blue shape is an exact square. Thus Newman maintains his basic and severe vocabulary, in this case achieving some variation by the white vertical zip's placement on the outer edge rather than on the inside, the typical format. The pale blue narrow zip on the right has white undertones.

By his title Newman calls attention to maximum darkness, unlike the day and fire implication of Vir Heroicus Sublimis. Looking over the shoulder to Queen of the Night, one is inclined to suspect a kind of tribute to a maternal principle (as in the symbolism of the Kabbalah) or at least an implication of the primal darkness before it is penetrated by the divine intellect in the moment of creation, the intellect given masculinity in both the Kabbalah and the Genesis myth. It is worth remembering that Nietzsche's absolute One was treated as a mother principle. Newman's midnight blue has a value different from the black and blackish purple of Rothko's late works: the blue carries the tragic dark awareness insisted upon in Newman's own vision of tragic myth, existential anguish, the retreat of religious faith, and a world gone wrong, yet Newman's late works do not manifest the bleaker despair of Rothko's: a rich, dark blue is a positive, affirmative color, though touched with the sadness of mortality, as in a piano nocturne.

In Midnight Blue the viewer projects the white band on the left across the dark field as it breaks through on the right in the light blue zip undershot with white. As Crowther emphasized, the zips animate the field with semantic values. In Newman criticism there is surprisingly little specific analysis of specific works, which is also the case with Rothko and Still. This tendency is explainable by the inherent difficulty of connecting abstract forms to specific ideas. Many of the points made about Vir Heroicus Sublimis, such as the consideration of scale, obviously apply to Midnight Blue, and will not be repeated. However, I have so far held off on the extremely important presence of the noble sublime in Newman's abstractions. When we look at

Midnight Blue, calmness and cerebral ordering strongly dominate, the white forms suggesting intellect. Keeping in mind all that has been said about Newman, Midnight Blue should be interpreted in this fashion: ideationally it declares the morality of a clean modernist reductionism in opposition to all aesthetics of imitation and sentimentality; it invokes the sense of a hospitable world; it declares moral war on corrupt forces in society and economy; it fuses into its colors and forms favored features of the thought worlds of Longinus, Burke, Nietzsche, Sartre, Jung, the Kabbalah, Einstein and others; and it disciplines these complex strands by the strictures of the noble sublime harnessed to the ideational sublime, the dominating noble sublime supplying the logicity, lentor, calmness, and dignity specified by Kant as its defining features.

Broken Obelisk (three casts were made, one for the Museum of Modern Art, one at the University of Washington, and one outside the Rothko chapel in Houston) has received scattered generalized comment as one of the most important pieces of American and modernist sculpture. We have seen Newman's comment (given by Rosenberg) that his obelisk "is concerned with life and I hope I have transformed its content into a glimpse of the sublime." Rosenberg's faint-hearted explanation is too bleak: "The ultimate meaning of the work lies in the affirmation of the collapse of past grandeurs and the transcendence of that collapse that survives because the artist wills it."<sup>109</sup> In his doctoral dissertation David Quick states that where the points meet in Newman's sculpture might signify the point of transcendence at which man meets God.<sup>110</sup> April Kingsley gives the important revelation that Newman often observed the obelisk Cleopatra's Needle on the hill behind the Metropolitan Museum, and she suggests that the meeting of the two points "creates the kind of drama Michelangelo intended for God's moment of sparking life into Adam on the Sistine ceiling."<sup>111</sup>

Probably the wisest way to interpret Broken Obelisk is to refuse to avoid the obvious. The inverted obelisk with its crumbled base closest to heaven rests with its point on the point of the normal pyramid, which acts as its base. It is about ten feet wide and twenty-six feet high. Newman has said that his theme is both sublimity and tragedy. Probably we should assume that the triangle and obelisk capture the spirit of primitive sublime art (something like a totem pole) and also invoke the religious and philosophic history of the West from the Egyptian pyramids and the geometricity of

Pythagoras and Plato (the same assumption we should make about I. M. Pei's glass pyramid as entrance to the Louvre). The pyramid and obelisk invoke temple architecture in general, giving Newman his hallmark of a sacred place. The powerful stability of the supporting pyramid (like the stable octagon of the Rice chapel) prevents any reading of dominant pessimism.

As religious icons the obelisk and pyramid also represent past mythologies, the grand stories about divine/human encounters, and the meeting of the two points symbolizes those encounters. The soaring quality of the work represents the transcendence to sublime eternal presences, the verticality recognized by Longinus and Burke as a technique of sublime art. In the conception of the sublime as a crossing of thresholds, nothing could constitute a better participatory symbol than the sharp point of transition where the lower triangle meets the higher obelisk. This point of change is even more dramatic, more charged with passion, than Rothko's doors and portals.

But we still must ponder the shattered base of the obelisk, closest to heaven. The broken base of the obelisk (plus its inversion) cries out the tragic retreat of the gods, the isolated unsponsored self of Sartre, the demythologizing of all myth, the temporary nihilism demanded by Nietzsche, the fading of the master narratives of the great religions, the failures of mankind in the two great wars, the confessions of sins, the suffering of the human awareness of death, and quite possibly the threatening entropy principle of modern science, promising the death of the cosmos. My point is that the crumbled base and the inverted form would logically represent all that we know or may assume about the tragic sense of modern man, all of this appropriate for a major public sculpture. Possibly the rust symbolizes all these tragic things. Conversely, the pyramid and the clean sanctity of the bulk of the obelisk, plus the dramatic meeting of the points, will represent all that we know about the hope and exaltation of Newman's orientation toward the sublime, an orientation dominated by the subsuming of various historically accumulated modes of the sublime under the pattern of the ideational and noble sublime.

Behind these four works and the whole oeuvre of Newman, and woven into the sensory ideographs, the ideational sublime is realized as dynamical sublime through the force and power of Newman's favored metaphysical interests, which include the following set: the sense of crisis for modern art and thought; the fact of the decline of orthodox religion; the need for art to try to fill the spiritual emptiness; the special value

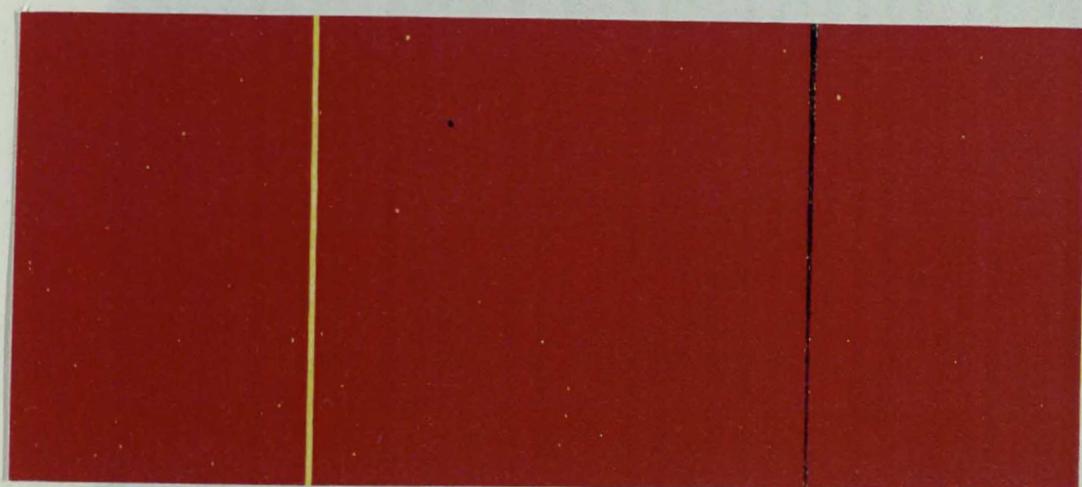
of the ideographic art symbol which participates in the sublime reality it reveals; the sense of scale as humanized value; the need for strong passions, but passions aroused by abstract sublime ideas; the setting aside of beauty in search of the sublime; the inescapability of terrible tragedy and suffering, the need to accept it and transcend it; the ability of abstract art to express concepts of science; the necessity for the artist to impose his vision on a misguided humanity; the inescapability of existential freedom, anguish, and moral obligation; the sense of sacred selfhood embodied in space; the need for new kinds of mythology raised from a subjective, existential, phenomenological base; the opposition to Fascism, Marxism, and the excesses of capitalism; the story of segments of art history as modern myth; the war against kitsch; a pattern of art history governed by the fate of sublime vision; the distancing from formalism and Mondrian; the distancing from group political action; and the on-going validity of distinctly religious idealism. Certainly Newman had an ample body of ideas with which to work. The mind-set of a painter is embodied in the works, just as the moral vision of a novelist is part of the formal design of the novel. Newman creates spiritual icons in cultic space, and we must locate in his works both the existential base and the wider culture-hold which have given direction to the brush strokes.

Such ideas provide for Newman an impressive base for his most emphasized mode of sublimicism, the ideational sublime. But the case has been made that various other modes are crucial for understanding his program: the religious sublime touched by Jewish mysticism, Genesis creativity, and the sublime religiosity of primitive man; the existential sublime deriving from Sartre and others; the Burkean sublime centered in strong passions and tragic vision; the Nietzschean sublime in Newman's sense of the aggressive artist as seeking a new vision of cultural unity in a general art project fully sublime as project; the Jungian mythic sublime carried by Newman's sense of a new subjective mythos and universal subjects; a moderate counter sublime located in a sense of major ideational enemies; a strong moral sublime centered in meeting the modern need for spiritual rebirth and new belief; and a conspicuous light-color sublime carried by radiant colors and dark shades. All of these modes involve a threshold crossing to higher ground. Newman has a firmer religious vision than Rothko, and a stronger stylistic devotion to cleanness, clarity, and verticality, as well as a stronger use of line and space. Newman obviously believes in the universal validity of transcendental

sublime experience, in treating it by confident universalist categories, and in a generally positive conception of truth and reality. The elements of crisis, doubt, politics, and alienation are not given the victory by Newman, but are rather the challenges to be met and mastered by abstract sublimicist art.



Newman - Onement I (1948)  
Oil on Canvas 17x16  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York  
Gift of Annalee Newman



Newman - *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51)  
Oil on Canvas 96x216  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ben Heller



**Newman - Midnight Blue (1970)**  
**Acrylic on Canvas 76x94**  
**Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany**



Newman - Broken Obelisk (1963-67)  
 Cor-ten steel 26x101/2x101/2  
 Rice University, Houston, Texas  
 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York

## Chapter Six - The Sublime in Still

Still's approach to the sublime emerges from his own statements, most of which are given in two exhibition catalogues, one from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1976, and one from The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1979.<sup>1</sup> Still has been extremely reluctant to publish any essays on his point of view, but he has agreed, in these catalogues, to present some letters, notes, and prefatory remarks.

In the San Francisco catalogue Still gives "A Statement By the Artist," declaring that his works are an effort to "challenge the arrogant farce enacted by those responsible for the intellectual corruption perpetuated during the last four decades in the name of art, criticism, and history," and also an effort to strike out against "the presumptions of the tastemakers whether called artistic, political, architectural, or critical."<sup>2</sup> The director of the museum, Henry Hopkins, offers some personal comments stating of Still that "I had heard him discourse on the rights and powers of the individual will and upon the isolation of integrity and the integrity of isolation."<sup>3</sup>

This catalogue also contains a biography of Still, and in it we learn that when he taught at Washington State College in 1940-41, his studies had "special emphasis on Plato, Longinus, and Croce."<sup>4</sup> The connection to Longinus has never been carefully explored. Still allows one of his idealistic comments about teaching to be included in the catalogue: "One simply tries to remove the load of educational negations which inhibit a student's mind, so that he may comprehend or come in contact with the forces he has within him. From those to whom this has no meaning one turns away. To those who discover it, is born of no competition, but a beautiful wonder and affinity with the creation."<sup>5</sup> Most of the abstract expressionists envisioned their art as having an affinity

with the creation of the cosmos, but Still had no real interest in a return to primitive states or primitive creation myth. He focused on a distinctly modern mind working in the present moment.

Still offers a diary note in which he explains his distrust of theory and criticism: "Verbiage becomes a substitute for comprehension. And everything leads to words and words become a substitute for everything," and words are treacherous, making fools seem plausible, "Because they are so common and can be so commonly and easily misused."<sup>6</sup> The compiler of the biography claims that Rothko developed his final style after visiting Still's studio in 1949 and seeing one of his large black paintings.<sup>7</sup> Still offers a 1951 letter to Rothko declaring that at times he speaks out against those who would try to fit him into some collective movement, "to incorporate me or deny my right to exist," and he calls the public domain "not a well to drink from, but a cesspool of insidious and poisonous matter." In another comment about teaching, Still says he tries to get his students to use their voice as "a lance—a broom—an exposure of aesthetic and semantic confusion or corruption."<sup>8</sup> A lance and broom, like the shapes in Still's paintings, are vertical weapons, and this concept does relate to the verticality in his works.

The catalogue has a section called "Notes by Clyfford Still." Here he gives a 1951 letter remark to Rothko: ". . . I hold that unless a man's art gives him strength to deny the value of social power for the real security of his inner comprehension he is on a devil's path to frustration."<sup>9</sup> Often sociology departments offer a course called "Social Control," and this idea is for Still one of the major enemies, an absolutely Satanic concept to be hated and resisted. In a 1951 letter to a friend Still says he is "asocial," and wants his paints to cry out this message: "Here I am; this is my presence, my feeling, myself. Here I stand implacable, proud, alive, naked, unafraid. If one does not like it he should turn away because I am looking at him. I am asking for nothing. I am simply asserting that the totality of my being can stand stripped of its cultural camouflage and look out on factional people who pass before me and see them without rancor, desire, or fear."<sup>10</sup> Still offers a related comment from an earlier exhibition catalogue, the 15 Americans show at The Museum of Modern Art in 1952, and his comment here is also from a 1952 letter: "That pigment on a canvas has a way of

initiating conventional reactions for most people needs no reminder. Behind these reactions is a body of history matured into dogma, authority, tradition. The totalitarian hegemony of this tradition I despise, its presumptions I reject. . . . We are now committed to an unqualified act, not illustrating outworn myths or contemporary alibis." Also in this letter Still rejects "the will to power."<sup>11</sup> He does derive partly from Nietzsche the sense of the revolutionary importance of a strong individual will, but he rejects the idea that a superman would impose his will on others, as he also rejects Nietzsche's thesis that a society needs the social control of religious myth. Still is obsessed with each person's discovery of his own inner power, uncorrupted vision, and freedom of choice.

Still also presents a 1954 letter stating, "I would not relinquish my identity to the security of the historical myth or the collective tide." Nothing was more important to Still than setting himself and his art in opposition to all the calls for collectivism that swept the twentieth century. The crusading, isolated, idealist mode defines Still. In this same letter he makes the major revelation that he rejects the horizontal spreading out into society and celebrates "The vertical rather than the horizontal; the single projection, instead of polarities, the thrust of the flame instead of the oscillation of the wave."<sup>12</sup> This phrase from Still, "the thrust of the flame," is a revealing one, and points to the hallmark of his mature works, the ragged tongues of flame aspiring upward.

In an interesting letter of 1954 to a friend, Still comments on a new study trying to explain Nietzsche, a study resembling Northrup Frye's study of Blake: "Just read Frye's book and you can dispose of Blake by 'understanding' him. So the scholar makes his contribution to the mass of murderous knowledge and the creator is supplanted by the pedant and all his work negated or hidden from those who might have some desire to experience it. He who does not send the enquirer to the original work is a thief, a liar, a fraud, and a murdering dog."<sup>13</sup> Still includes an important diary note of February 11, 1956, speaking of his "tense slashes" on the "beautiful white fields," and observes: "And as the blues or reds or black leap up and quiver in their tenuous ambience or rise in austere thrusts to carry their power infinitely beyond the bounds of the limiting field, I move with them and find a resurrection from the morbid oppressions that held me only hours ago. Only they are complete too soon, and I must

quickly move on to another to keep the spirit alive.”<sup>14</sup>

In a 1960 letter Still hopes that his work “will give back courage as freedom,” and he takes another statement from an earlier catalogue for a show at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, 1963, declaring: “To be stopped by a frame’s edge was intolerable; a Euclidean prison, it had to be annihilated, its authoritarian implications repudiated without dissolving one’s individual integrity.”<sup>15</sup>

The second exhibition catalogue (from The Metropolitan Museum of Art) adds additional crucial insights. In a prefatory essay Katharine Kuh writes that Still had declared that he saw his black colors not as death but as a warm generative color.<sup>16</sup> This catalogue also has a selection from Still’s notes and letters. In a note written at the time of his first New York show at Peggy Guggenheim’s gallery in 1946, Still deplores the “vitiating pressure” of the commercialized museum world and the “subordination of the freedom of the creative spirit,” adding that the majority of lesser painters “know who they are painting for and why, and it is not for the edification of mind or soul.”<sup>17</sup> This suggests the Longinian elevation of soul. In a 1949 letter to Rothko, Still condemns the simplistic escapist demands of the public, asserting that the critics and theorists “make hamburger of us for the public gut.” He “rejects the suppression of the genius and the tyranny of the masterpiece,” and “sees responsibility as a single, individual, alone.”<sup>18</sup>

An important claim comes in a 1950 letter to a friend, in which Still rejects any return to primitivism: “one must not drag in past primitives or erudition to corroborate our position. This is a different thing,--a different meaning. The scholar will only defeat us if we allow him ascendancy. This we must carve clean.” A great deal of Still’s program is implied in the imperative to “carve clean.” In this same letter the painter observes: “I am myself--not just the sum of my ancestors, and I know myself best by my gestures, meanings, and the implications of my thoughts and acts.”<sup>19</sup>

It is significant that Still chooses to print a review article from Hubert Crehan in the San Francisco Chronicle July 1950. Crehan takes Still out of the beautiful and into the sublime: “In his paintings there is no trace of figures, and all semblance of conventional painterly beauty has been negated with an austere rigor, but the monstrous

black and red shapes, with their swift yellow flicks or blue articulations, evoke a spiritual charge akin to those profound emotions produced by the occasional scientific or philosophic utterances that reconstruct our consciousness of reality in a more perfect order." Crehan adds that "When one examines the history of styles in art, he discovers that styles pertaining only to happiness are among the least striking; but the more art is concerned, as it is in our time, with all that transcends man—with the diabolical and the sacred—the less man and the objects of his familiar life enter into its portrayals."<sup>20</sup> For Still the sacred is inside the work and the diabolical outside.

In a 1953 letter Still says he is one who struck out against "the conspiracy of a social culture," and in a 1959 note to an art critic he calls the intellectual establishment "intellectual eunuchs" in the "collectivist castration ward." He follows with a letter to this critic declaring that thirteen years earlier, on a white wall, "was shown one of the few truly liberating concepts man has ever known. There I made it plain that a single stroke of paint, backed by work and a mind that understands its potency and implications, could restore to man the freedom lost in twenty centuries of apology and devices for subjugation." Still believes he carries real power, and his work "threatened the power ethic of this culture, and challenged its validity." In this letter Still mentions a sublime "moment of elevation" from "an idea" whose integrity is degraded by museum dealers, and degraded by painters who accept commercialism and "are amply worthy of the contempt and hatred they secretly exchange with one another even unto their deaths." Still adds a key remark: "It has always been my hope to create a free place or area of life where an idea can transcend politics, ambition, and commerce." Obviously Still has his center in the ideational sublime. He closes this powerful letter by bringing in a tragic sense, asserting that some individuals can dig out the truth that is "usually hard and sometimes bitter." He counsels: "Dig out the truth and one man is a match for all of them. Accept their premises and you will walk on your knees the rest of your life."<sup>21</sup>

Still writes Mark Rothko in 1951 to kick the architects for "their lust to plan a controlled culture," urging him to celebrate "what goes on before a totally free field in the man who employs it as a means for total realization."<sup>22</sup> It seems reasonable to assume that "total realization" would be, in the Kantian sense, an idea thrown up by

reason to encompass an infinitely complex existential area that cannot be held in a clear image or act of understanding, and obviously "total realization" is the transcendence that has been located in the indirect Sartrean sublime.

This Metropolitan Museum catalogue also includes a biographical chronology presumably prepared by the editor John O'Neill. We learn that in his youth Still was an avid student of old masters, a book collector, a player of classical piano works, and a heavy reader of literature, and that in addition to Plato and Longinus, he stressed Croce in his college studies. O'Neill gives a statement from Still recording that he wanted to break with European tradition but not in the "ontic protest and parody" mode of Dadaism nor in the exotic foreign mode of Picasso or Modigliani, nor the technological mode of the Bauhaus with its program of mass control.<sup>23</sup> Also printed is a 1948 letter from Still to Motherwell revealing Still's hope for at least a small social group of enlightened people "uncontaminated by political ends or social needs," a hope that might solve his "relation to society," but probably "the most foolish hope I ever had."<sup>24</sup>

Still also reprints a letter to Gordon Smith offered earlier in the exhibition catalogue from his 1959 show in Buffalo sponsored by the Albright Art Gallery and the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, a letter emphasizing Still's dislike for museum showings due to "my responsibility to the completed work . . . to make clear its conceptual germination of idea and vision, without which all art becomes but an exercise in conformity with shifting fashions or tribal ethics." Some critics declare that Still's subject is vague powers, but Still often insists that clear ideas are present in his works. In this letter Still records his desire to cut through all "cultural opiates" so that in "a direct, immediate, and truly free vision," some "idea be revealed with clarity." He goes on to offer one of his most revealing comments: "It was a journey that one must make, walking straight and alone. No respite or shortcuts were permitted. And one's will had to hold against every challenge of triumph, or failure, or the praise of Vanity Fair. Until one had crossed the darkened and wasted valleys and come at last on a high and limitless plain. Imagination, no longer fettered by the laws of fear, became as one with vision. And the act, intrinsic and absolute, was its meaning, and the bearer of its passion." There is no critical vocabulary adequate to this absolute act and limitless plain except the vocabulary of the sublime. Still calls for an immediate existential revelation

that is “beyond vanity, ambition, or remembrance,” clearly a disinterested state connected to our supersensible inner life of freedom and thought. It is extremely important that in this letter Still quotes Blake. Two of the couplets given are these: “The Vision of Christ that thou dost see/Is my vision’s greatest enemy” and “Thine loves the same world that mine hates./Thy Heaven doors are my Hell Gates.”<sup>25</sup>

O’Neill gives a letter of 1972 in which Still declares of the painters he secluded himself from that he does not hate them, “I like these people—they represent the creator-man—for the survival of our life, the only hope left.”<sup>26</sup> O’Neill notes that in 1975 Still received from Washington State University an alumni award stressing his resistance to power structures and his liberation of the human spirit.<sup>27</sup>

In an article on Still, Patrick McCaughey quotes a remark by Still in the catalogue for the 1963 exhibit at the University of Pennsylvania’s Institute of Contemporary Art—the remark that “The Sublime? A paramount consideration of my studies and work from earliest student days.”<sup>28</sup> Another remark by Still is given by Donald Kuspit, from an interview with Benjamin Townsend, in which Still declares that he removes all associations and all that is “pleasant, luminous, and symbolic,” and that he has an “anti-elegant attitude.” Kuspit adds that the only association the painter keeps is that of the sublime.<sup>29</sup> Still keeps more than that, though the sublime is dominant.

In a conversation with Still in 1976, Thomas Albright gives Still’s comment that “Art is a force for life, not death” and “It is a matter of joy.” Of the New York School Still observes: “We were all quite different. There was no cabal, no gang, no real movement, although we shared certain basic attitudes, a basic vocabulary. These were strong people. They had their hands on a strong thing.” Albright adds the interesting (and not correct) point that Still has revealed only one symbolic clue: that a jagged slicing line could be read as his “life-line.”<sup>30</sup>

Supplementing statements by Still, there are general stances taken by various critics. Albright claims that Still’s main theme is “The lone individual moving with towering self-confidence through a neutral environment which becomes whatever one chooses to make of it”; however this claim is much too minimal and timid. Albright does better when he finds in Still the “grandeur of a raw and elemental There-ness,

transcendent in its implications,” and finds that the convulsive forms are “awesomely still in their totality.” Albright declares that Still’s paintings function much like orchestration in music because like pure sound, the works are “pure vision.”<sup>31</sup> Again, this is too vague and minimal a thesis, though it may be part of the truth.

Robert Hughes, in The Shock of the New, is one of the few critics who ridicules Still, declaring that his vision of the radical power of one stroke of paint is silly egotistical bombast. Hughes calls his theatrical works an achievement “beset by cliches,” though Still did aim for an heroic Grand Canyon kind of “pantheistic energy.”<sup>32</sup> Max Kozloff claims that the abstract expressionists turned away from politics and social structures in search of freedom to treat sublime subjects in “a roughhewn grand manner.”<sup>33</sup> Eva Cockcroft takes an opposite view, that the abstract expressionist theme of artistic freedom was carefully used for political ends in the fight against communism by Rockefeller money working through The Museum of Modern Art; therefore the abstract expressionist paintings were not really politically neutral.<sup>34</sup> David and Cecile Shapiro stress the importance of two early articles by Greenberg and Rosenberg. Greenberg’s “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” emphasized that abstract expressionism was difficult art aimed not toward politics or the general public but toward a cultural elite, and Rosenberg’s article claimed that these painters escaped both political and moral values by seeing the painting as a radically new event. The Shapiros also note that this non-political art was used both by the Museum of Modern Art and the CIA for political purposes.<sup>35</sup> Continuing the political analysis, David Craven argues that the abstract expressionists should be criticized for turning away from politics in search for the sublime. Craven claims that all Utopian anarchistic seekers of the sublime become obstacles to social reform.<sup>36</sup>

David Anfam, in a 1993 article, asserts that Still does indeed, in his early work, have a strong myth subject related to important books on mythology by Sir James Frazer and others, and that the dark and bitter childhood of Still on the Canadian plains becomes a permanent residue in all of Still’s paintings. Anfam states that the late works carry transcendental spiritual and hermetic value as they blend the carnal and spiritual.<sup>37</sup> In another article, Anfam claims that Still’s strong vertical forms are

gendered symbols of male virility.<sup>38</sup>

Donald Kuspit develops the thesis that Still falls just short of the sublime because his great obsession is ethical and existential: Still wants to do us good by dramatizing our total freedom in making moral choices.<sup>39</sup> For Kuspit, the symbolic meaning of Still lies in the total volatile field and volatile edges which do not convey the sublime but rather “a situation of ethical choice rather than esthetic finality.”<sup>40</sup> Kuspit apparently does not see that existential moral freedom could itself be an idea that reaches the sublime. His concept of the sublime is too narrow, but his article is valuable as a recognition of Still’s existentialism.

Patrick McCaughey develops the thesis that Still belongs in the Gothic mode, treating the sublime in an essentially Romantic Gothic manner revealed especially by Still’s discovery that the raw canvas is a source of light, which connects him to Gothic luminism.<sup>41</sup> McCaughey claims that the sublime content is carried not by the masses in Still’s paintings, but by the light.<sup>42</sup> Again, this valuable idea is too restrictive, because the vertical masses play a crucial role in Still’s search for sublime meaning.

In her article on color and abstract expressionism, Ann Gibson claims that Newman, Rothko, and Still used color to symbolize the regression to primitive thinking in primitive myth. This original sense of oneness with the cosmos is seen as their sublime subject.<sup>43</sup> The problem here is that Still repudiated the idea of any return to primitivism. This contradiction may be resolved by assuming that Still, like Rothko and Newman, wanted a kind of primitive condition but not a real return to primitive thinking. Stephen Polcari takes the same view as Gibson, stressing Jungian myth, Levy-Bruhl’s mythology, Nietzsche’s use of myth, and others.<sup>44</sup> However Polcari wisely adds that Still has a second major theme of personal unfettered creativity.<sup>45</sup> This is the painter’s major theme.

David Anfam has produced an important doctoral dissertation on Still, stressing that Still, Rothko, and Newman must all be interpreted through the vocabulary of the sublime as the best explanation of their concern for exaltation and transcendence. Anfam believes that Still’s early works were centered in recurrent motifs of primitive myth, especially myths of fertility, this concern being related to Nietzsche and to works

on myth such as those of Harrison, Weston, Jung, and Frazer.<sup>46</sup> Anfam does not offer a theory connecting myth to the sublime, but he is assuming there is one. Then, Anfam declares, around 1947 Still, Rothko, and Newman all began to seek a new start, some “aboriginal matrix” to treat “a primal or ultimate condition” beyond history and myth, and they found it in the idea of the color field as a nexus for a transcendent subject matter of “first and last things.”<sup>47</sup> Anfam declares that Still’s small flickers of bright color symbolize hidden meanings and that his sense of the sublime becomes more Burkean, Gothic, and romantic than the directions of Rothko and Newman, due to features like rugged and broken surfaces, suddenness and ugliness, darkness and terror.<sup>48</sup> The connection to romantic theory lies in Still’s strong sense of selfhood as the basis for a romantic version of the sublime, including a Wordsworthian fear that the self might be swallowed in some abyss.<sup>49</sup> The romantic bond also lies in Still’s dedication to symbols as they relate to the thought of Coleridge and Blake (use of the imagination to transform matter into spirit by symbols).<sup>50</sup> Anfam also connects Still’s late vehement and obscure statements to the influence of Nietzsche, “where ethical imperatives are fused with an agitated diction,” and also to the whole content of Nietzsche’s thought.<sup>51</sup> However Anfam does not treat the Nietzschean sublime. In general, Anfam’s position is that Still reaches for a sublime elevation to idea, and thus remains close to Longinus in his pervasive inclination to identify “art’s transcendent content with the concept of the Idea.”<sup>52</sup> This is the correct view, but a heavy stress on abstract idea (which is Still’s center) drifts away from the typical romantic sublime, just as Still, Rothko, and Newman all turned away in their rejection of nature. Anfam does not touch on all the ideas that are at the center of Still’s method, nor does he stress sufficiently the influence of existentialism on Still, though he does mention it. Also, Anfam does not connect Still sufficiently to a moral sublime, and his favoring of “earth mother” myth in Still is not as appropriate as a Promethean pattern.

The moral center for abstract expressionism is stressed by Robert Motherwell, whose opinions are important because he was so close to Rothko, Newman, and Still, and had good training in philosophy as well as art history. Several remarks in Motherwell’s Collected Writings (some previously cited) are relevant to the sublime in

Still: that "Modern art is a specific ethical enterprise. . . . on the part of men who deeply love painting, to preserve its integrity and truth"; that there is a moral imperative for "no nostalgia, no propaganda, no discourse, no autobiography, no violation of the canvas as a surface . . . , no clichés, no predetermined endings"; that the sublime is a strongly felt experience of "the exalted, the noble, the lofty" and contemporary painting perhaps becomes sublime "when the artist transcends his personal anguish, when he projects in the midst of a shrieking world an expression of living and its end that is silent and ordered"; and that modern abstraction is a mystical enterprise arising, like other mysticisms, "from a primary sense of gulf, an abyss, a void between one's lonely self and the world. Abstract art is an effort to close the void that modern men feel. Its abstraction is its emphasis." Motherwell has a good sense of threshold crossing. He states that the dynamism in Still and his group derived from "an existential context of greatly liberating forces"; that "To modify one's art is to modify one's character"; that Still's first New York show, in comparison to the other abstract expressionists, "was the most original. A bolt out of the blue"; that he was the first to reject any trace of figuration; and that he deeply influenced Rothko in the late forties when Rothko was close to Newman.<sup>53</sup>

While William Seitz's important study of abstract expressionism does not include a concentration on Still, his general comments would illuminate Still: that in spite of spiritual crisis and doubt "Modern art is still a quest for an absolute"; that Nietzsche's sense of polarity and tragic awareness is a major influence; that even if overt religious meaning is absent, "Yet the personal quest for a transcendental reality, and for an absolute, has in no sense abated"; that beauty became a secondary concern; and that modern art (Seitz's closing lines) "In its concern for creation over mechanism, freedom over regimentation, inclusiveness over chauvinism, live structures over chaos or dead order, and commitment over pragmatism . . . portrays the searcher and idealist among contemporary men." Obviously Seitz emphasizes a moral imperative and a transcendental aim, and he illuminates Still's method by rightly observing that "In an existential aesthetic no part of the process is merely technical; it is a symbolic act, inseparable from the biography of the artist."<sup>54</sup>

Nancy Marmer makes a number of interesting points about Still: that he reveals

considerable experimental variety in his later works, reaching at times “a near-Oriental calligraphic delicacy and refinement unprecedented in his earlier work”; that his ascending flame-like towers reach “towards infinity” and convey upward spiritual longing; that his paint is “an emissary of the artist’s will, the symbol of his Promethean power” (she does not connect this, as one must, to Nietzsche); that his polarities seem almost Manichean; that his romantic melodramatic imagination creates an “agon of polarities”; and that his essentially romantic egotism does not postulate an outer-world mystical zone, but rather seeks an “equivalent to the transcendent flash of spiritual meaning available to earlier art.”<sup>55</sup> She is right to construe Still in terms of polarity plus a Promethean, Gothic-romantic melodrama, but wrong to think that Still stops short of a genuine absolutist and transcendental sublime; and she is ignoring his moral sublime. Rosenblum, as we have seen, is more correct to locate genuine religiosity in the romantic sublime as it comes over into abstract expressionism.

Just before Still died he was interviewed by Thomas Albright, who observes that our final picture of Still “was a kind of composite of Savonarola, Zarathustra, and Captain Ahab.” Albright reports Still’s remarks that in his works he sought “the vastness and depth of a Beethoven sonata or a Sophocles drama,” and that rather than show (as in Rembrandt or Velázquez) what an eye, hand, or foot could do, he would show “what just the idea of an eye or an arm or a head might be,” and that art is “an instrument of thought”—revelations that Still also belongs essentially in the ideational sublime. In an insight meshing with Crowther’s sense of the needs of consciousness and its enlargements and the growth in power through rational grasp, Albright shrewdly observes that a Still painting “seems a reflection of consciousness becoming ever more conscious of itself, of its freedom and power.”<sup>56</sup> Though Albright does not say so, he points to a transcendence akin both to the Kantian and existential sublime.

An important publication came in 1992, the catalogue for a Still retrospective in Munich, with analytical essays by Thomas Kellein and Michael Auping. Kellein prints a remark Still made to Hess in 1952, that his painterly object “is almost all idea.” The general approach of Kellein is too formalist, as witnessed by his comment that the works do not show “a calculated reliance on mystical theories,” and “The pictorial elements are always interrelated as if involved in a struggle for the painting. Seen

individually, they articulate neither space nor color, but a world of interfering, mutually attractive and repelling entities that never subordinate themselves to a higher or unifying order. . . . and compositional balance is not a prime objective." All that Kellein will concede toward transcendence is that "Through their massiveness, the areas of color took on a measure of sublimity." The formalists miss too much that really matters. Kellein's essay resembles Greenberg's article on Still, a very dull treatment based entirely on form, size, and color, and revealing how blind Greenberg was to crucial content: "On more than one of the few times Clyff and I talked . . . he brought up Longinus's 'On the Sublime.' I can't remember at all what he said, but it did seem that Longinus was on his mind."<sup>57</sup> Greenberg should have remembered.

Auping's catalogue essay (more satisfying than Kellien's) declares that Still saw his work "as one immense visual biography" and "the self—in all its darkness and peculiarities—constituted the heart of his image." Correctly recognizing background theorists, Auping observes that "In many ways, Still and his colleagues were paralleling in visual and symbolic terms a heady theoretical climate that included the writing on myth, primitivism, and the unconscious of Freud, Jung, and Nietzsche." Still's comment that the threads in his work are life-lines is passed along by Auping, who connects it to "an existentially aware self," who accepts the "vaguely gothic" element in Still, and who notes that "Still also avoids pure spectrum colors, replacing yellow with ocher and orange with sienna." Still's works suggest "a vertical emanation from ground to cosmos," and his colors have "a transcendental interior light," though Still recognized that he used color, in his words, "in a new and, for many, displeasing way."<sup>58</sup> What is lacking in Auping's analysis is the needed connection between Still's harsh colors and the presence of a sublimicist project.

Like Marmer, Auping finds hints of "a primordial or mythic duel," but does not connect this to the sublime. He does rightly observe that Still's color (as is the case for Rothko and Newman) "transforms Mondrian's metaphysics into something more grand and awesome"; but we need to know what that something is. Auping discovers in works of the fifties a stronger "gothic ascension" and more of a "solemn processional quality," along with more Burkean "terror and chaos" than in Newman's "divinely calculated" paintings that seem to derive from a personal "Golden Section." Auping

properly relates Still to the Burkean sublime, “a phenomenon steeped in gothic atmosphere and characterized by properties of terror, darkness, and grand unfathomable dimension. Other characteristics of the sublime described by Burke—roughness of surface, melancholy color—are particularly applicable to Still’s work.” In the latest paintings of the sixties Auping finds not only more white, light, optimism, and economy, but also a deeper theological sense, a sense of rebirth, a “transformation from the natural to the metaphysical, to something profoundly moving but not quite nameable.”<sup>59</sup> Obviously Auping gives strong warrant for a sublimicist analysis of Still.

Finally, mention should be made of a new exhibition catalogue for a 1994 show in New York, the exhibition and catalogue title being Newman, Rothko, Still: Search for the Sublime, with a discerning text by Irving Sandler, who writes that through their color field format they hoped “to evoke what Newman termed ‘the Sublime,’ Rothko, ‘transcendental experience,’ and Still, ‘exaltation.’”<sup>60</sup> Sandler plays down any specific borrowings from primitive art by the three painters, and notes that “Still’s images were often composed of vertical light forms set off against horizontal dark forms, evoking an upright figure in a landscape, male and female, sky and earth, Heaven and Hell.” All three artists converted myth-making into an American abstract sublime, Irving states, in the light of suggestions from Rosenblum and Alloway. Burke’s influence is stressed in the painters’ elimination of line and the blurring of edges to invoke infinity; in the increase in size of the canvases to increase sublime impact; in dark colors divorced from conventional effects; and in bright colors that were more dissonant than pleasing. Still’s forms are related to the earlier American sublime of vast geographic spaces, and also to Emerson’s radical individualism. Still’s vertical and flame-like areas “unlock the picture space, and cover it to expand up and outward, conveying an immediate sensation of limitless upward aspiration.” Still is construed as an “ultimate Emersonian” with a sublime sense of the mythical American West.<sup>61</sup> These kinds of relatedness to a general American tradition of the sublime in painting and literature will be treated in a later chapter. Sandler’s interpretation is perceptive but requires what he does not supply: a clear and detailed way to connect rugged individualism to a transcendent sublime.

If Ferguson’s approach were applied to Still, an argument could be made that the dissolving of the figure into the ground raises doubts about the individual as

autonomous agent; however that would be a misreading because it is hard to think of any painter who equals Still in the celebration of the free and unfettered self. Deconstructionists and postmoderns could of course respond that no matter what Still thinks, his writings and ideas are so thoroughly located in the fluid fields of language and culture, so thoroughly “constructed” by the malleable contingencies of non-universal word games, so thoroughly faded out in their interlockings with other texts, and so inherently destabilized by the self-reflexive and unreliable ontological and epistemological status of his referring terms, that there is no possible way to read him except in line with a Ferguson movement toward rhetoricity and deconstruction. However, if anyone told Still that his Captain Ahab kind of arrogant, Nietzschean assertion of isolated will and intellect was no more than a fiction exploded by his enslavement to some culture field, we may imagine Still’s blistering response. In short, Ferguson-like readings are always possible, but they would not fit with the positive aspects of Still’s painterly crusade. Ferguson would, however, be helpful in that her focus on selfhood is also Still’s main focus.

Weiskel would be very interested in Still as a projector of strong psychological compulsions, a perceiver of psychic trauma, an anxiety-ridden modernist whose jagged tensions separate him from the harmonious romantic sublime and locate him in the secondary, troubled modern or postmodern sublime. Weiskel would claim that Still’s sense of destruction is fed by the Oedipal antagonism, and that Still’s works are best explained by physiological and psychological elementary pleasure/pain mechanisms. Weiskel would be able to concede that Still genuinely felt the need to reach a more than human transcendent zone, but that we should explain this on naturalistic grounds, not idealistic. Again, such readings are possible, and Still makes a better case study for Weiskel than Rothko or Newman—just as (due to his better sense of enemies) he would make a better case study for Bloom’s counter sublime. What is wrong here is that Still (whose studies focused heavily on Plato, Longinus, and Croce) really ought not to be approached in terms of materialism, naturalism, and nominalism. It is counter-intuitive to suppose that such a direction could explain his sublimicist art.

The Lyotard paradigm would be more adequate than that of Ferguson or Weiskel. Still, Rothko, and Newman were indeed critical of the culture of the machine age, technology, and mass production; they did indeed harbor a vague dream of a more

humane and equitable society; they were indeed devoted to metaphysical ideas; they did indeed try to present the unrepresentable; they did indeed favor a more tolerant society open to new voices; and they did indeed relish their power to produce paintings that spoke like phrases and sentences to honor a moral ought. These important correspondences indicate some of the considerable special merits of Lyotard's theory of the sublime. However, there is simply no sense in which Still and his group believed that constructive and operative myth was impossible, that the self was unstable, that the differing culture areas could not communicate with each other, or, especially, that no positive new vision could now be declared.

There are many interesting ways in which Crowther's terminology allows a rewarding treatment of Still. While I will not pursue such a reading in detail, I will refer to some of Crowther's specific notions in the analysis of specific paintings. Suffice it to say, here, that Still's sense of a vast chaos of inimical culture forces that can be logically comprehended, brought into coherence, and transcended through the sensibility of the sublime lends itself to illumination by Crowther's expanded Kantian model. Crowther gains distinctive advantages for handling positive sublimicist art through his positive concepts of personal enrichment, cultural regeneration, universal needs of consciousness, flexible but long-enduring constants, and understanding of how widely relevant and constructive the concept of the sublime should be. Crowther strongly maintains the ideational sublime of Kant, offering the best approach to Still as well as Rothko and Newman. Also, Crowther's theorizing of an existential modern sublime of shock and terror grafted to Burkean concepts seems highly appropriate for the Gothicized sublime of Still. But again, the blazing moral passion of Still, plus the absolutism and implicit theism (which I think is there) would not be adequately captured in Crowther's model.

Keeping all the major theorists in mind, plus the insights in Still criticism, plus Still's own invaluable statements, what are the most promising ways to pursue sublime content in the works of Clyfford Still? Longinus offers one major direction, indicated in a listing of some of his insights which relate strongly to Still: that the sublime is seen in "a lightning flash"; that through the sublime the soul "gains a proud step upward"; that grand conceptions are the chief source of the sublime; that strong passion is a source; that an artistic unity of parts to whole is a source; that seriality is a source along with

bridging from one to many; that the sublime resides more in mind and imagination than in nature; that dark areas in a painting can work as a concealed sublime metaphor; that contemporary materialistic, corrupt society is hostile to sublime artists, who must denounce both to reach eternal things. Each of these items is connectable to Still's work, for instance, his flame motif as an icon both for lightning flashes of intuition and a proud elevation of soul, his jaggedness as a suggestion of strong passion, his interlocking forms as a unity of parts and whole, his sustained sameness of style as a wave of seriality (along with his passion to show works in groups in solo exhibitions), his dark sections as symbols, and his turning from nature to mind and imagination. Also Longinus, like Still, assumes that moral passions are inextricable from sublime aims.

Burke establishes a major path of interpretation for sublime content in Still, especially Burke's stress on passions as psychological universals; on the elements of fear and danger, which for Still would certainly involve society as daemonic and the self as endangered by social control, as well as private histories of pain and suffering and the danger of death; on darkness and obscurity as signs of the sublime, including obscurity in sublime ideas; on Burke's sense of power as a necessary aspect of the sublime; on solitude, silence, and privation as conditions of the sublime; on verticals and jagged surfaces as suited to the sublime; on darkness, light and colors revealed by light as symbols of sublimity; on paradox and polarity as sources of the sublime; on black, brown, purple, and red colors as appropriate in suggestivity; on the ragged and rugged contours of the sublime as opposed to the smooth harmony of the beautiful; on things (like paintings) from which we have no real fear but which have an effect similar to objects of terror; and on the essential role of the emotion of astonishment. Gothic features mesh smoothly with Burke's ideas.

Nietzsche's theory is also highly relevant to Still, whom we should see as a ruthless Nietzschean sublime man struggling to impose his value system on a decadent society through sublime art symbols. Nietzsche would not find sufficient myth in Still, although clearly we have Apollonian and Dionysian polarities plus a distinctly Promethean motif of aggression. Also Nietzsche failed to see how the biography of geniuses can become effective as myth. There is no doubt that Rothko, Newman, and Still believed they could create new myth from their own lives as long as they could

achieve a cultic space.

Probably the most productive direction for grounding Still's vision of the sublime lies in Sartre and Kierkegaard, especially Sartre. The dominant theme for Still is the wholly free and morally responsible individual, struggling to make choices that elevate the choices of others. The Sartrean existential sublime (though Sartre did not declare it), would be located both in Sartrean dread and freedom, and in the transcendence of the self toward future idealized states which are projected outward and upward as an expanding horizon beyond the zone of the merely human. Kierkegaard relates to Still in terms of the rejection of the crowd and the raising high of the anguished individual in search of a transcendent ground of being. In a general sense, Still's Sartrean existential sublime should be seen as an extension of the egoistic romantic sublime, with strong Gothic aura, but the existentialism must be supplemented by transcendent ideas in the tradition of Longinus and Kant, and in kinship with Rothko and Newman.

Still should also be interpreted through the moral sublime, an avenue strongly theorized by Kant and in some ways expanded by Crowther and others. For Still there was a painterly moral imperative related to the general aims of abstract expressionism to purify and simplify the means of expression, along with a social moral imperative to convert a sick society to a healthy one. Kant discovers highest sublimity in the power of the individual to legislate universal morality, and also in the subjective power of reason to supply a concept adequate to bridge over the shock of a rugged encounter with powerful forces, certainly the key to Still's achievement. This unifying concept comes from the realm of subjective rational freedom where, for Kant and Still, moral judgments must originate; thus for Kant the sublime encounters activate our respect for the whole inner world of idea, including the area of moral choice. The Kantian model of the sublime allows a plausible way to invoke the moral sublime for any artist, like Still, who clearly sees his artistic program as ethically instrumental.

Still's Prometheanism, his Apollonian and Dionysian polarities, his sense of ancient foes clashing on a modern plain, his strong sense of the universal validity of his vision, all of this is partly founded on the confidence given to the abstract expressionists by the archetype theory of Jung, confidence that by probing their own existential condition they could reach universal ground, confidence that if they probed the dark regions of their own psyches, they could hope for regeneration and integration

of self. Also, there is an impressive quality of the noble sublime in Still because his works are sharply etched and invite deliberate and rational meditation. Yet he manifests less of the noble sublime than Rothko and Newman, less of a sense of balanced ratio and measure. Still moves further toward a passional sublime, in keeping with his Burkean cast.<sup>62</sup> It should be possible to locate in Still a light/color sublime, establishing a kinship with Rothko and Newman as a color field painter. Yet there are peculiar features to Still's use of color--his refusal of pure spectrum colors, his clear understanding that he kept away from "beauty" in his harsh colors. We may properly assume that he does this, in part, as a sign that his sublimicist vision is too moral and serious, too Puritanical, to keep company with the traditionally beautiful. However if harsh colors are chosen deliberately at the urging of a combative idea, this is not quite what we mean by an inherent sublime of color--as we find in Rothko and Newman, and Turner, as well as in Matisse and Mondrian. It may well be that Still hurt himself by his harsh colors, yet his decision came from moral courage, and his colors do contribute to his sublimicist project, serving his ideational sublime.

As we move into the analysis of specific works, it is helpful to keep in mind certain particular kinds of awareness activated by Still's own comments: the sense of a white canvas as a field for a demonstration of freedom; the sense of a single stroke of paint delivered by a thinking mind intending to demonstrate total existential freedom of choice; the sense of the edge of the painting as a symbol for oppressive restraint by society; the sense of a complete painting as a revelation of a total person showing heroic bravery; the sense of sublime reality carried by the sublime ideas of total freedom and total selfhood, by the sublime warfare against a corrupt society, by the sublime pressure of strong emotion, by the sublime disinterested state beyond utility or greed, and by the parallel between human and divine creation; the sense of vertical forms and flame-like ascensions as symbols of the thrust toward the transcendent sublime; the sense that harmonious beauty has been set aside for the more harsh, ragged, and rugged tonality of the sublime; the sense that strong shocks need to be administered to a public that has been made passive by the many opiates of social control; the sense that a bold, prophetic, Nietzschean male is flinging down a bold challenge; the Nietzschean sense that creative artists, using intellect and imagination, are the only hope for a sick society; the sense that primitive thought and the past must not dominate, and that the true state is

a fully modern existential mind taking an action in the present moment; the sense that all past styles and taste must be set aside and a new style developed for unique purposes; the sense that one aggressive stroke of paint might prevail over an entire misdirected society; the sense that human freedom is a right of the individual that carries with it a powerful moral obligation; the sense that art should shun commerce and achieve an elevation of mind which is redeeming for self and society; and the sense that Still is standing not only in the midst of modernism, but also in the shadow of Europeans such as Plato, Longinus, Burke, Nietzsche, Blake, the symbolists, and the surrealists, and equally (as a rather Puritanical Protestant) in the shadow of American individualism and transcendentalism.

Four paintings by Still have been selected for analysis: July 1948, 1951-L No.2, September 1955, and Oil on Canvas, 1959 (using the plate titles in the Kellein Clyfford Still). July 1948 is chosen because that is the year in which Rothko, Newman, and Still were all approaching their mature style, though Still reached his the soonest. July 1948 has a cream-colored field dominated by jagged and upward-moving black masses, with a jagged red flame-like form in the middle of the largest black mass, along with a few isolated streaks and jagged spots of red, and also a few spots and streaks of cream in the black masses. On three sides the black shapes come to the edge of the painting as if extending beyond.

The most conspicuous features of July 1948 are the ominous sense of some kind of endangerment; the restless Gothic and Baroque sense of energy, power, and destructive potential; the sense of upward thrust; the renunciation of natural forms and figure; and the harshness of the colors in that the cream is rather muddied and the crimson is prevented from being a pure spectrum color by some internal streaking of cream and black, plus an infusion of orange. We may certainly accept Still's remark that he did not like the tyranny of the edge of a painting as a confinement, and thus construe the "beyond the edge" motif as a sign of extensions outward toward a more or less cosmic and infinite context. In this work the cream ground is close to the bare canvas, probably a sign of the bare canvas as a field of freedom upon which a Nietzschean will to power (not over people but against oppressors) can inscribe aggressive ideas. There is no reason not to agree with Anfam and others that there is a clearly masculinized presence in Still's works.

It would simplify things if we could assume that in Still's paintings the black and other dark colors symbolize forces of oppression and destruction, while the reds, yellows, bright blues, and whites suggest the indomitable existential self. But we have no warrant to assume that—for this reason: it is possible that the jagged polarities of shape and color all represent Still's individual powers, his various faculties and resources for waging war, his own fierce internal polarities and strivings for integration and synthesis. This latter type of analysis strikes me as the most probable. The entire painting is a revelation of a human self flinging down a gauntlet, a human self not easy to defeat because it embodies a complex assortment of weapons, skills, resources. We should rely on Still's assertions that a polar duel does not dominate his paintings internally, but rather a "single projection," and that his works declare "Here I am; this is my presence." Such a reading allows us to see the blacks not as signs of the enemy, but rather (in consonance with Burke) as signs of the depth and mystery of a sublime subject. However Still's constant enemy (the socio-politico-economic ensconced powers, institutions, and traditions) is indeed invoked by implication as the kind of thing requiring such strength and violence to be resisted. And here, precisely, lies proof of the conspicuous value of the theory of the sublime. Still's foe is so vast, so infinite, so complex, so obscure, so unrepresentable, so dangerous and terrifying that only a concept of reason can encompass and cope with the gigantic entity being contemplated or with the force being set against it. Crowther strongly encourages this kind of analysis of modern and postmodern art—and so does the art itself.

Anfam, as we have seen, has called attention to Still's phrase "of the earth, the damned, and the recreated," which may be related to a comment of Still already given, but worth quoting again: "And as the blues or reds or black leap up and quiver in their tenuous ambience or rise in austere thrusts to carry their power infinitely beyond the bounds of the limiting field, I move with them and find a resurrection from the morbid oppressions that held me only hours ago. Only they are complete too soon, and I must quickly move on to keep the spirit alive." It is important to note that Still includes the blues, reds, and blacks as part of the upward affirmations toward infinite concerns. These colors represent powers within the self that are touched by the divine in a saving kind of recreation for the self. Thus we meet the Sartrean existential sublime in both of its impulses: transcendence toward higher and future realizations of perfected selfhood,

plus the threshold crossing to moral responsibility for other persons, who are encouraged to elevate their lives by similar kinds of fiercely committed idealism and agonized choice. Still's extremely negative assessment of the general conditions of social life and his sense of the huge dangers to personal honor and Sartrean authenticity sufficiently explain his references to oppression of spirit and the state of damnation. Also, we should keep in mind that Still approved before publication Crehan's comment in the San Francisco Chronicle that "the monstrous black and red shapes, with their swift yellow flicks or blue articulations, evoke a spiritual charge akin to those profound emotions produced by the occasional scientific or philosophic utterances that reconstruct our consciousness of reality in a more perfect order." We cannot properly assess Still without keeping in mind a kind of paradise vision, and Crehan's remark also suggests that Still (like Newman) connects his ideational sublime to key concepts of modern science. Still has made it clear that his paintings operate like pure ideas close to Sartre's rationalism. For Still, existentialism was precisely one of the articulations in philosophy that had the impact of a major scientific theory.

The strong reds and blacks of July 1948 make an interesting contrast to the luminous domination by yellow of 1951-L No.2. Throughout his career Still produced bright works as well as dark ones. The whole middle of 1951-L No. 2 is a large upward-thrusting pillar of jagged yellow reaching to the upper edge and thus projecting higher. Also at the top are some small slashes of white. The left and right edges are irregular narrow zips of burnt orange, and at the bottom center is a small flare of red complementing a black streak in the lower right corner. These forms stand out against a general ground of pale tan. Except for black and white, none of the colors are pure, a feature which should be connected to avoidance of the spectrum hues of nature and to the shifting of subject from the beautiful to the sublime.

The vertical shafts in this work reflect an aggressive Nietzschean male ego. The concentration of the white streaks at the top, plus the dominance of yellow, suggest that this painting asserts more of the rational and spiritual self, less of the impassioned and embodied self depicted by the blacks and reds, which are here not eliminated, but pointed to by the smaller lower black and red streaks. All of the streaks and flares in Still's paintings function semantically (in their spontaneity and energy) to suggest the whole of an aggressive intellect and will—something full of life and energy, something

not predictable, something not governed by mechanism, something operating with the consciousness of its own freedom, something not to be silenced, something complex in weaponry. If there is more warmth and kindness in such a yellow, tan, orange, and white painting, more of a sense of possible serenity and heavenly implications, these should be taken as part of the existential weaponry. Still's own moments of exaltation, joy, and regeneration are certainly a proper sublime subject. It was Sartre himself who said that the pessimism of existentialism should not obscure the truth that it is also a joyous doctrine. It is the strong domination of yellow in this work, plus the more stable column as opposed to jagged flames, which suggests a more spiritualized and heaven-tilted reading of this type of work in Still's oeuvre.

September 1955 has been selected in part because as a red color field work, it can be compared and contrasted to Vir Heroicus Sublimis. Still's bold red field, unlike Newman's, offers an impure crimson shot through with orange. The darker red-orange tongues of ascending flame stand out against a paler red-orange, and the general red-orange field reaches to the edges on three sides. On the left side is a ragged burnt yellow zip with creamy white streaks, and at the right bottom is a small jagged black flare. To the left of center a prominent feature is a thin white line reaching to the upper edge. Still and others have mentioned his motif of a "life-line"; however in my reading this should not be taken to mean that the thin line is the human self. The life line is, rather, an assertion of spontaneous living vitality, and the fact that Still combines lines with splashes and streaks has the semantic value of declaring the complexity and spontaneity of the self, of the will. It may well be the case that the lines can represent rays of the intellect as they cut clean in a turbulent world, but in any case the lines represent part of the self, not the entire self.

If Newman's red masterpiece belongs to the measured noble sublime as a tribute to the sublime heroic life, Still's red canvas carries a similar tribute, but in Burkean-Gothic-Baroque shock mode, strongly colored by Nietzsche and Sartre. We have noted that Still admired Blake and that the myth of the fire-stealing Prometheus (strongly emphasized by Nietzsche) has been connected to Still and his program. Certainly Still's September 1955 lends itself to a Promethean analysis in terms of the aggressive boldness, the heroic assertiveness, and the tongues of flame. However we have seen that Still rejected any kind of revival of older myths, insisting (like Newman) that a

fresh beginning was required, a raw existential base. Jungian archetype theory encouraged Rothko, Newman, and Still to believe that universal mythical grounds could be reached by the descent into the depth of selfhood, into the turbulence of the inner human powers and passions that clashed in polar opposition and required a difficult integration. All of this points to the genuine mythical sublime in Rothko, Newman, and Still. The living embodied artist is the culture hero who engages in battle with the diabolical forces. We should recall Polcari's general thesis that the abstract expressionists picked up the great Western monomyth of the questing hero, suited to their uses because they treated two grand themes: "to be caught in a web of difficulties and to seek to overcome them through an inward transformation and rebirth."<sup>63</sup> Still's crimson field, like Newman's, should be seen in the light of a comment by Ronald Paulson: "The complementary aim of the abstract expressionists . . . was to secure the archetypal image, the mythic Jungian archetype, whether this was a luminous, numinous square or a single vertical line. The powerful, haunting, mysterious image, itself sublime in the way that an image of God in glory would have been to a medieval Christian, or the omnipotent sun was to Turner." Due to the stronger existential appropriation, Still is more humanist than Rothko and Newman, though we have no warrant to assume that Still does not adumbrate also a religious divine. He probably does. Yet his humanism is powerful, as it was with Blake, who associated fire with his Gothic and destructive tiger as symbol of passion and freedom. Paulson realizes that a merely rhetorical and metaphorical sublime would not count: "either the human has to be truly raised into a natural/supernatural force, as by a kind of possession, or we are dealing with at best a metaphorical and at worst a pseudo sublime."<sup>64</sup> This is exactly what we should perceive in Still—a natural/supernatural force as possession. Still does not revive the old fire legend of Prometheus, but rather recreates this same kind of heroic and mythic action in his own life, encouraged to do so by Blake, Nietzsche, Longinus, Burke, and Jung. Still's effort to behave like a superman and produce art symbols intended to impose order on a whole culture stands in close proximity to the Nietzschean sublime, and the jaggedness, shock, and tumult of his forms, the intense implication of terrors and dangers on all sides, brings his sublimism close also to Burke's in a combination of modes of the sublime somewhat different from those in

Rothko and Newman.<sup>65</sup>

As a final painting for consideration, Oil on canvas, 1959 seems appropriate because it so perfectly conveys the hallmark features of Still's works. There is a general ground of tan at the bottom and impure creamy white at the top. On this ground in the upper right is a jagged wedge of strong but impure blue, at the bottom left a jagged wedge of impure orange-red, and at the bottom center and right a jagged wedge of rather harsh maroon. We have the dark colors and rough contours of Burke's sublime, plus the strong dark/light contrast Burke singled out for sublimity in the design of Gothic cathedrals, plus the Burkean verticals and descent into darkness. Still also gives a small black streak at the bottom and a yellow streak at the top, plus a yellow life line. This painting is a kind of summary of Still's vocabulary. The white, yellow, and blue at the top should be construed as analogues for intellect, hope, and projections toward a transcendent and more perfect order. The lower masses of crimson and maroon are semantic analogues for powers in the self other than reason and faith--the powers of strong passions, including rage, hate, and destructive potential. These existential and also universal and trans-finite (if not eternal) entities are, in this work, well balanced against the blue and white areas. We seem to reach from the lower depth of the unconscious to the upper zones of lucid ideas and something at least close to the mandate of heaven, yielding Still's declared ideal of an "edification of mind or soul."

As a later work, Oil on canvas, 1959 seems (importantly) to be somewhat more noble, measured, integrated, balanced, reaching the painter's goal of a sonata form. Most of the analytical observations made about the other three paintings apply also to this one. The white, blue, red, and maroon chunks are like stalwart, courageous soldiers set upon the field of battle with great freedom for spontaneous action. Who is the enemy? It is an Other whose corruption, power, and threat need this kind of counteraction, that huge "collectivist castration word" hated by Still, against which some high idealism and male virility should be set. Still's hostile Other is the entire social establishment, including the politicized militants as well as the governments, churches, capitalists, and art institutions. To use Still's terms, he is creating lances and brooms in paint.

Difficulty and seriality should be mentioned as part of Still's sublimicism. The difficulty factor is obvious, and it is noteworthy that Still compounded it by refusing to

give any statements that provided specific clues about specific paintings. The Burkean sublimity of things made difficult attaches to all abstract art, and especially to Still's. Also, he seems more passionate about seriality than Rothko or Newman. He used the same forms throughout his entire artistic life. Often later paintings are close echoes of earlier ones, and his will decrees that his huge fund of unshown paintings must remain in hiding until some city creates a quiet museum (no snack or sales shops) in which his works go on permanent display in series. We should conclude that a cumulative wave-like effect of grandeur and impact was in Still's mind, another facet of Still's search for the sublime in our age that needs elevation, awe, and mystery, but finds those needs not being met.

Clearly Still exhibits a moral sublime in this powerful concept of his own aesthetic holy war. For Still, every rugged color block, every ascending pillar of flame, was a moral declaration, as his own comments assert, such as his Lyotardian "phrases" that for his audience he "will give back courage as freedom," that he will "carve clean," that he will use ideas to reach a "moment of elevation." In Crowther's theory of the sublime there are precognitive constants established by the universal conditions of human embodiment, and these are important elemental forces in Still's hold on the world, his correlations of hand, eye, and intellect, and his existential sensibility. Crowther also stresses the universal needs of self-consciousness, which he defined as attention, comprehension, projection, reversibility, species-identity, and individual freedom, and which he connects to the unique value of art in overcoming both personal and cultural antagonisms in a redemptive, integrative fashion. If we could ask Still whether or not he utilized psycho-physiological constants; called for and offered attention, comprehension, and projection; focused on the human species and human freedom; and tried to achieve a redemptive vision for self and society, Still would reply that someone had a good grasp of his program (if the seclusive Still would agree to answer questions at all). To understand Still, as well as Rothko and Newman, criticism must employ an aesthetic theory much like Crowther's, one which construes aesthetic experience as a complex harmonizing of rational and sensory components; construes art as uniquely qualified to present a redemptive vision via the sensory manifold; embraces both phenomenology and historicity; understands the axiology of the conscious pleasurable recognition of aesthetic and sublime content; protects art from dissolution into language;

and takes cognizance of often neglected broad features such as the general moral good, general existential courage, and the general feeling at home in the world. This kind of combination is precisely what Rothko, Newman, and Still adopted in their art programs.

Albright connected Still in his final years to Captain Ahab—a shrewd analogy. Ahab, as if in some preordained battle, sets his fire energies against whatever it is in the universe that causes frustration, suffering, and despair to mankind, and if the dark god who is responsible will not come out and fight, Ahab will attack him through his agent, the white whale. Ahab's weapon is the lance, which Still named as his weapon. Most critics do not like to discover any kind of paradise vision offering ultimate hope for Ahab. They should read again the lines early in the novel from Father Mapple's sermon, in which he declares that the brave spiritual fighters of the world may, at the end, expect some grand coming of delight: "Delight is to him—a far upward, and inward delight—who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth, ever stands forth his own inexorable self."<sup>66</sup> Art historians may not think that Still was a fully successful painter, but this is what he did. His Ahab nature and his self-reliance connect him to Melville and Emerson and the romantic American Protestant sublime, a metaphysical sublime—for Still so totally a project of strong ideas as to place him, essentially, in the ideational sublime, with other modes (as has been demonstrated) mixed in, including probably a genuine religious sublime as an implication of those upward vectors in Still's work that reach toward a zone of radiance and eternity, with his creative fire counting as an analogue for divine creation.

Thus, by way of ending part two of this study, we have seen that our four seminal and four recent theorists of the sublime—combined with Sartre and Jung—supply a full and complex background of sublimicist theory which can profitably be brought to bear on Rothko, Newman, and Still—a procedure demanded by the speculations on sublimity and transcendental subjects so dominant in the assembled personal comments of the three painters. For all three, the sobering negativities of tragic awareness and alienation in the modern age are faced and absorbed, yet not allowed to destroy a central vision of positive philosophic and spiritual belief. Their programs cannot be fairly construed in negative terms, and this fact justifies the art historical decision to locate them chiefly in the positive ideational sublime, with strong cross-

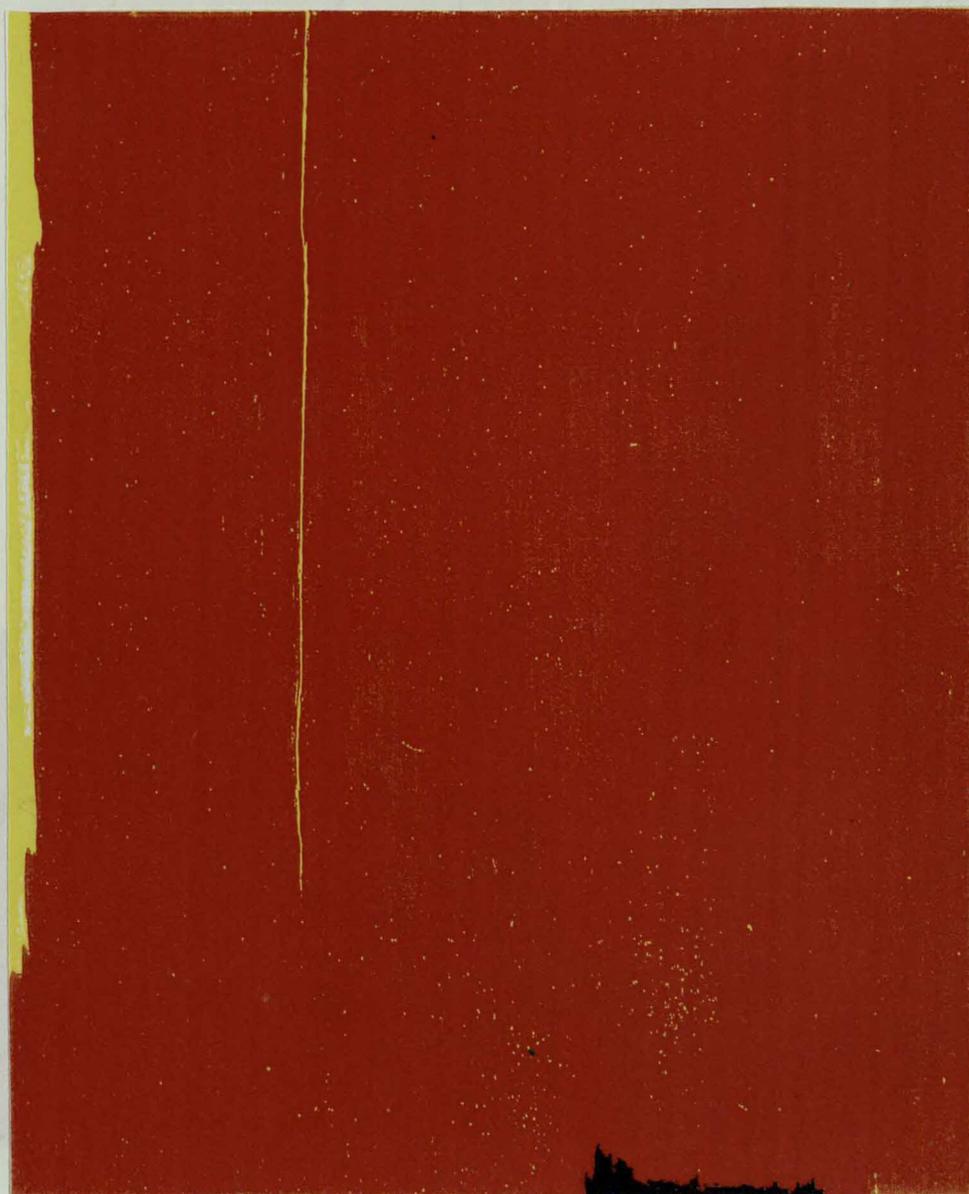
weavings from a group of other modes: moral, religious, existential, mythic, Burkean-Gothic, counter, noble, and color-light. The ideational mode includes Kant and his far-reaching concept of the mathematical and dynamical sublime. We have noted also some coloration from the romantic sublime in that Rothko, Newman, and Still do emphasize passion and do envision an individualistic hero; yet they tilt away from the romantic by the turn away from nature and the advocacy of impersonal universal emotions. There is more of the romantic and existential flavor in Still, with his urgent sense of freedom and his key concept of one man against the world, and also more of the Burkean-Gothic, with his stronger sense of fear, rugged aggression, and breaking of forms. For Rothko, the portal motif has been stressed (carrying the symbolism of threshold crossings) and stressed also has been his sense of ratio and measure, both of these related to the ideational and noble sublime. And for Newman, we have seen a strong ideational and noble sublime, with an emphasis on universal passions aroused by ideas (including ideas of science), along with the strategy of using verticals to semanticize color fields, and along with a more conspicuous religious sublime. For all three painters, there has been a search for sublime transcendence, a conscious awareness of the traditions of the sublime, and an effort to formulate ideas and abstract styles to handle the various kinds of awesome and surprising exaltations of spirit that supplied their most favored subjects. They were well aware of a general social and spiritual crisis which they could help resolve by a bold art grounded not in the sense of beauty, but rather the sense of sublimity.



Still - July 1948  
Oil on Canvas 58 1/2 x 49  
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York



**Still - 1951-L No. 2**  
**Oil on Canvas 114x96**  
**Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York**



Still - September 1955

Oil on Canvas 114x95

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York



Still - Oil on Canvas, 1959

1151/8x1043/4 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California

**PART THREE**

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**AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN CONTEXTS**

**FOR**

**ROTHKO, NEWMAN, AND STILL**

## **Chapter Seven - The Tradition of the American Literary and Painterly Sublime**

**Rothko, Newman, and Still obviously worked in the general stream of history and culture, from which their ideas develop and to which their art contributes. It would therefore be constructive to suggest briefly some of the major sources for a general American tradition of the sublime, the literary and art context in which abstract expressionism emerges. Such a brief sketch would also be helpful in that the interpreters and biographers of Rothko, Newman, and Still often point to some of their literary interests. Inevitably, any effort to suggest highlights for such a vast field will have the fault of oversimplification. One possible way to proceed is to stand back from major American writers and ask if there are some points at which we see the kind of rugged force, grandeur, and transcendence around which this study has located the experience of the sublime.**

**In the Colonial period, there was a strong Burkean sense of a religious sublime associated with terror. The vision of Jonathan Edwards and other Puritans was dominated by their fear of the destructive wrath of a God of absolute sovereign power, as indicated by Edwards's famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." The Salem witchcraft trials grew out of this perception of terror and the supernatural. Much of this Burkean aspect carries into the works of Poe, in his tales of terror. Elements of the Gothic sublime abound in Poe's turbulent stories of extreme dangers and diabolisms that threaten body and soul. We have noted earlier some of Poe's speculation about theory of the sublime.<sup>1</sup> Juxtaposed against this sublime of terror stands Poe's radiant and Platonic sublime vision centered in his famous theory of lyric poetry as a brief opening of windows into paradise--a sudden flash of the eternal, very**

much a kind of portal event which cannot be long sustained. Poe's prose work Eureka is a serious cosmological study in which Poe offers the sublime narrative of an expanding and contracting universe that originates in the explosion of a primary particle, this One being god himself. Poe can thus envision life and history as a struggle to regain the state of the primal One. Poe's short stories, poems, and cosmology treat what the abstract expressionists called sublime subjects.

The Puritanical tradition, coming before America responded to the impulses of Romanticism, perceived the rugged wilderness not as a magnificent inspiration but as a dark and dangerous pagan zone—some of this attitude appearing in Hawthorne's work. In The Scarlet Letter, for instance, the illicit sexuality of the minister and Hester is located in the dark woods.

Puritan dogmas came under strong attack from the early American deists, such as Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, and Paine. These voices of the age of reason can be seen as a case of the counter-sublime in their strong warfare against Puritan beliefs. Their positive sublime vision appears in their core concept of the universe as a complex machine ordered by natural law construed as an aspect of divine law. This grand rational order of nature, this sense of a cosmic blueprint, would favor a sublimicium in the cool, rational, Kantian noble mode. The heritage of deism would be a factor in the counter-sublime rejection of religious orthodoxy by Rothko, Newman, and Still, and perhaps in their efforts to connect their sublime subject to scientific law. Deism connects to the on-going scientific search for rational cosmic design.

Thoreau and Emerson manifest the coming of the romantic sublime to the new world. Thoreau, in consonance with several early landscape painters, declares that Walden celebrates the spirit of the American West and wilderness. Perhaps the chief core idea of Emerson (treated in his essays "The Oversoul" and "Self Reliance") is that the self and nature are pantheistically elevated by the in-dwelling real presence of deity, the concept spread by Wordsworth and Coleridge. In "The Over-Soul," Emerson claims that each human soul contains the "eternal One," though it is "undefinable, unmeasurable," and in the crucial transcendent experience, "The alone gives itself, alone, original, and pure, to the Lonely, Original, and Pure."<sup>2</sup> Like Coleridge, Thoreau and Emerson were more interested in reason and philosophy than Wordsworth. The two Americans conceived nature not just as a structure of sublime grandeur, but also as

a forest of symbols. Walden continuously finds symbolic values in natural forms. Coleridge's thesis that a form of nature gains sublimity when it is a symbol for a grand idea would be endorsed by Thoreau and Emerson. Thoreau states that in his year in the woods he will confront life, and "if it were sublime, to know it by experience," and he names the rational intellect as his device for searching.<sup>3</sup>

Melville (joining Thoreau and Emerson to generate the burgeoning American romantic vision) offers a number of stagings for grandeur, shock, and awe: the encounter with ocean; the titanic battle against ocean's most destructive creature; the Nietzschean will to power in Ahab as he imposes his obsession on his crew; and Melville's frequent rhetorical fireworks. And probably as important as these features is the distinctive theological-cosmological framework Melville creates. In one important passage Ahab posits a god of love to whom he would offer love; a counter-god of hate and destruction who delights in tormenting mankind and to whom Ahab offers hate and warfare by striking at this dark god's agent, the great white whale; and beyond both of these gods, a third supreme deity to whom he appeals for a final refuge and justification.<sup>4</sup> While critics might wish to dismiss these speculations as part of Ahab's madness, there are three reasons to take them seriously: (1) Ahab's theological paradigm is precisely that of Manichaeism, (2) Father Mapple's sermon early in the novel offers a possible justification for Ahab's war with the gods, and (3) Ahab's personal small-boat crew are all Parsees, whose theology would be Manichaen. In his sermon, Mapple declares (in the last lines of "The Sermon" chapter) that "Delight is to him—a far, far upward, and inward delight—who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth, ever stands forth his own inexorable self."<sup>5</sup> This may well be the kind of final justification Ahab hopes for. In any case, this sense of a cosmic Manichaen conflict activates a rugged religious sublime as part of the texture of Moby Dick, and the terror level all through the novel, the diabolism and darkness and pain, add a Burkean Gothic flavor. Ahab also takes on some flavor of the Prometheus myth and the myth of the endangered questing hero, and Melville's masterpiece has itself loomed large in the accumulating American narratives that seem to enjoy high mythic status. I have observed earlier that Still has been connected both to Emerson and to Ahab.<sup>6</sup>

This aura of the mythic sublime may also be seen in a few tales of Washington Irving, such as "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," and afterward, items such as The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Faulkner's "The Bear." Some might argue that in the pattern of Robin Hood, important mythic elements are activated in Star Trek and Star-Wars movies, Tarzan narratives, John Wayne westerns, and other developments in popular culture. The question is, can some of these, like the tales of Irving, move toward the status of the Arthurian legends, even if not that high?

The next literary giant deserving mention is Emily Dickinson, the divine Emily. Her powerful compressed verses convey sublime themes of the grandeur of nature, the depth of human suffering, and the vast horizons for the absolute sovereignty of the human soul (indicating a debt to Emerson). We see this last item when (in her poem "The Brain is wider than the sky") she asserts that the human mind will differ from the mind of God only as a syllable differs from its sound. In addition to these resources for positive modes of the sublime, Dickinson's poems project a blazing counter-sublime as she wages war against orthodox Christian concepts.<sup>7</sup> She reaches the Longinian sublime of intense passions in her revelations of supreme loss and suffering, reflected in her name for herself: Empress of Calvary.

From Hawthorne into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there has been a realistic bitter-flavored American tradition in which sublime subjects are scant--from Hawthorne to Henry James to Dreiser and Frost. In the nineteenth century it is Whitman who nourishes the strong spiritual exaltation, the romantic hope, deriving from Emerson. In his strong ideological sublime, Whitman developed a powerful sense of spiritual democracy, a vision of the vast enlargements possible for the idea of democracy. To this he joined intense appreciations for the wilderness and the land, for the westward frontier spirit, and for tolerance and equality. He wanted body raised as high as soul, somewhat like Blake. In "Song of Myself" he treats all these major themes, and creates a stirring depiction of the depth, range, and mystery of the individual self, and of its various mystical bondings to God, nature, and other selves.<sup>8</sup> Moving into the twentieth century, we find major resources for an American sublime in Hemingway, Faulkner, Eliot, Hart Crane, and Wallace Stevens, all of these having influenced the abstract expressionists.

While Hemingway's works offer a strong measure of the tradition of bitter-flavored realism, there are also some upward vectors toward exaltation and redemption, two of these being his existential motif of brave and authentic selfhood for his wounded heroes, and the purity and sacredness of nature in wild places such as the upper Michigan peninsula, the high mountains of Spain, various cold remote trout streams, the green hills of Africa, and finally in the sanctuary of the Gulf Stream. In a strong sense, Hemingway belongs to that secularized religiosity that Rosenblum located in the northern romantic tradition and connected to Rothko, Newman, and Still.

In Faulkner several elements are noteworthy: the sublime of extremely strong passions centered on sexuality and guilt; rhetorical fireworks; the mythical power of Civil War legends in the mind of the South; the sacredness of the American wilderness; and a powerful counter-sublime directed against Puritanism in the South and the Industrial Revolution. In his short story "The Bear" (already part of major American myth) Faulkner celebrates the mystical and saving spiritual power of the American wilderness (understood by the Chickasaw Indian Sam Fathers who tutors the white boy). This is the last of the annual ritual bear hunts for these plantation aristocrats because, full of guilt, they have sold the timber rights to the virgin woods, and the railroad spur is being laid. The iron of the machine age puts an end to the American Eden. In Faulkner's analysis, Puritanical protestantism in the South has failed to safeguard the land and failed to maintain the sacredness of sexuality.<sup>9</sup>

In Faulkner's novels one finds a good case study for Longinus's theory that sublimity can come through powerful thrustings of past into present. In Faulkner's South, the plantation and Civil War dreams and legends never fade. The past is never past. The hunger for Nietzschean myth is so great that the southerners turn mere soldiers into immortals. This hunger (which Faulkner, like Nietzsche, connects to noble families) is part of the Utopian Southern dream of a stately, ritualized, plantation aristocracy of beautiful white homes, noble gardens, privacy, elegance, dances, European culture, and manners—a dream Faulkner both exalts for its excellence and condemns for its flaws. The Dionysiac passions that destroy Faulkner's people, set beside this Apollonian dream of order and ritual, probably reflect the influence of Nietzsche.

In the case of T. S. Eliot, we meet the unexpected advocacy of a return to the

religious sublime of orthodox Christendom, the mythical sublime of the grand narrative of creation, expulsion from paradise, the incarnation of the Logos in the Christ child, the death and resurrection, and the grand story of European history as Christianity triumphs and orders the life of nations around the Christian calendar. Eliot believes the classical Christian vehicles of sublime meanings can be revitalized and supplemented with new contents and new artistic styles. As examples of new contents, we may note his concept of the ever-living and ever-changing magic circle of great books (developed in his "Tradition and the Individual Talent"); his appreciation of heresy (in the Blake essay); and his praise of James Joyce for using pagan myth to organize contemporary secular chaos.

Eliot's The Waste Land, like Joyce's Ulysses, is difficult, grand, and complex in design, thus enhancing its sublime subject of lost souls that see occasional hints and flashes of deity and redemption. Eliot's demand that the living operate with the whole European past in their blood and bones is a call for a historical sublime. He has been remarkably successful in defending the passion and exaltation that accompany (as Heidegger develops along different lines) a religious vision of a sacred space creating a community of mankind, earth, sky, and deity. As Rothko, Newman, and Still illustrate, the American sensibility has been strongly inclined to some deep sense of a religious sublime, and Eliot is part of that tradition. In his own counter-sublime, Eliot often strikes against modern secular humanism, asserting that it tends toward splintering and chaos, cannot locate an eternal sanction for values, cannot create (even in theory) a unified society, and cannot satisfy eternal spiritual hungers.<sup>10</sup> The Waste Land is the artistic concretization of Eliot's counter-sublime. Suggestions of Eliot's positive vision of spiritual exaltation and transcendence appear in The Waste Land when the protagonist, shaken by the beauty and aura of the girl in the hyacinth garden, sees "into the heart of light"—a sublime portal experience that Eliot also treats in the chief motif of Four Quartets: the divine presence as the still point which gives meaning to the turning world. Eliot treats the powerful jolt of the phenomenological encounter with the absolute.<sup>11</sup> Much like Hopkins, Eliot offers a Christianized version of Heraclitus, who had emphasized flux, yet postulated a divine logos to give order to the world of change. These logos patterns seem to have on-going attraction in part because they connect to

the scientific interest in a blueprint model for the universe, this concept itself is a good example of a sublime idea.

Hart Crane was influenced by T. S. Eliot.<sup>12</sup> These poets, like Rothko, Newman, and Still, are reacting to the modernist sense of spiritual crisis as both Christian and Jewish religious orthodoxy were weakened by science and secularism, and the general Western sensibility came into a time of doubt and spiritual emptiness. They all thought that art should give new positive content to the growing spiritual void. While Eliot hoped for a renewal of Christian orthodoxy, Crane (like Wallace Stevens) did not think that would be possible. Very much in the northern Renaissance tradition, Crane sought a new secularized religiosity based on new sources of myth and value. Following Whitman, Crane thought the American experience itself, the saga of the movement from the Atlantic to the Pacific, had activated new mythical contents of grandeur and power. However, like Eliot and Stevens, Crane realized that the Christian traditions should be kept and absorbed into a wider, more secular context.<sup>13</sup>

Crane's modernist epic poem The Bridge is a search for new usable myth and value. In his invocation, Crane celebrates Brooklyn Bridge, the beautiful art and technology form, asking that his controlling symbol might "lend a myth to God." In his outline of authentic mythical emergings, Crane includes folkloristic figures such as Pocahontas, Rip Van Winkle, Daniel Boone, and the railroad hoboes who have intimate contact with the land. Also Crane brings in as haunting presences the legacy of writers such as Melville, Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson, assuming (in agreement with figures such as Yeats and Stevens) that major poets have been all along creating a new sacred book to rival orthodox religious texts. It is noteworthy that Crane's lines, so rich in passionate turns of phraseology, are excellent examples of the rhetorical sublime theorized by Longinus. While working on the Bridge, Crane was reading Aeschylus and Shakespeare.

There is no doubt that Crane's spiritual and mythic sublime leans heavily on Nietzsche. The Bridge offers several Dionysiac sections, such as the primitive frenzy of "The Dance," wherein Crane's white protagonist, under the Nietzschean stimulation of dance and music, reaches a sublime merger with the psyche of the Native Americans, and reaches also a Nietzschean sense of merger into the maternal One. It would be hard

to find in literature a more perfect depiction of the power of Dionysus. And Crane's impressive efforts at the interlocking of his segments into a coherent design testify to the power of Apollo. In Crane's symbolism, Pocahontas represents the whole American continent (an earth-mother model), one breast being the Appalachians and the other the Rockies, with the genital zone located where the dark and fertile Mississippi delta merges into the Gulf. Crane's protagonist seeks for moments of mystical and quasi-sexual bonding to the American land and to the grand narrative of American history and the flow of American culture.

Crane's sense of the terrors that confront the self brings in the Burkean tonality of Melville, Poe, and Dickinson, to correct the too easy optimism of Whitman. Crane's isolated, anguished protagonist certainly reflects the influence of Sartrean existentialism, which (along with Jungian and Freudian thought) was such a strong factor in the programs of artists from the twenties to the fifties. At the end of *The Bridge*, the protagonist remains in danger and isolation, hoping that the iconic bridge can protect him as if it were deific.<sup>14</sup> Thus in his masterpiece, Crane presents various sublimicist modes: romantic, religious, Nietzschean, Burkean, Jungian, and existential, and the difficulty and complexity of his design relates to the ideational sublime of Burke and Kant—Crane being influenced by the complexities of Eliot and Joyce.

In the case of Wallace Stevens, the difficulty factor is even greater. He demands very subtle uses of the intellect by his readers. Probably his most famous poem is "Sunday Morning," which offers on one hand a strong counter-sublime as he undermines the orthodox Christian world view, and on the other hand a strong positive sublime vision as he shifts paradisaical language from outmoded heaven to radiant earth. The poem appeals to a Christian woman on Sunday morning (a surrogate for the Christian community) to understand the Jungian truth that "Divinity must live within herself," and that obsolete conceptions of some remote paradise "cannot endure as April's green endures." Stevens moves toward a kind of new phenomenological sun worship and existential selfhood. In 1940, in two letters he declares that "The idea of pure poetry, essential imagination . . . appears to be, at least potentially, as great as the idea of God," and that "The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it

to our different intelligence or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary."<sup>15</sup> Much like Nietzsche, Stevens gives everything to the artistic intelligence and imagination.

Stevens also offers an American version of Nietzsche's superman--a fiction that Stevens calls major man, the fiction of a vast giant on the horizon who is a composite of the finest human traits, a giant of reason and imagination who has lived and grown through all stages of Western civilization and who holds in memory the major cultural accretions. This giant differs from Nietzsche's superman in being more god-like, and at the same time more normative in that he develops out of normal human needs and interests. Stevens's major man thinks and imagines in a zone beyond human error; consequently he is the voice to which mankind should listen. He can speak the words which would satisfy in our time of spiritual crisis. He is described in Stevens's long poem "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction": ". . . He comes,/Compact in invincible foils, from reason/Lighted at midnight by the studious eye," and "He is and may be but oh! he is, he is." Major man understands that the major poets are creating the true sacred book, a work of pure poetry.

Stevens also speaks of major man in his letters, claiming that this demigod "is without any of our weaknesses and cannot fail," and that to conceive of such a fiction properly, a fiction to compete with the idea of God, "the first necessity seems to be breadth."<sup>16</sup> Stevens's construct moves toward the vastness of the unrepresentable mathematical sublime, and in the energy and power of major man, toward the dynamical sublime. In his poem "Chocorua to Its Neighbor," Stevens has one New England mountain peak describe major man to a companion peak: "The feeling of him was the feel of day," he comes from the blue "of the brooding mind," "He was as tall as a tree in the middle of/The night. . . ." One of Stevens's essays, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," develops the thesis that modern artists must create bold new imagery that offers a nobility equal to that of Plato, and this is noteworthy in that Longinus, Kant, and the general tradition of the sublime have made a strong connection between the sublime and the noble. It should be added that Stevens also displays a strong emphasis on ambiguity, paradox, and change.

Some of the contours, then, of sublimism in Stevens are suggested by these

details from his works: a new concept of paradise and divinity, a powerful assault upon orthodox Christendom, a sense of the body of major poetry as a redeeming sacred book, and the fictional concept of major man. These are a few of the conspicuous items, though there are more. Stevens displayed a conscious awareness of the tradition of the sublime originating with Longinus. In Stevens's long poem "Esthetique Du Mal" (developing a new modern sense of evil attached to human nature and not to Satan), the poem opens with philosopher-poet in Naples reading the text of Longinus. Stevens assumes that his new ideas about evil (and art) belong to the humanistic ideational sublime as it replaces the obsolete religious sublime. Instead of a Satanic force, Stevens offers a universal human law which decrees that "fault/Falls out on everything," a law for "that evil in the self." Stevens also shows his strong interest in Nietzsche, describing Nietzsche—in his letters—as one whose "strong mind distorts the world," while the more important task is true understanding, not distortion. The poet comments, "The incessant job is to get into focus, not out of focus. Nietzsche is as perfect a means of getting out of focus as a little bit too much to drink."<sup>17</sup> If Nietzsche encourages too much postmodern disturbance, Stevens seeks a modernist correction.

These efforts to sketch some of the high points in the American literary sublime suggest issues that need fuller investigation in other studies. The influence of American writers on Rothko, Newman, and Still is very clear. Their interpreters and biographers, as we have seen, reveal that the first generation abstract expressionists were reading Eliot, Stevens, and Joyce, along with Nietzsche, Jung, and Sartre. They were discussing these writers at their meetings, and they were certainly aware of the works of Hemingway and Faulkner, as well as earlier American writers. The New York climate in which they developed was a rich and complex blending of passions and excitements fed by strong currents in literature and philosophy. The general optimism and hope in Rothko, Newman, and Still may be reasonably connected to the general optimism of American literary traditions, and to the grand, bold, and often astonishing projects of writers such as Melville, Whitman, Faulkner, Crane, Eliot, and Stevens. This body of literature encouraged sublime programs in American painting.

Turning now from the American literary sublime to the painterly traditions, one may indicate the high points much more easily. This issue has been well treated in the

recent study of American art by Robert Hughes, American Visions. Hughes first uses the concept of the sublime in discussing the passions, pains, and Rubenesque swirling energies in Benjamin West's religious painting Death on the Pale Horse (1796). Hughes declares, "With liberal quotations from Rubens, West turned this into a phantasmagoria that joins the wildest scenes of English Romanticism, from Henry Fuseli to 'Mad' John Martin; it is kitsch, but sublime kitsch." Just as West may be seen as the father of American painting, he may also be seen as introducing romantic sublimicist into American art, including a Gothic aura, in that Hughes notes the "irrational and demonic" traits in West.<sup>18</sup>

Linking John Singleton Copley's art to the American realist tradition (in which we would not expect sublime subjects), Hughes is nonetheless willing to say that Copley took his distinctive linear realism "and made it grand--not through rhetoric, as in the 'Grand Manner,' but in the candor of its empirical curiosity."<sup>19</sup> There are conditions under which an apparently mundane item can provoke a quiet wonder and achieve a genuine grandeur, as in Vermeer and Wyeth.

During the age of Jefferson, there is no sublimicist program in American painting. Hughes notes that the dominant concept in the arts was that all art should serve and promulgate personal and civic virtue, as a religious duty. This heritage from the early years of the new republic created a foundation for the interest in morality typical of Americans and displayed by the abstract expressionists. Hughes treats this period under the chapter heading "The Republic of Virtue." His next chapter, "The Wilderness and the West," examines some strong instances of sublimicist intent. Hughes writes: "Without history painting or new great men, where was a national image to be found? Only the landscape itself, unique, vast, marvelous, the container of all possibility." The westward surging pioneers and settlers encountered "landscapes of unimagined grandeur."<sup>20</sup> The feel of this is what Hart Crane tried to invoke in The Bridge, treating the highways, canals, the Mississippi, and the vast female body of the continent. Hughes rightly connects this strong American sense of wilderness landscape and national identity to the European romanticism of Wordsworth, Schelling, Turner and others, observing that when Americans celebrated wild nature as a product of the Creator, "this compensated them for the lack of other signs of the romantic sublime: old

castles, crumbling Gothic chapels, the ruins of Roman aqueduct and Greek temple."<sup>21</sup> Hughes observes that when the American painters began to treat sublime nature as a gift from God, they also, for the first time, began to acquire a priest-like sense of the artist as seer and visionary.<sup>22</sup> This aspect of the romantic sublime—the artist as *high priest of the imagination*—comes strongly into modernism through figures such as Mondrian, Le Corbusier, Yeats, Joyce, Hart Crane, and Wallace Stevens, and it stands behind the belief of Rothko, Newman, and Still that the artist might change the world. The concept of artist as priest and divine creator has played a major role in shifting toward modern secularized models for spirituality and sublimicisim.

It is easy for Hughes to develop the thesis of the wilderness as sublime subject for the next group of American painters: Thomas Cole's visit to the famous Catskill Mountains Mountain House with its waterfall vista that "promoted feelings of sublimity and awe," followed by such Cole paintings as Falls of the Kaaterskill (1826), with its dark storm and radiant sky, rugged stone cliffs, dark lake, powerful white waterfall, and storm-ravaged trees, and the vast sky, storm, river, and mountain work View from Mount Holyoke (1836).<sup>23</sup> Hughes also points to Frederick Church's mathematical and dynamical sublime long horizontal view of Niagara Falls (1857) and its "power, the relentless kinetic energy"; his wild mountain, lake, and flaming sky panorama Twilight in the Wilderness (1860); his orange Turner-esque mountain, sun, mist, lake, and sky view of Cotopaxi (1862); and his glorious rainbow arching over rugged peaks in Rainy Season in the Tropics (1866).<sup>24</sup>

In his treatment of the remarkably serene luminist ocean and ship paintings of Fitz Hugh Lane (such as Boston Harbor, 1855-58), Hughes observes that the glorious design of the tall boats activated a sublime feeling, and as evidence Hughes gives a remark from Horatio Greenough that the marvelously crafted tall ships might inspire American architects to compete with the Parthenon. Also, describing Martin Johnson Heade's Approaching Thunder Storm (1859), Hughes (being well aware of Rosenblum's study of the Northern romantic sublime) notes that the calm isolated man gazing out over the vast ocean and sky creates "images in American art closest to those of European Romantics like Caspar David Friedrich," in whose works "Horizontalty equals sublimity." Commenting on the serene and rather minimalist marine landscapes

of John Frederick Kensett--such as his masterpiece Eaton's Neck, Long Island (1872)--Hughes points both to Kensett's stress on ideational aura and his "discovery of abstraction" as a virtue. However there is no evidence that Kensett was an influence on the abstract expressionists.<sup>25</sup>

Some sublime effects may be located in the general tendency of Americans to tap into the grand biblical narratives, for instance treating Americans as new Adams and Eves in a new paradise. To this well-known pattern, Hughes adds that paintings of figures like Daniel Boone leading settlers through the mountains were obvious allusions to Moses.<sup>26</sup> The grand Christian narrative has been a major force in the American sublime.

A strong sublimicisim is apparent in the western landscapes of Albert Bierstadt, whose paintings of sweeping vistas with rugged peaks and radiant skies are characterized by Hughes as "sublime histrionics."<sup>27</sup> Joined with Bierstadt was Thomas Moran, who spent a year in England carefully studying Turner, then visited the Yellowstone Canyon, and produced the huge eight feet by fourteen feet The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone (bought immediately by the American government) which, writes Hughes, "rivalled Church and outdid Bierstadt in offering the panoramic thrill that no watercolor can give."<sup>28</sup>

While Hughes does not connect Whistler to American sublimicisim, it is worth considering that Whistler's discovery of color as abstract value was a preparation for the sublime of color in Rothko, Newman, and Still. Hughes does note that Childe Hassam, America's chief impressionist, reached a powerful visionary sense of almost religious elevation in the grand flag motifs of his Celebration Day, 1918, a work which "has moved into the world of Post-Impressionism."<sup>29</sup>

Of considerable importance to the tradition of the American sublime was the complex stunning design of the world's longest suspension bridge, Brooklyn Bridge. Its designers, John Roebling and his son, claimed to be divinely inspired. It was from the start a sublime project, to create the most beautiful bridge in the world. We have seen how Hart Crane utilized it as his controlling symbol for a gathering of national mythology. Hughes observes that one can hardly exaggerate the "awe and pride" this masterpiece evoked as "a powerful metaphor for unity and linkage" and for

“transcendental purpose.”<sup>30</sup>

Since the next wave of American painters (Thomas Eakins, Winslow Homer, George Bellows) were devoted to realism, we would not expect to see conspicuous sublime subjects, though there are Burkean touches in some of Homer’s depictions of the danger and terror of the ocean. However when Hughes treats early modernism in America, he points to John Marin as trying to convey “the raw anarchic energy of Manhattan,” Marin’s Brooklyn Bridge (1910) being called “a Gothic nave gone wild in the sky.” Hughes finds a vortex violence of light and color plus an American futurism in Joseph Stella’s Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras (1913-14), and gives Stella’s own statement that his strongly machine-like portrait of Brooklyn Bridge aimed for a “sense of awe, of terror” for this American “shrine” painted as an “APOTHEOSIS.”<sup>31</sup>

Rothko, Newman, and Still were affected by and drew inspiration from these American painters and American writers, who, deeply stained by the optimism of the American experience, adopted ideational and aesthetic projects of conspicuous grandeur, spirituality, and transcendence. Even when they were not consciously aware of the philosophic theories of sublime experience, they were working in sublimicist modes. And perhaps a suitable place to end this chapter would be a look at New York City itself. Around Brooklyn Bridge were the skyscrapers, new icons of bold vision. The city throbbed with the powerful energies of steam and electricity, along with new sexual energies of jazz and blues. At night the city lights were inspirational. The Armory Show had made its explosion. Gifted immigrants from Europe, such as Mondrian and Duchamp, had come to New York and were major factors in generating that remarkable climate of intellectual and emotional intensity. New York City, being vast, complex, and grand, was itself a good candidate for a mathematical sublime, and so were its swirling industrial, ideational, and aesthetic forces and energies a candidate for the dynamical sublime. This urban dynamo, added to the literary and painterly American sublimicism, encouraged the abstract expressionists consciously and unconsciously to choose sublime subjects and seek a grand style and a grand scale.

In summary, we may say that Rothko, Newman, and Still were the heirs of a robust tradition of American sublimicism in literature and in generally realistic painting,

and their great discovery (influenced by Mondrian and other early abstractionists) was that the modern, alienated, and existential self still had a profound need for the sublime, and that sublime subjects and sublime ideas could be successfully treated in a fully abstract style, a style strong in power precisely because it was bold and new. They would have been encouraged toward radically new styles by Dickinson's extreme compression, Whitman's distinctive long lines, Crane's verbal richness, Eliot's astonishing new voice, Stevens's sophisticated difficulty, Hemingway's markedly simplified prose, and Faulkner's unique layered sentences. Of course stylistic innovation is a key element in modernism, but the abstract expressionists met it on another front in American literature. Also, from these literary sources they would have sensed the emergence of a national mythology growing from secularized artistic programs. Rothko, Newman, and Still met also an impressive set of what might be called grand, sublime art projects in Moby Dick, in Thoreau's year of isolation at Walden pond, in Whitman's panoramic coverage of the whole nation, in Crane's gathering of national mythology, in the epic cultural scope of The Waste Land, and in Faulkner's total fictional county. Furthermore, from Moby Dick forward these painters would see strong individualism, Burkean narratives of pain and terror, a strong romantic sublime, strong rejections of religious orthodoxies, and the distinctive intensity of the American moral impulse, plus something else so crucial for Rothko, Newman, and Still: the sense that a divine absolute colored all the individualism with the touch of a sublime mysterious One. This same aura marks the Western landscape sublimicist paintings we have treated, and from these painters Rothko, Newman, and Still would inherit this romantic sublime, including Turner-esque effects that point toward their color-field experiments. Their projects were nourished by these American traditions, and, as the next chapter will address, their projects also grew out of the general European context of the modern and the postmodern.

## Chapter 8 - A Comment on Modernism and Postmodernism as Contexts

While Rothko, Newman, and Still developed their programs in the matrix of modernism, a sustained effort to define modernism and, as part of the definition, to juxtapose it to postmodernism, is beyond the scope of this limited study. However, the attempt in the preceding chapter to describe a general context in American literature and painting for these first generation abstract expressionists may be profitably supplemented by a tentative brief consideration of European modernism as a further significant context. Modernism, however, is an extremely complex thing, and when one tries to fix it in clear categories, one is faced with various ambiguities and internal contradictions. The general position I will develop is that modernism cannot be neatly defined, and even when it is tentatively outlined, it is by no means certain that a clearly postmodern paradigm can be marked off. Still, a number of helpful generalizations can be made about modernism as the European context for abstract expressionism.

Since Rothko, Newman, and Still created their mature styles before 1950, the European art movements which might have influenced them were impressionism, postimpressionism, symbolism, Fauvism, futurism, constructivism, neoplasticism, Dada, expressionism, cubism, and surrealism. A few brief comments on specific painters may indicate the range of influences that can be reasonably connected to the abstract expressionists. In all of these movements there appeared the demand for experimental newness of style. With Monet and Renoir came not just a great excitement about color, but also, especially in the late works of Monet, the new sense of color field, something that lurked also in Turner and in Bonnard. Mark Rosenthal notes how, in Monet's late works, "the motif appears to be lost in a coloristic harmony and an abstract atmosphere."<sup>1</sup> There was a similar portentous excitement about color in the

Fauves and Matisse, and also in Gauguin and Van Gogh. The Fauves deserve the credit for the liberation of color, which is an important element in the color sublime of Rothko, Newman, and Still. Cézanne's decision to present the visual world through cone, cylinder, and sphere became a watershed event, since just ahead of Cézanne's geometrizing was cubism, Mondrian, and abstract expressionism. In the works of Gauguin, the abstract expressionists were probably influenced by the neoprimitive motifs, and also by the symbolist aura of a mystical sacredness lurking behind the primitive scenes. Gauguin did not want a close imitation of nature, he wanted a dreaming, brooding treatment of it that moved toward abstraction, and he made various remarks about the advantage offered by increased abstraction. John Russell points to the remark of Maurice Dennis: "The idea of having to copy nature had been a ball and chain for our pictorial instincts. Gauguin set us free," and Russell also offers Gauguin's comment that he wanted to give artists "the right to dare anything."<sup>2</sup> Van Gogh also offered a sense of primitivist new beginnings. His basic vision centered on the capture of strong feelings, a program of expressionism. Yet he also, like Gauguin, tried to capture a sense of the sacred, and he distorted reality in a much more abstract style, giving a sense of color as a value in itself, plus a somewhat pantheistic sense of awe before the outer mystery of the cosmos. These values are especially strong in works such as The Starry Night. Russell offers Van Gogh's remark that "the painter of the future will be a colorist such as there has never been seen," and Russell interprets The Starry Night as giving cosmic "ideograms of convulsion."<sup>3</sup> Probably a better judgment would be ideograms of creative energy, since the sleeping village beneath the violent swirls of color does not seem to be endangered. The abstract expressionists would have been encouraged by Van Gogh to treat strong passions through strong colors and increased abstraction. The German expressionists also pushed strong feelings to the fore, and unlike other movements, they chose to emphasize the darker feelings of terror, suffering, pain--the kind of Burkean dark cast that Rothko, Newman, and Still wanted to stress, the kind of deeper sense of terrors that Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, and T. S. Eliot wanted to accentuate as a corrective to the too easy optimism of Emerson and Whitman. The importance of terror and pain in both German expressionism and abstract expressionism derived in part from a general cultural

awareness of corruption and depravity in social and nationalistic structures, a sense of European crisis and decay. The darker and disturbing sexual motifs in German expressionism, however, were not attractive to Rothko, Newman, and Still. From cubism came the obvious importance of planar geometry and bold experiment, but the cubists remained tied to the world of physical appearances.

In the geometrizing and neoprimitive flavor in Picasso's famous Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.), were impulses that the three Americans would have found congenial, but Picasso did not stay in one place long enough to exert the kind of influence coming from Mondrian. Matisse, however, was another matter. We have noted previously Rothko's comment that his whole program evolved from many ponderings of Matisse's Red Studio. Probably Rothko was responding to what many have felt: behind Matisse's recognizable forms, the flatness and the arbitrary use of color invoke a strong intuition of form as abstract value, plus a distinctive sense of color as an autonomous aesthetic field, plus a mysterious sense of the pleasure principle elevated to spiritual value. Also, Rothko was surely responding to the daringness of Matisse. It is not surprising that both Matisse and Rothko created sublimicist religious masterpieces, in the chapels at Vence and Houston. Newman's strong interest in clean aesthetic harmony may well have been influenced by Matisse, just as his distinctive interest in primary colors may be related to Mondrian.

Full abstraction changed art forever in the works of Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich. The geometrized and reduced forms of Mondrian were an especially strong influence on the American painters, and we have noted their comments which acknowledge the debt but also voice the criticism that Mondrian's severe, fixed grid had too much of an emotionally and spiritually cooling effect. They wanted forms more impassioned, as apparently Mondrian came to desire in his late boogie-woogie series, influenced by his love of jazz in New York. It seemed at times that Kandinsky and Malevich were seeking a pure art that took abstraction beyond subject matter. Rosenthal discusses their peculiar wavering back and forth, their contradictory statements.<sup>4</sup> It seems to come down to this: they wanted to free art from all traditional, realistic, personal, and anecdotal subjects as they sought a kind of free, suprematist purity of form, yet they also thought that their art was not ornamental because this higher purity conveyed elevations toward higher spirituality for the coming ages. Kandinsky and

Malevich maintained a kind of religious mysticism, as did Mondrian, something they absorbed from the new Theosophy movement in Europe (which also influenced Hart Crane in his mysticism). This general drift to keep abstraction allied to some deeper spiritual subject obviously carried over into the experiments of Rothko, Newman, and Still.

Mondrian was a stronger influence in part because he never wavered from a sense of subject in terms of truth and transcendence. He claimed that scientific laws of polarity as well as major human polarities (such as male/female) were suggested in his own ideograph symbol of the right angle, one leg vertical, one horizontal, and he always insisted that the abstracted and purified forms of his grid were prophesies of higher spiritual purity and also actions to purify religion of anecdotal and local superstitions. This is clear when (in London just before coming to America) Mondrian drafted a note entitled "A New Religion."<sup>5</sup> Commenting on Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich, Rosenthal states: "the abstract work of art occupies a real presence in the space of the viewer even as it conveys a realm beyond the world of experience," and "abstraction is ultimately intended as a form of emancipation from the world, and thus as a means of transcendence. The early abstractionists referred to myth in order to explain how such transcendence might occur."<sup>6</sup> For them, as Rosenthal notes and as Mondrian emphasized, it was the myth of the artist as quasi-divine Creator. We have seen that this myth was important to Rothko, Newman, and Still, along with the Prometheus myth, the various questing hero myths, all of this colored by Nietzsche, Jung, and modernist myth theory in general.

Dada was too irrational and too anti-art to be attractive to the American abstractionists, and the same is true of futurism, yet Rothko did testify to a sense of irony and play probably related to Dada and Duchamp, and the futurists were seeking an anarchistic something, even if it was a nothing, which would lift them above the general European social corruptions. Their sense of speed and technology was absorbed by Hart Crane, and the machine age-technology forms in purism and constructivism indicate a line of progression from abstract machine forms to fully abstract art forms.

Duchamp might have exerted a larger influence on Rothko, Newman, and Still,

in the light of his emphasis on ideational and even mystical content (as in The Large Glass) and in the light of his strong abstraction. Duchamp's impressive panel Tu M' (1918) was almost fully abstract and geometrized (there are some recognizable objects like bicycle wheel, hand, and bottle opener). But Duchamp did not pursue this line. The complicatedness of his late works did not accord with the reducing and simplifying of Rothko, Newman, and Still, and probably they found his comic and ironic flavor not in tune with their serious sublimism. Duchamp did declare that Dada was an interesting temporary phase that he quickly moved beyond. We have seen in earlier chapters that the three Americans (as especially theorized by Motherwell) felt the force of surrealism, but could not accept the emphasis on the irrational or the dream/fantasy world. They were, however, influenced by the surrealist search for psychologically profound subjects.

Like Duchamp, Jean Arp developed out of Dada toward richer spiritual concerns, creating impressive fully abstract works with clean geometrical shapes, and Rosenthal observes that "Purity, the sublime, and an 'incommunicable absolute' were Arp's obsessions."<sup>7</sup> These anticipations of the sublime subjects of the American abstract expressionists would have been reinforced from other directions, for instance the search for a new modernist spiritualism in the Jewish mysticism of Franz Marc, the search for spiritually elevating purified machine forms in Leger, and the search for transcendent spiritual zones in the color-rich abstractions of Kupka. Though Leger stays close to fact, he claimed that he helped to liberate color, and considered abstraction a "dangerous game" that "must be played."<sup>8</sup> While Miro's biomorphism and surrealist fantasy offer a contrast to the programs of Rothko, Newman, and Still, Miro did have two fully abstract phases, and Rosenthal believes he "tried to sieze abstraction's territory."<sup>9</sup> Delauney's richly colored abstractions<sup>9</sup> had a wide impact, but he focused (like Bonnard) on light itself rather than symbolized higher meanings. Klee also offers a contrast to abstract expressionism due to his biomorphism and his search for laws of nature and laws of composition, yet at times Klee draws startlingly close to Rothko and Newman, for instance in his powerful fully abstract Fire in the Evening (1929), which features rich colors. Dubuffet's unique program suggests a different kind of contrast, since his eccentric, famous "weird logic" for each work establishes an

eccentricity not compatible with the sublimicist universalism of the abstract expressionists. He is of course compatible as a modernist launching bold innovations in an avant-garde manner. Bacon is also an interesting contrast with his disturbing realism of terror and anguish; however he too felt the tremendous force of modernist abstraction, as revealed in his often-repeated comment that he will utilize "very much as in abstract painting involuntary marks on the canvas," making of these a "trap with which one would be able to catch the fact at its most living point."<sup>10</sup>

An effort was made by Clive Bell, Roger Fry, and Clement Greenberg to define modernism in terms of formalism and flatness, both of which are crucial in abstract expressionism, yet the formalist model is clearly inadequate because so many modern movements emphasized ideational content along with formalist values.<sup>11</sup> Formalism had a strong influence in the first half of the twentieth century, but so did Marxism, and while the abstract expressionists did not espouse Marxist revolution, their programs were affected by the Marxist emphasis on dialectical forces, Utopian vision, and a sophisticated theory of human alienations from nature, work, self, and society. Marxism colored modernism. And modernist architecture was extremely important also, the Le Corbusier cleanness of line and plane, the goal of civic spiritual elevation, the reductionist rejection of ornament, the governance of form by function, and the tendency of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe to project a Mondrian grid onto buildings--these tendencies also reflected in the simplified forms of Rothko and Newman.

This brief and limited comment on many of the major European predecessors and contemporaries of Rothko, Newman, and Still demonstrates the importance of the idea of the net of culture. The three Americans are understood better when we see the complex interweavings that give them ideational and stylistic rootings through analogies, and that also clarify by contrast. The very complexity of these many connections suggests that modernism itself will not be easy to capture in clear definitions.

Other general conspicuous features that one could attach to modernism (as opposed to postmodern assumptions) would be these: a traditional Western search for universal truths, new foundations, preferred theories, and hegemonic triumphs; a

general optimism about the truth-telling powers of language and art; a general interest in hierarchies and higher transcendental entities; a general search for resolutions and authentic but radically new closures. These tendencies are reflected not just in the artists but in thinkers and literati such as Freud, Marx, Sartre, Husserl, Whitehead, Russell, Yeats, Joyce, Faulkner, Eliot, Crane, and Stevens. Most often but not always, the radical components in both ideas and styles were slanted optimistically toward a new universalist international foundationalism—though these grand tendencies were opposed by counter impulses such as Dada and futurism. As is usually the case, well-educated and well-read artists like Rothko, Newman, and Still were absorbing many things from many directions, and the whole European stream of modernist experiments deeply permeated their aesthetic consciousness, even as they sought a raw, new, powerful style and new subject matter. Their crucial decisions for the abstract ideograph symbol and for transcendent spiritual subjects were made with an American sense of bold freedom and American history, yet there were also major absorptions from European modernism.

One might think that a reasonably clear grasp of postmodernism could emerge by listing a key set of postmodern emphases which negate the modernist paradigm. And indeed, this probably is the most fruitful modus operandi. But the task will be complicated because modernist figures reveal some postmodernist turns, and postmodern figures have some modernist impulses. Thomas Docherty isolates what he considers to be seven key elements in postmodernism: a rejection of rootedness, an aesthetic of disappearance in the loss of a distinction between appearance and reality, an openly acknowledged historicity and temporality, a new sense of heterogeneity and alterity, eclecticism, pluralism, and “the tendency to sublimity or ek-stasis in the work’s attack on conventional representability.”<sup>12</sup> Apparently Docherty comes close to construing the postmodern sublime as the impassioned counter-sublime. He makes sublimicist crucial to postmodernism: “It is the major contention of the present book that this sublime [of Lyotard] is only attained by the releasing of the historicity of thinking, by what might be called an unpunctual working which will eventuate not in a thought but in thinking.”<sup>13</sup>

By working through a number of works on postmodernism, one may add (with

some overlapping) the following longer supplementary listing to Docherty's seven items: the deconstruction movement that sees human reality as linguistically constructed by seriously imprecise and unstable language forms; political voices of various attacks upon Western hegemonic traditions to produce a new non-hierarchical pluralism and multivocalism; neo-Marxist strategies to move beyond the discredited Russian socialism; eclecticism in artistic styles; a rejection of spiritual and transcendental categories and a rejection of preferred theories; a new scepticism about what art and philosophy are and why they should do; an end-of-the-century decadence; a connecting of art not to aesthetics or philosophy but to society; a hostility to museum and gallery commercialization and a search for art forms that cannot be marketed; a new elevation of the art of the masses; a breaking down of the distinction between life and art; a rejection of centeredness, closure, and narrative coherence; an assertion of a new identity politics; the replacement of the goal of public knowledge by interpretation and critique (questions not answers); the shunning of all homogeneity; a new sense of history focused not on logical evolutions but on unprepared-for eventual becomings which may or may not be concretized; any strategy that opposes modernism; creating a warrant for transgression and unpoliced thought; a critique of social codes that produce control and oppression; the condition of the death of the stable autonomous self; the search for an ethic of alterity; a sense not of isolated identity but of being constituted socially through the Other; the shift from an attraction by reality to a seduction by unreality; the rejection of the concept of a morally responsible self; a new mode of philosophy not as truth-seeking but as playing at the interfaces of ideology; a stress on process not product; the thrusting of the verbal into the visual; the construal of meaning as provisional, local, temporary; history dominated by asking whose history; the Jameson theory of postmodernism as a period phase of late multinational, consumer capitalism in which a feeble pastiche replaces the strength of parody to reflect disorientation, loss of a sense of history, and entry into a kind of perpetual presentness; a rejection of depth and an embrace of a non-relational additive surface; a vast new area for publishing academic papers about lack of knowledge, plus a way for elitist academicians to maintain their authority over extremely difficult subjects; a political guerrilla action; a decentered form centered in some environment; a shift from an all-knowing author to an ironic playful author; a displacement of the referential by the

rhetorical; a new dominance by irrealism and fabulism; a rejection of the authority of science and an assertion of the value of magic; and the struggle of art against itself.<sup>14</sup>

Lyotard stands in a somewhat unique position, with his doctrine that modernism is ongoing, and the postmodern is the moment of innovative rupture which initiates each of the radical modernist visions. Lyotard writes: "Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but the nascent state, and this state is constant."<sup>15</sup>

Thus obviously, so far, there are contradictory views of what postmodernism is: a historical period serving capitalism, a series of attacks on modernism, a new movement toward dislocation in a mutated sensorium, the originating radical moment in a modernist enterprise, a new style of pastiche, a philosophic rejection of knowing in favor of questioning. This last item seems dubious in that most of the voices of postmodernism seem to "know everything" about current life, thought, and art, and to "know" it in universalist categories.

Some conceptual difficulties were obvious in what is perhaps the first major theoretic description of postmodernism, Jencks's Postmodernism, in which the author notes that genuine modernism is still a strong force and should continue; that "a commitment to both Classicism and Modernism is required to effect a credible synthesis"; and that while Ihab Hassan has produced a very radical model of postmodernism marked by anarchy, exhaustion, silence, and schizophrenia, John Barth has called this view a desperate decadence, and suggested a much less radical model in which the postmodern continues modernism but gives it more democratic contents.<sup>16</sup> The architecture photographs in Jencks's book cause one to ask if postmodern architecture is not after all about eighty percent clean modernist geometricity with lesser touches of humor, incongruity, classicism, and Egyptian temple. Is Frank Gehry's new Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain dominated by disturbing imbalance or by sleek, elegant, elevating idealistic modernist geometrism? Is the new postmodern wing on the Tate an effort to achieve some postmodernist playfulness and yet capture a harmonious modernist elegance and beauty? Can Lyotard be postmodern when he condemns postmodern architects?

And there are difficulties from other directions. Dana Polan points to Mike Davis's claim in the New Left Review that even if there is a postmodernist sensibility, it

is confined to various pockets of culture, and is not a dominating force.<sup>17</sup> Also, there are several questions that should be faced. Is postmodernism actually being advocated as a new totalizing narrative? Is an ethic of alterity offered as a new favored theory? Will attacks on history be framed by history? Will scientists and philosophers actually give up the ideal of truth and universality? Is it even remotely possible for youth not to be oriented toward the real world but toward electronic fantasy? When Jencks ends his book by listing seven rules for postmodern builders, why is this not an effort at a new international style?<sup>18</sup> And is it socially and psychologically desirable to give viewers a dominant sense of dislocation, nausea, contradiction, and parody, a feeling of not being at home in the world? In short, we have not yet seen enough recognition of conflicting concepts of postmodernism, and enough recognition of where it is vulnerable to critique.

A reasonable way to end this brief comment on modernism and postmodernism in a manner relevant to a study of the sublime is to consider the postulated strong postmodernism of Slavoj Žižek in his book The Sublime Object of Ideology. There will be some oversimplification in this effort to simplify Žižek. His crucial concept derives from Lacan's psychology: that in life, art, society, and thought the individual posits himself in some social symbolic field as being in a doubled relationship of desire with some Big Symbolic Sublime Other. He needs to bind himself to the Outer Mystery and the Outer mystery needs his contribution. Both are incomplete until completed by the other. This double ontology leads to Žižek's key operational principle of doubling, of a "double reflection," in which each of the polar opposites (self and Other) floats in a peculiar criss-cross relationship. This foundational criss-cross, Žižek argues, must be seen as one negativity touching another negativity, because the dominant fact is the lack in the two parties, and a foundational lack is a void, a nothingness. As an example, man and woman essentially are a nothingness because each desires and needs the other, thus incompleteness, the lack, is the dominant item. Sublimicisms of a Kantian/Hegelian sort is a golden key for Žižek (as it is for Lyotard and Crowther) because of the Kantian theory that a negativity, a failure, impels the ascent to the sublime. For Žižek (in agreement with Nietzsche and Lyotard) the whole Big Real of the culture complex is the terrain of the outer mystery of the sublime. For Lacan and Žižek, there is an unmasking

“redoubling” moment when a psychotic patient or a wise philosopher sees the light: that both the knowing subject and the Big Other are fantasy constructions, a nothing not a something. The enlightened party (even if reduced to a negative) at least senses a new open space when he “accepts the Real in its utter meaningless idiocy,”<sup>19</sup> and while Zizek does not say so, presumably it is a space for some more wholesome kind of new ideology or fantasy bondings of self to other. In Zizek’s view, Christianity illustrates this pattern better than Greek and Jewish religion because “in Christianity, human freedom is finally conceived as a ‘reflexive determination’ of this strange substance (God) itself.”<sup>20</sup> Christianity supports the root idea of an ontological criss-cross between man and God.

Zizek finds in Marx and Freud the source of the idea of unmasking fantasy constructs. But Freud’s commodity theory was flawed because he was unaware of the major presence of sublime objects, unaware for instance that the mysterious, spiritual, eternal value placed in gold (an immaterial postulated as-if with strong cultural causative force) offers “a precise definition of the sublime object,” and “this postulated existence of the sublime body depends on the symbolic order” and “is always sustained by the guarantee of some symbolic authority.”<sup>21</sup> Thus for Zizek (as for Nietzsche and Lyotard) the vast culture field, including political ideologies, philosophy, and religions, is the postulated mysterious Big Other, the sublime object to which some subject is related through need and desire. Zizek comments that philosophy tries to be blind to its unstable foundation (negative meets negative) because “it cannot take it into consideration without dissolving itself, without losing its consistency.”<sup>22</sup>

A basic term for Lacan and Zizek is “symptom” (partly derived from Marx), which is a formulation of relatedness whose consistency depends upon subjects not being aware of the hidden contradiction. The fundamental element in any ideology is a symbolic “social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence.”<sup>23</sup> Zizek argues that even when citizens see through some ideological posture and still choose to pretend that the system works, there is something deeper than their cynicism that prevents us from being in a post-ideological world. The deeper thing is the persistence of the deep unconscious fantasy-form that is the root of

all ideologies.<sup>24</sup> This is somewhat like Lyotard: the possibility of sublimicisism is permanent even in a time of scepticism. For Lyotard all serious thinking is an ascent to the genuine sublime, while for Zizek all serious symbolic structures create a fantasy sublime.

When a Lacanian patient is led to see through the fantasy criss-cross that has caused a neurosis, one might think the result would be total despair, but instead, in the Lacan-Zizek model, there will always be fragmented pieces of jouissance, possibilities of desire and pleasure, because the enjoyment mechanism is so deep in the unconscious that it cannot be dissolved. This enduring pleasure kernel, a sort of buried jouissance, is given, by Lacan, the name of "sinthome," so that symptom and sinthome go together.<sup>25</sup> Such a primitive mechanism, we may recall, was envisaged by Weiskel as some deepest pleasure mechanism that would originate movements upward toward the sublime. Since fantasy will always resume itself, the fantasy space (a void) is seen as an a priori framing potential. Lacan calls it "the frame through which we experience the world as consistent and meaningful—the a priori space within which the particular effects of signification take place."<sup>26</sup> Zizek declares that "Fantasy is basically a scenario filling out the empty space of fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void."<sup>27</sup> Zizek endorses Lacan's later sense of the Real—seeing it as an immaterial (sublime) unreal that has a real symbolic presence, a real social force, something that rests on a void yet still "exercises a certain structural causality."<sup>28</sup>

Lacan theorizes that sublimity is conferred on any ordinary object when that object is elevated and baptized to a major place in the symbolic net, conferred by "the fact that it occupies the sacred-forbidden place of jouissance."<sup>29</sup> Zizek likes Hegel's sublimicisism not only because of the negativity in the dialectic but also because Hegel corrects Kant by bringing the sublime down into the phenomenal world, rather than postulating a transcendent world.<sup>30</sup> However, Kant's world of a priori mental categories is like and unlike Zizek's world of a priori non-material fantasies. Zizek's sublime of fantasy is close in form and content to Nietzsche's sublime of art fictions. Certainly Nietzsche would recognize a desire and jouissance basis for the willing of sublime symbolic fictions of order. Zizek does not use Nietzsche's sense of the will to

power, though it could be accommodated. Also Zizek does not speak of a class of necessary fantasies, such as Nietzsche offers, and such as Jung attempts in his theory of archetypes, but this direction could also be accommodated.

In rounding out his paradigm, Zizek tries to use his negativity principle to mount a critique of essentialism and the notion of "truth." He favors Saul Kripke's antidescriptivism which denies that essences rest on objective traits, and claims that, on the contrary, the name for an essence functions as an arbitrary socio-symbolic sign. It is as if, out of a negative void, the act of naming confers the essence, which is then subject to cultural change when different meanings become attached to a given name. For instance "chair" might mean a device for seating people, but in a different context might mean a symbol for a hated industrialism. In the Kripke model, as Zizek explains it, a name that indicates an essence is a sort of cultural, arbitrary "primal baptism," not a term for some objective reality.<sup>31</sup> For Zizek the elevation of some mundane item to a sublime aura is an arbitrary act of baptism.

In his theory of truth, it is predictable that Zizek would offer a scheme in which truth and error support each other in an ontological criss-cross, that "true" and "false" meet in a dialectic of give and take, that truth depends upon error, and that we should see error "as an internal condition of truth."<sup>32</sup>

The final issue (in relation to my comments on the modern and postmodern) is this: should we locate Zizek as modernist or postmodernist? It is not an easy matter. Obviously the stress on fantasy worlds as opposed to truth worlds seems postmodern, along with the critique of essentialism, and along with the post-Marxist tonality of deconstructing all political ideologies, and along with the new use of the void as a foundational category. However, it is also clear that--deriving from Kant, Hegel, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, and Lacan--Zizek offers a confident new modernist preferred theory that is historically grounded. Presumably he would admit to using a metalanguage, in that he agrees with Lacan in seeing that poststructuralists are actually using their own metalanguage: "a clearly defined theoretic position which can be articulated without difficulty in a pure and simple metalanguage."<sup>33</sup> Certainly Zizek is postmodern in generating a new sense of instability in self and Other, and yet he does say that there is a true foundation in the constant unchanging impulse toward jouissance

and fantasy. This may not be much of a foundation, but it is something. In my opinion, there is another modernist element. If we say that a person can be led to see that his symptoms are fantasies which he presupposes to be real, why is not the act of presupposing a validation of a genuine subject? And if jouissance itself can never be deconstructed because it is so deep, why is not jouissance a site for the validation of a genuine subject? And is it not strongly modernist for Zizek to reject the idea of any post-ideological condition and to operate with philosophic confidence?

These points are intended to support my general contention about the difficulty of efforts to mark off the abstract expressionists and other artists and thinkers as being modern or postmodern. The categories are not yet clear enough to yield confident decisions. I have made an argument that the positive modernist sublimicist in Rothko, Newman, and Still should be taken as the dominant element in their art programs; yet I would not deny that Rothko's sense of uncertainty, doom, and terror is a postmodern motif, or that Newman's sense of a radical break with the past is postmodern, as is Still's central theme of the threat to the subject by the forces of social control, which moves Still towards a postmodern anarchism (and we might recall Newman's appreciation of Kropotkin's anarchism). Some recent support for my premise that modern and postmodern seem to bleed together comes in one of the very latest treatments of modernism, in which Kirk Varnedoe defines the modern as if it has been all along the postmodern. He calls modernism our current system, "a system that is in crucial senses unfixed, inefficient, and unpredictable--a cultural system whose work is done by the play within, in all senses of the word, in a game where the rules themselves are what is constantly up for grabs." For Varnedoe the core of modernism is the free, uncaused, spontaneous acts of artists, "those first ruptures of convention."<sup>34</sup> In my view this is too Dada and too postmodern to be a good definition of modernism, but Varnedoe, like Lyotard, is not willing to separate the movements, and argues for an on-going modernism as the main stream. My own inclination at the moment is to favor Lyotard's view that postmodern vectors are the radical initiating vectors of the modernist search for new foundations. Lyotard's firm theory of the sublime can be seen as a kind of foundational structure, and he presents it as if it is true. If Lyotard is right, we would assume that European modernism and postmodernist impulses both constitute the European context inherited by Rothko, Newman, and Still, and both are

reflected in their art; and Lyotard would find, as I have found, and as Crowther has argued, that what we might call the negative postmodern features can and should be assimilated into some generally positive conception of aesthetics, society, and preferred theory, although we do not yet see clearly how to do this. The effort to do this would be modernist, even if it involves some thinking at the edge of thought, a task well-suited for the sublime. Derrida has been viewed as postmodern, yet in one of his most recent remarks, he supports the modernist impulse toward hegemony. He conceives each new movement as a “jetty” pushing outward its key claims, and “each jetty has a hegemonic aim” as it seeks to incorporate other jetties “in order to be incorporated into them.” Derrida adds the modernist thesis that it is foolish to try to abrogate the historical net of Western culture because any new jetty must be “a priori historicist.”<sup>35</sup> It remains to be seen whether the new century will move toward greater stability or greater instability. In any case, it seems to me that we should locate Rothko, Newman, and Still about ninety percent in the camp of what is generally considered modernist, and about ten percent in territory often considered postmodern, and the very fact that such a paradoxical ranking is called for suggests that we cannot, at the moment, sharply differentiate these two movements.

## Conclusion

This study has developed from a particular situation: numerous scholars were connecting Rothko, Newman, and Still to the sublime but not giving detailed readings; Rothko, Newman, and Still had studied classical texts on the sublime, but their paintings were not being connected carefully to these texts; and recent years have witnessed a resurgence of sublimicist theory in relation to current modernist and postmodern points of view. Four of these recent theorists--Weiskel, Crowther, Lyotard, and Ferguson--were brought to the fore to complement classical perspectives in Longinus, Burke, Kant, and Nietzsche. Attention was also given to Sartre and Jung as major influences on the general ethos behind abstract expressionism, and as thinkers whose doctrines of transcendence carried indirect sublimicist values. The published statements of the three painters were scrutinized as revelations of sublimicist aims, and specific paintings were analyzed in terms of an iconography of the sublime. Also, an attempt was made to locate Rothko, Newman, and Still in the context of an American literary and painterly tradition of the sublime, followed by an attempt to suggest the larger European context created by the conflict and the interlacing between modernism and postmodernism.

The interpretations offered have postulated the reality of various kinds of transcendence from a lower ground to a higher ground, each capable of constituting a threshold crossing, an exalted rite of passage into a region sufficiently complex and difficult, sufficiently spiritual and universal, to warrant its location in the sublime. Just as there are varieties of moral systems and political systems, there are various modes in which sublime experience has been manifested, and the ones singled out for emphasis in this study have been the ideational (launched by Longinus and Kant), the moral, the

Burkean-Gothic, the religious, the Nietzschean, the romantic, the existential, the Jungian-mythic, the noble, and the light/color sublime, these being positive modes. Negative modes (though not always negative) would be the comic, ironic, counter, mock, and the merely rhetorical. Rothko, Newman, and Still (placed most firmly in the ideational sublime) operate predominantly in positive modes, though we have seen elements of the ironic and the counter. There is considerable over-lapping in the modes, and as the layers accumulate, adding metaphysical and ethical dimensions, the resulting complexity and difficulty (as Burke and Crowther have suggested) increase the sublime potential, making the sublime much richer than the more fully sensate harmony of the beautiful.

The sublime has been defined as a leap of transcendence, a kind of overwhelming and awesome jolt—either passionate or calmly meditated—in which a threshold is approached and crossed, relating the self more or less mystically to a significant Other, sometimes in purely human and secular terms, sometimes in religious. In the sublime, as a rule, the aesthetic structures will be reciprocally blended with ideational content through some kind of ideographic symbol or analogy. Wherever there is some astonishing ascent from a lower to a higher region, some elevation joined to wonderment, there is a potentially sublime encounter. The case has been made that just such a spiritual and ideational ascent has been mediated for Rothko through the portal image offered in dark and rich color slabs with careful ratio and with mysterious inner light and blurred edges; for Newman through his clean edges, rich and dark colors, semanticizing vertical zips, horizon reachings, and human scale; for Still through his harsh colors, flickering spots, thin lines, rugged polarities, and ragged ascending flames. All through the study an effort has been made to clarify their essential positive beliefs as the key to their ideational sublime, including an awareness of things they were opposing and rejecting, and including recognition of darker and negative elements, and recognition that although there is a general tendency to connect modernism with positive items and postmodern with negative, this division cannot be sharply made because given artists and thinkers display both tendencies, and because there is, so far, no agreement on definitions of modern and postmodern.

It seems appropriate in some last words to speculate on some of the special virtues of the concept of the sublime, and on its probable future as an instrument for creating

and understanding serious art, and enriching human life. Why has sublimicist thinking enjoyed a renaissance in modernist and postmodern theory? Because as a concept, the sublime has conspicuous power and usefulness. In a critical age, sublimicism is attractive because it allows access to far-ranging ideas, because it contains its own inner dialectic of impasse plus resolution, because it can embrace concepts that are themselves ambiguous, because it can mediate between surface and complex depth. Here precisely lies the special value of the sublime for art analysis. Art critics and art historians must be able to navigate a difficult and disputed zone between sign and meaning, a navigation not easy through the surface harmony of the beautiful, yet very possible through sublimicist categories, as these carry aesthetics toward philosophy.

Because sublimicism can operate in terms of impasse, check, and contradiction, because it can embrace absence as well as presence, because the dynamical sublime has, from Longinus on, been applied to forces and movements in the social and political arena, and because the sublime is uniquely defined to accommodate regions of terror and destruction, the sublime has been attractive to those revolutionary currents in postmodern and deconstructionist thought which thrive on either political activism or metaphysical negation and scepticism, or both. The concept of the beautiful does not yield such complex resources. The sublime allows aesthetic theory, quite rightly, to exert force outward on the structures of society, philosophy, religion, and morality. The category of the beautiful can also do these things, but not with the range and power of the sublime. Also, because sublimicism, by definition, can reach toward absence, can subvert, can strive to express unrepresentable new visions, artists of the future, when new movements and revolutions are in the air, will find new ways to articulate the sensibility of the sublime as a resource for avant-garde programs.

The twentieth-century mind has often displayed an inclination to reduce thinking and value analysis to linguistic forms, to word games, giving language complete control of all possible human intuitions of meaning and purpose. People and societies--in this perspective--are malleable, unstable, governed by no universal constants in either psychology or philosophy. Self, truth, morals, and political forms are mere constructed fictions that can be made and unmade according to rules of differing and temporary language strategies. If we actually lived in such a floating world, the only possible sublime would be a merely rhetorical one. There might be some language of fire,

exaltation, and ascent, but there would be no genuine higher zone to reach. The position taken in this study has been a constant opposition to the concept of a merely rhetorical sublime. If there are no genuine higher zones, but only a linguistic field, then there are severe diminishments in the territory of the sublime. Probably the course of science, as well as opposition within the humanities, will work against this new kind of language scepticism. The sublime will probably have an important future as long as the main streams of Western culture are honored and preserved, as they will certainly be by any universities charged with the mission of transmitting the best of the art and thought of the past. And on psychological grounds, it seems clear that sublimicist art satisfies universal needs of consciousness. Sublimicism will also continue to serve another kind of need: living people can, by force of mind, draw closer to past ages than to a diminished present, and can also reach out to the future; the sublime is an avenue for such decisions, with its Utopian potential and its potential for thrusting past into present.

There are some other noteworthy factors lying close to folk psychology. We are not likely to see a time when individuals do not feel the need for renewal and redemption of spirit, and this impulse will encourage the search for higher zones of reality. As Rothko said, there is on-going value to the image of the human figure with arms upraised toward something considered absolute. These impulses will continue to animate the religious sublime. From a global perspective, religion today is a very powerful force in world affairs, and according to polls, most scientists are theists. It is unfortunate that most of the major theologies now active are damaged by a substantial amount of superstition, as if, in religious terms, mankind is still close to a primitive mentality. Sublimicism can in the future exert pressure toward theological reforms, and if it does, another of its areas of potential strength will be manifest, just as, now, the sublime, as we have seen in Lyotard and others, exerts pressure for political reform through both impassioned attack and impassioned Utopian speculation. In view of the on-going global force of religion, theorists of the sublime might well give more attention to theorizing the religious sublime, and recognizing its high status among the sublimicist modes.

The same holds true for the moral sublime, which is often a major element in the religious sublime. While many theorists (such as Longinus, Kant, Lyotard, and

Crowther) have treated the possibilities for close contact between the moral and the aesthetic, our age has not done well in producing persuasive systems of ethics, and this failure is part of the widespread condition of confusion, doubt, and uprootedness. As Kant understood, the nobility of the sublime can be reached in the ascent to universal moral law, and in the power of individuals to legislate morality. There seems to be now a growing sense of a universal obligation to protect the environment. Possibly these dimensions in Kant's sublimicism help to explain Lyotard's emphasis on spontaneous moral phrases which individuals can throw out. Indeed, since Lyotard assumes that some golden new phrases would capture the aura of general public validity, he apparently sees a Kantian role for sublimicism in legislating public morality. Of course Lyotard also emphasizes that multivocalism makes it difficult for a new consensus to develop. Yet, as we have seen, Derrida now finds the hegemonic imperative to be natural and good. If even one moral law can be seen as universal (such as the keeping of contracts, the preserving of the family, or the protection of the environment and gene pool), then there is at least a chance that we will see, in the future, a return to some kind of natural-law thinking in human ethics, which might, in turn, bring about a stronger appreciation for the moral sublime. Most strong voices (from the left, center, and right) are relying heavily on moral judgments, but are not producing persuasive moral theory.

It is interesting that sublimicism has been utilized by both conservative and liberal groups. Conservatives respond to its long tradition of idealism, nobility, and historical accumulations, while more radical groups respond to its rugged conflicts, its application to social forces, its negative modes of attack, and its Utopian potential. Sublimicism, as Longinus emphasized, can emerge from strong passions, and in order to advance their programs, conservatives and radicals and centrists will all perceive the need for the *passional sublime*, even when it might be better to invoke more of the *studied, calm, rational, and noble sublime*.

It might happen, of course, that sublimicism, like idealism in general, will, into the future, meet periods of decline, especially if current movements toward scepticism and atheism weaken the hope for transcendental encounters. Conversely, Nietzsche may be proved right in his assumptions that affirmations and joys will prevail over doubts and lamentations. Even if the positive modes of the sublime retain their favored status into the future, it is clear now that the more or less negative modes, such as the comic and

the mock, deserve a fuller investigation, especially since they can be put to positive uses. One new direction which may gain ground is the position of Nietzsche, Lyotard, and Zizek that the Sublime Other is the whole net of culture as it rests on symbols. Interestingly, this direction seems to oppose materialism, and might therefore be seen as a reinforcement of modernism, in that materialism has been related to the more sceptical postmodern frame of mind. However, the anti-materialism of Zizek and Lyotard would not bring much comfort to the main line of modernist idealism, since Lyotard's idealism does not seem to encourage any cultural consensus, and since Zizek's idealism does not reach upward toward universal transcendent zones, but rather reaches downward to subjective fantasy. Crowther and Ferguson also offer paradigms which ward off strong materialism, and Weiskel, though more aligned to materialistic vocabularies, did insist that sublimicisms requires an upward thrust to a transcendent Other. Nevertheless when Zizek chides Marx for not understanding the omnipresence of the non-material cultural sublime, this does involve a sense of the inadequacy of a fully materialistic frame of reference. In any case, this study is in part the posing of three important questions: can we theorize persuasively the idea that major raw ideas are sublime, that major cultural narratives are sublime, and that the general net of culture is sublime? Probably the future uses of the concept of the sublime, and also the concept of transcendence, will involve a battle of the survival of the fittest. Sublimicisms will probably remain an influential concept if we continue to see how many important things that can not be called beautiful can be called sublime, and if we continue to search for acceptable versions of higher transcendental zones. And obviously an additional factor is whether or not world-wide religion maintains or loses ground.

Finally, it seems reasonable to believe that sublimicisms will be permanently attractive to those artists who—like Rothko, Newman, and Still—desire a subject matter that rises above ornamentation and personal confession, a subject matter that touches on the concerns of philosophy and religion. The abstract expressionists launched a program designed to honor sublime subjects in the new fully abstract art style of modernism. They sought an ideograph symbol with semantic properties that would allow them to go beyond the beautiful into the realm of the true and the good. They inherited from Longinus and Kant a tradition that found sublimity both in reasoning and in ideas of reason, and it seems certain that other painters and artists, in the coming

centuries, will feel the same need, and will create their own kinds of sublimicist art.

## Notes -- Introduction

1. Robert Rosenblum, "The abstract sublime," ARTnews 59 (Feb. 1961): 39. The guide to scholarly form for this dissertation is The Chicago Manual of Style, 14th ed. Among its recommended practices are the ignoring of ellipses at the start or end of quotations, the retention of the capitalization or lack of it for the first word in a quotation, and the omission of issue number for a periodical entry if the month (or season) and year are given. This dissertation follows the wide-spread American practice of using the historical present tense for truth claims about the past which are permanently true, in conjunction with the corollary principle that past tense may be used if the element of pastness is pertinent. In handling exhibition catalogues, since the text is my chief interest, I have treated them as books, giving prominence to author or editor of the text sections. I also follow the recommendation that names of art movements not be capitalized.
2. Rosenblum, 56.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 58.
5. Laurence Alloway, "The American Sublime," Living Arts 2 (June 1963): 11.
6. Ibid., 12, 14, 18, 21.
7. This essay (written along with Newman's for a symposium on the sublime in the periodical Tiger's Eye) is "A Tour of the Sublime," available in Motherwell's The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell, ed. Stephanie Terenzio (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 52-53. The journal issue of Tiger's Eye is no. 6, 15 Dec. 1948.
8. Ibid., 86, 111, 125, 215, 257, 270, 285.
9. Dore Ashton, The New York School (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 170, 181-82, 123, 124.
10. Stephen Polcari, Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), xviii-xx, xxiii, 3, 4, 25, 29, 43, 44, 54-55.

## Notes – Chapter One

1. Longinus on the Sublime, trans. A. O. Prickard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), v.
2. *Ibid.*, 2, 3.
3. *Ibid.*, 3-4.
4. *Ibid.*, 11-12.
5. *Ibid.*, 12.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 13, 14.
8. *Ibid.*, 14, 13.
9. *Ibid.*, 17, 14-15.
10. *Ibid.*, 18.
11. *Ibid.*, 22.
12. *Ibid.*, 25.
13. *Ibid.*, 26-27.
14. *Ibid.*, 28-31.
15. *Ibid.*, 31.
16. *Ibid.*, 32.
17. *Ibid.*, 33.
18. *Ibid.*, 41.
19. *Ibid.*, 42, 49.
20. *Ibid.*, 57-58, 39, 68.
21. *Ibid.*, 65.
22. *Ibid.*, 66, 65. Interestingly, Longinus allows for the comic sublime, noting that “laughter too is a passion” (79). Suzanne Guerlac has offered a postmodern analysis of Longinus’s text by treating it as rhetoric containing a lot of “slippage among the positions of enunciation.” Guerlac tries to find the inner fissures which make for deconstruction. She declares that the rhetorical nature of the text “undoes the possibility of a firm distinction between a true and a false sublime” and also “disrupts the stable identity of the subject.” If the ambiguity of language is given such total control, the validity of sublimicist transcendence is placed in doubt for texts, and this undermining can be extended to paintings. See her article “Longinus and the Subject of the Sublime,” New Literary History 16 (Winter, 1985): 275,

279, 285.

23. The edition I use is the Harvard Classics Edmund Burke, ed. Charles Eliot Norton (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1937).
24. *Ibid.*, 16-17.
25. *Ibid.*, 17.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, 19.
28. *Ibid.*, 20.
29. *Ibid.*, 22.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, 25.
32. *Ibid.*, 30-32.
33. *Ibid.*, 34.
34. *Ibid.*, 35.
35. *Ibid.*, 36. Burke wryly observes that men, unlike animals, can defer sexual pleasure under the guidance of reason, and had these periods of want caused any great pain, "reason, I am afraid, would find great difficulties in the performance of its office." Other than sexual pleasures, Burke names (as passions involving not self-preservation but social relations) sympathy, ambition, and imitation, painting being centered in the pleasure of imitation. The object which stirs sexual feelings is the beauty of women (37-39, 44).
36. *Ibid.*, 49.
37. *Ibid.*, 50.
38. *Ibid.*, 50-51.
39. *Ibid.*, 54.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*, 55.
44. *Ibid.*, 58-59.
45. *Ibid.*, 60.
46. *Ibid.*, 61-63.
47. *Ibid.*, 65.

48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., 66.
50. Ibid., 67-68.
51. Ibid., 68.
52. Ibid., 69.
53. Ibid., 73.
54. Ibid., 75, 80, 82.
55. Ibid., 101-102.
56. Ibid., 105.
57. Ibid., 109.
58. Ibid., 108. Burke reveals his strong insistence on pain by a feeble argument that nerves in the eye are somewhat in pain when they register a vast sublime spectacle (109-110).
59. Ibid., 109.
60. Ibid., 128.
61. Ibid., 138.
62. Burke's principle that certain pairings intensify sublime effects can be applied to the linking of iconology and formal elements in paintings.
63. Paul Crowther, The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989), 10-12.
64. Still, as later remarks will show, studied theory of the sublime, and Newman considered Burke and Kant in an article on the sublime for the periodical Tiger's Eye (to be treated later).
65. I am using the translation by William A. Haussman (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964). This key quotation is in section 7. In the case of all quotations, I check against the Kaufmann translation to ensure that the ideas are accurately conveyed. Also, I will cite not by page but by section number, using the abbreviation "S" so that the material may be located in any translation. To the citation by section number, I will add titles, using the following abbreviations BT for The Birth of Tragedy, JW for The Joyful Wisdom, TI for Twilight of the Idols, and WP for The Will to Power.
66. BT, S. 5.
67. BT, S. 1.

68. **BT**, S. 3.
69. **BT**, S. 10.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid.
72. **BT**, S. 16.
73. Ibid.
74. **BT**, S. 1.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid.
76. Ibid.
77. **BT**, S. 3.
78. **BT**, S. 8.
79. Ibid. The power of Greek music from primitive Greek culture to the age of Pericles was probably very great, but we can only guess, since no Greek music has survived.
80. **BT**, S. 21.
81. Ibid.
82. **BT**, S. 21.
83. **BT**, S. 15.
84. **BT**, S. 23.
85. **BT**, S. 15.
86. Thomas Kuhn has moved somewhat in this direction by his theory that science attains coherence but not final truth. His key work is The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. After Nietzsche, the most sweeping assertion that science, law, the arts, and all disciplines offer useful fictions created by the will, comes in H. Vaihinger's The Philosophy of 'As If', trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1924). Vaihinger states: "It must be remembered that the object of the world of ideas as a whole is not the portrayal of reality--this would be an utterly impossible task--but rather to provide us with an instrument for finding our way about more easily in this world" (15).
87. **BT**, S. 15. Nietzsche calls Kant and Schopenhauer very helpful in showing the limitations of science and reason (S. 18).
88. **BT**, S. 23.

89. Ibid.
90. Ibid. Note how close to the opening of Eliot's The Waste Land is Nietzsche's comment: "And now the myth-less man remains eternally hungering among all the bygones, and digs and grubs for roots, though he have to dig for them even among the remotest antiquities" (S. 23). Indeed, Nietzsche is so close to Eliot as to suggest a specific source.
91. BT, S. 23.
92. It seems clear that Nietzsche was as wrong about German legends as was Yeats about Irish legends. Neither group seems to have much potency.
93. BT, S. 19.
94. BT, S. 20.
95. BT, S. 21.
96. BT, S. 20.
97. BT, S. 24.
98. BT, S. 25.
99. BT, S. 20.
100. BT, S. 1
101. BT, S. 2.
102. Ibid.
103. BT, S. 9.
104. BT, S. 10.
105. BT, S. 17.
106. BT, S. 23.
107. Ibid.
108. BT, S. 24.
109. Edgar Allan Poe also showed some anticipation of abstract art. In "The Fall of the House of Usher" the painting by Usher is geometric abstract expressionism, and in Marginalia Poe makes several interesting remarks: that if an artist paints decayed cheeses, "his merit will lie in their looking as little like decayed cheeses as possible"; that when the imagination chooses new compounds for beauty or sublimity, the compound may show "nothing" of the elements being mixed; and that "The mere imitation . . . of what is in Nature, entitles no man to the sacred name of 'Artist.'" See Marginalia, ed. John Carl Miller (Charlottesville:

University Press of Virginia, 1981): 29, 189, 198. Poe's turning away from surface realism follows from his theory of lyric poetry as the opening of brief windows into supernal reality--one element in his sublimicisim. These ideas of Poe will be mentioned later in a section on American literature.

110. My translation of The Joyful Wisdom is that of Thomas Common (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964). Quotations are checked against the Kaufmann translation for accuracy.
111. JW, S. 299.
112. JW, S. 304.
113. JW, S. 308.
114. JW, S. 337.
114. JW, S. 337.
115. Ibid.
116. JW, S. 347.
117. JW, S. 358.
118. JW, S. 370.
119. JW, S. 379.
120. I am using Kaufman's translation in his The Portable Nietzsche (New York: Viking Press, 1954). Twilight of the Idols has titled parts. I will refer only to the long part "Skirmishes in a War with the Age," which is itself broken down into numbered sections. In addition to the abbreviation TI for the whole text, I will use "SWA" for this part, and also give the section number within this part.
121. TI, "SWA," S. 7.
122. TI, "SWA," S. 8.
123. TI, "SWA," S. 9.
124. TI, "SWA," S. 11.
125. TI, "SWA," S. 21.
126. TI, "SWA," S. 22.
127. TI, "SWA," S. 24. In a comment (S. 30) which anticipates Dada, Nietzsche declares that in our current age of good-natured and dull mediocrity fixed on newspapers and vacations, some irrational absurd responses would be appropriate.
128. TI, "SWA," S. 24.

129. TL, "SWA," S. 34. Nietzsche slyly notes that people happily endure their unhappy lot because complaining adds so much charm to their lives. Emerson's bold, heroic egotism appealed to Nietzsche, who asserts (S. 13) that Emerson was "Much more enlightened, more roving, more manifold, subtler than Carlyle; above all, happier."
130. TL, "SWA," S. 37.
131. TL, S. 48.
132. WP, Book One, S. 4. I am using the translation by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967).
133. *Ibid.*, S. 5.
134. *Ibid.*, S. 15.
135. *Ibid.*, S. 30.
136. WP, Book Two, S. 158.
137. *Ibid.*, S. 218, 219.
138. *Ibid.*, S. 144, and WP, Book Four, S. 1035, S. 1036, S. 1037.
139. WP, Book Three, S. 685.
140. WP, Book One, S. 29.
141. *Ibid.*, S. 120.
142. WP, Book Two, S. 387.
143. WP, Book Three, S. 487.
144. *Ibid.*, S. 493.
145. *Ibid.*, S. 497.
146. *Ibid.*, S. 522.
147. *Ibid.*, S. 584.
148. *Ibid.*, S. 585, S. 689.
149. *Ibid.*, S. 804. Nietzsche declares (Book Four, S. 1040) that the grand style "excludes the pleasing," thus moving it from beauty toward the sublime.
150. *Ibid.*, S. 805.
151. *Ibid.*, S. 808.
152. *Ibid.*, S. 809.
153. *Ibid.*, S. 811.
154. *Ibid.*, S. 821.
155. *Ibid.*, S. 829.

156. *Ibid.*, S. 849.
157. *WP*, book Four, S. 870.
158. *Ibid.*, S. 975.
159. *WP*, Book Three, S. 800.
160. *WP*, Book Four, S. 943.
161. *Ibid.*, S. 941.
162. *Ibid.*, S. 1064.
163. *WP*, Book Three, S. 828.
164. *Ibid.*, S. 842.
165. *Ibid.*, S. 848, S. 849.
166. *WP*, Book Four, S. 1052.
167. *WP*, Book Three, S. 851, S. 852.
168. *Ibid.*, S. 488, S. 489, S. 492, S. 674.
169. *Ibid.*, S. 767. Nietzsche pushes existentialism down to the level of atoms in that each atom has its own creative will acting in its own neighborhood (S. 637).
170. *Ibid.*, S. 684.
171. *Ibid.*, S. 853.
172. *WP*, Book Four, S. 996. Nietzsche's reality-centered sublimicist thought contrasts with Schopenhauer's escapist model. In his study, W. D. Hamlyn describes Schopenhauer's view that aesthetic contemplation sets will aside to be free from the pain and suffering of the real world. For Schopenhauer, what is contemplated as the essence of the beautiful or the sublime is the Platonic idea behind the art work, not its sensory features. Hamlyn describes Schopenhauer's sense of the exaltation of the sublime: "For, whereas in the case of the merely beautiful the state of contemplation, the pure knowledge of the idea is achieved without opposition, in the case of the sublime it is won only after a struggle, by a violent tearing away from the relations of the object to will. . . . Hence for the state of exaltation that the contemplation of the sublime involves there has to be a constant awareness of the object as a threat to the will . . . without its actually producing the fear or other emotion it might well produce in a concrete situation." See Hamlyn's *Schopenhauer* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 111, 113. After his early enthusiasm for Schopenhauer, Nietzsche fiercely came to oppose his predecessor's view that life is monstrous and evil, that the will is

poisoned, and that art should deny life and offer an aesthetic escapism.

173. See Ackerman's Nietzsche: A Frenzied Look (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 6.
174. Benjamin Bennet, "Nietzsche's Idea of Myth: The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Eighteenth Century Aesthetics," PMLA 94 (may 1979): 420-430. Other interpreters have also, rightly or wrongly, emphasized the positive value-creating side of Nietzsche. Kaufmann assumes that Nietzsche's real center is value theory and the creation of a new sanction for value (a position many would challenge). See Kaufmann's Nietzsche: Philosopher, Poet, Antichrist (Princeton University Press, 1968), 122-23. Richard Schacht develops the thesis that while in later works Nietzsche does not see art as the only saving force, Nietzsche does not retreat from his early stand in BT that art is the supreme order-making power. See Schacht's Nietzsche (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 8. Julian Young argues that when Nietzsche's late perspectivism undermined his own high placement of science, Nietzsche then came back toward his art theory in BT. See Young's Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 61-62, 95-99. Gilles Deleuze focuses on Nietzsche's will to power, presenting it as the bestowing force that propels positive sense and value through art symbols. See Deleuze's Nietzsche and Philosophy, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London: The Athlone Press, 1983), 85. And although Arthur Danto emphasizes the extreme nihilism in Nietzsche, he notes that this horrible blank is not acceptable, "and the Will-to-Power imposes upon that unshaped substance the form and meaning which we cannot live without." See Danto's Nietzsche as Philosopher (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 228. Yet it is also true that Danto shows how the nihilism can weaken any positive vision in Nietzsche.
175. These steps are clarified especially in sections 23-28 of the Critique of Judgment. I am using J. H. Bernard's translation (New York: Hafner, 1951).
176. *Ibid.*, 89-95, 99-101.
177. *Ibid.*, 103, 114. In case religious people might want to object to these concepts, Kant reminds them that were it not for the human ability to grasp the sublime, there would be no recognition of the sublimity of God (104).
178. *Ibid.*, 109, 112-14, 117.
179. *Ibid.*, 160. We would find similar exemplar combinations of idea and style in

poetry, such as Blake's couplet "A Robin Red Breast in a Cage/Puts all Heaven in a Rage," or Hart Crane's description of the American land as a Pocahontas earth mother with her two breasts the Appalachian and Rocky Mountains: "Time like a serpent down her shoulder, dark/And space, an eaglet's wing, laid on her hair." Blake's lines are in "Auguries of Innocence" and Crane's are in "The River" section of The Bridge.

180. Ibid., 170, 141, 160, 135, 121, 108, 105.

181. Roger Scruton connects aesthetics to morality in that they both rest on the same cultural net of rules about appropriate judgments, evidenced in the fact that we use the same terms to judge character and art (such as the wrongness of sentimentality). Donald Crawford connects aesthetics and morality in that both must rest on an a priori schema. Ted Cohen argues that nothing but an aesthetic object would yield the richness to symbolize a moral value. See Scruton's Art and Imagination (London: Methuen, 1974), 247, 249; Crawford's "Kant's Theory of Creative Imagination," Essays in Kant's Aesthetics, ed. Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 162-76; and Cohen's "Why Beauty is a Symbol of Morality," Essays in Kant's Aesthetics, 232-35.

## Notes -- Chapter Two

1. Thomas Weiskel, The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976), 2-6, 11-12.
2. Ibid., 17, 26, 24. Possibly Weiskel attached false hopes to the powerful effort in the sixties and seventies by Richard Rorty and other sceptical philosophers to validate an "identity" thesis reducing all mentalistic brain events to mechanistic brain buzzes, seeing mind as physio-chemical machine. The movement failed due to internal logical problems, including the recognition that mental states are too complex for a simple machine analogy plus the feebleness of the appeal to the future verification. These philosophers got some help from Quine's science-centered point of view.
3. Ibid., 23-24, 26-29, 31.
4. Ibid., 92-95, 105, 162, 106. Weiskel's respect for a negative and Freudian version of the sublime was conditioned by Harold Bloom's 1973 study The Anxiety of Influence, put forward as a study of poetry, and presenting the theory that a gifted new poet will always establish his vision by a destructive assault upon a major predecessor, a classical Oedipal conflict. Bloom calls this savage tension the pattern of a counter-sublime. The older poet in his daemonic trance becomes the god of his sublime vision. The new young genius misreads the old poet, swerves away from him, slays him, and achieves his own deific trance. Each poet is doomed to fail, but can take pride in having made his own hell. Guilt must be completely rejected so that a genius has no restrictions on daemonic trances. This daemonization in the creative trance is singled out by Bloom as the sublime experience. In addition to Freud, Bloom often invokes Nietzsche as the prophet of daemonic pride and ruthless power, of attack and counterattack. The main flaws of Bloom's model are excessive narrowness and excessive negativity, plus the obvious truth that few artists have manifested this obsessive wrath against some precursor. This model does not serve the facts of history, but it does serve radical political strategies. These criticisms do not imply that the idea of a counter-sublime is wrong. It is a useful concept because while paintings affirm, they also attack, with enemies in view. A counter-sublime mode should be recognized.
5. Paul Crowther, Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 153.
6. Paul Crowther, Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism (Oxford: Clarendon Press,

1993), ix.

7. Paul Crowther, The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 24-25.
8. *Ibid.*, 26-30. Crowther also points out that for Kant, all reasoning is a moral good because any adequate explanation of the cosmos must regard it as having been created to suit the needs of rational creatures. Ontological Being could not comprehend its purpose if it were not rationally construed in human thought; therefore mankind as contemplative (including moral reasoning) constitutes a unique good which must be placed at the center of cosmic design (42-43). Such reasoning obviously raises the status of the ideational and moral sublime.
9. *Ibid.*, 46-49.
10. *Ibid.*, 70.
11. *Ibid.*, 71, 76.
12. *Ibid.*, 135.
13. *Ibid.*, 143-45.
14. *Ibid.*, 147-50. These points were developed also in Crowther's "The Aesthetic Domain: Locating the Sublime," British Journal of Aesthetics 29 (Winter 1989): 21-31, stressing the crucial role of consciously realizing the victory over complexity, and the awe and astonishment this would yield through the paradox of imprisonment and liberation, a better (and more logically necessitated) explanation than the use of pain plus pleasure favored by Burke and Kant.
15. *Ibid.*, 152-55.
16. *Ibid.*, 156-62.
17. *Ibid.*, 162.
18. *Ibid.*, 164-65.
19. *Ibid.*, 168-73.
20. *Ibid.*, 125-27. Crowther observes, contrary to Burke, that in some cases we could appreciate the sublime even if we are in real danger, as in Poe's "Descent into the Maelstrom" (122). There would still have to be some distance allowing for contemplation. Certain war situations would also apply, as would mountain climbing.
21. *Ibid.*, 128-32.
22. *Ibid.*, 135, 139.

23. Ibid., 146, 149, 150-52.
24. Ibid., 173-74. In an interesting rebuttal of Danto's simplistic thesis of "the end of art," Crowther shows how Philip Taaffe and other neo-geo painters have happily and ironically absorbed postmodernist scepticism in a genuine new art that recognizes cultural continuities with a Kantian sense of the affirmative satisfaction felt in being able to bridge over discontinuities, a move toward Kant and Burke. Crowther properly sees that the very idea of contemplative appraisal of radical new art will inevitably position it in the main stream of historicist legitimating discourse (191-94).
25. Ibid., 199-208.
26. Art and Embodiment, 170, 175.
27. Ibid., 158, 175-77.
28. Ibid., 163, 198.
29. Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime," Artforum 20 (April 1992): 64-69.
30. Ibid., 64-66.
31. Ibid., 67.
32. Ibid., 68.
33. Ibid., 68-69.
34. Jean-Francois Lyotard, the Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985, ed. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas, trans. Don Barry and others (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 9-10.
35. Ibid., 12-14.
36. Ibid., 15-16.
37. Ibid., 20, 21, 18, 30. In his afterword to this text, Wlad Godzich thinks that Lyotard's crucial sense of justice is "a justice that does not legislate" and "does not subject anyone to a law that is alien to him or her" (134). This would be a very feeble, non-productive theory of justice. Trans-cultural moral judgments, apparently, would not be possible, or even judgments across different language communities in the same society.
38. Ibid., 41-42, 46-51. Lyotard's emphasis on linguistic phrase regimes clearly brings him into the recent "language games" ideology, focusing on the phrase as the unit of meaning. In his afterword, Godzich concludes that these families of ideolects

commit Lyotard to the theory of the self as constructed, “this constitution of the subject in the act of reading” (134). While we must agree that some major features of selfhood are built up through reading, it would be wrong to insist that the self is “nothing other than” a linguistic construct. If this is true, we have a new disturbing causal mechanism: a person has no intrinsic nature and no intrinsic value because the self is a mere fiction stamped out of some collective mold. Lyotard might not agree with Godzich. He could insist that certain human needs are intrinsic and universal, along with the power of sublime envisioning. The Crowther-Kant-Merleau-Ponty direction has the advantage of subjecting language to certain pre-linguistic or a priori features which prevent language (or writing) from exercising total control over experience and selfhood.

39. Ibid., 66, 71.

40. Ibid., 72, 76.

41. Ibid., 73.

42. Ibid., 77.

43. Ibid., 78.

44. Ibid., 89.

45. Ibid., 91.

46. Ibid., 96-97.

47. Ibid., 102.

48. Ibid., 110. Godzich’s remarks come in an afterword to the text. Its original French title was Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants, published in Paris in 1988.

49. Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 15, 67, 48, 50.

50. Ibid., 29, 39, 41, 16.

51. Ibid., 26, 27, 66. In his The Differend: Phrases in Dispute, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xi, Lyotard explains that some discourse genre can have phrase regimes such as “reasoning, knowing, describing, recounting, questioning, showing, ordering, etc.,” pointed to some end, with different genres decreeing differends between the matching phrase regimes, and with “the absence of a universal genre of discourse to regulate them.”

52. The Postmodern Explained, 129.
53. Jean-Francois Lyotard, Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), x, 55, 70, 122, 23.
54. *Ibid.*, 238, 66, 181, 186-87, 189, 188.
55. Crowther observes that Lyotard postulates too great a break with the past because all painting has raised the questions of how art represents and what painting is, so that Lyotard's novatio by which he defines the avant-garde is more like a universal historical attitude. Furthermore, it is too coercive and wrong to demand that every avant-garde painter must radically question painting. Crowther also points out the irony of Lyotard's rejecting all narratives while spinning his own story, and his self-contradiction in rejecting history and pedagogy while offering a pedagogy and a strongly historicized conception of the emergence of modern techno-science. Crowther also comments that Lyotard's recommendations would not insure any progress toward justice, and that postmodern theorists often fail to realize that the relatively disinterested model for aesthetic-sublime experience can have politically useful results in handling greatly complex social structures, in appreciating the value of community, in shielding us from cultural despair, in awakening us to "transformatory possibilities," and in moving toward consensus. See Crowther's Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism, 158, 159, 166-67, 169, 170, 173-74. Christopher Norris emphasizes the political dimension of Lyotard's thought, pointing out that Lyotard's theory of the sublime utilizes aesthetics to protect utopian thought against any rebuttals based on social events or historical truth-claims, creating thus a convenient refuge for those struggling to retain the socialist ideal. However Lyotard does not give them much comfort because he rejects any new positive program which might accommodate socialism to state monopoly capitalism and possessive individualism. Norris suggests that Lyotard and others can be viewed as a leftist "desperate holding action," using sublimicist theory as a way to raise questions about socio-political theory. See Norris's What's Wrong with Postmodernism (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 14, 16. Norris points to elements one might well reject, though there are other insights in Lyotard of great value, especially his defenses of the ideal ought as implicit in sublime experience.
56. Frances Ferguson, Solitude and the Sublime (New York: Routledge, 1992), x.

57. *Ibid.*, vii, viii. Broadly speaking, deconstructionists seek some internal contradiction that collapses some presumed unity, or they accomplish this by invoking the ambiguities of language, and they often follow both routes.
58. *Ibid.*, 1, 2, 3, x.
59. *Ibid.*, 3.
60. *Ibid.*, 14-15.
61. *Ibid.*, 21, 23.
62. *Ibid.*, 32, 63.
63. *Ibid.*, 31.
64. Frances Ferguson, "The Sublime of Edmund Burke, or the Bathos of Experience," *Glyph* 8 (1981): 62, 66-69, 75-76, 79.
65. Frances Ferguson, Wordsworth: Language As Counter-Spirit (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), xv-xvi, xvii, 3, 125, 194.
66. *Ibid.*, 116.
67. The essay collection The American Sublime is designed to articulate the "merely rhetorical" concept of the sublime. The editor, Mary Arensberg, declares that for poststructuralists and deconstructionists all major meanings have collapsed "into the vast sea of textuality," turning the sublime into "a fiction of transcendence, itself a fiction of absolute discourse." She comments that within this word-game context, "the sublime is alive and doing well," seen in an empty white "vortex of atheism" (2, 10). In her own essay on Wallace Stevens, she, like Ferguson, cannot allow poets to say anything positive. When at the end of "Auroras of Autumn," Stevens calls for a new age of positive belief and genuine innocence, Arensberg judges that such a vision must surely come from a "false messiah," even though she quotes the declaration of Stevens that such a dawning new innocence "exists, it is visible, it is, it is"; also she falsifies Stevens (170) by using brackets to change his ending: "a [deluded] happy people in a happy world." She proves how wrong it is to ignore intent. In this book Joanne Feit Diehl, in "Women Poets and the American Sublime," declares that women should resist the traditional American sublime (centered around unbounded horizons for a new American Adam) by creating a new "asexual" model, a "Counter-Sublime" (211). Hilary Putnam resists the "fully rhetorical" language theorists by noting that "if all notions of rightness, both epistemic and (metaphysically) realist, are eliminated, then what are our

statements but noise-making? What are our thoughts but mere subvocalization? The elimination of the normative is attempted mental suicide." See Putnam's "Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized," After Philosophy: End or Transformation?, ed. Kenneth Baynes and others (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 242. Putnam represents the general view that Western thinkers should not radically shift the whole terrain of art and thought. In this same essay collection, Derrida argues that there are two radical choices, to exit "without changing terrain" or "to change terrain" in "a discontinuous and eruptive fashion," yet the only real solution, he claims, is to do both: "A new writing must weave and interlace these two motifs of deconstruction." Derrida leaves unanswered the question of how much of the old terrain might be kept. See his "The Ends of Man" in After Philosophy, 151.

68. Crowther's concept of aeonic constants is a move toward universal categories, and some natural kinds might seem to be close to Platonic universals. If the categories of substance, causation, gravity, and numbers are construed as natural kinds, what is their age and range, and is it from creation to eternity, and if so, how do they differ from Platonic universals? As Crowther moves toward enduring categories he gains a better sanction for his own favored values and theories, which are perhaps too vulnerable to the mere contingencies of social change—a serious liability for Lyotard, Weiskel, and Ferguson.

### Notes -- Chapter Three

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1956), 290.
2. *Ibid.*, 291. Since Sartre does not try to prove these claims, presumably he starts from a postulation by intuition.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 292.
5. *Ibid.*, 308.
6. *Ibid.*, 292-95.
7. *Ibid.*, 299. Even though Sartre became a committed Marxist there is no reason to assume that he would repudiate such reasoning. His logic may have encouraged the abstract expressionists in their decision to keep aloof from leftist political passions.
8. *Ibid.*, 299, 300.
9. *Ibid.*, 305, 306.
10. *Ibid.*, 302.
11. *Ibid.*, 304.
12. Sartre could modify the cogito to something like "I alone think, choose, and act, therefore I become."
13. *Ibid.*, 306.
14. *Ibid.*, 303. Apparently Sartre treats this discovery of the other as given by intuitive certitude.
15. *Ibid.*, 293, 298.
16. *Ibid.*, 309-311. In an essay on Descartes, Sartre states: "The fact remains that a formidable power of divine and human affirmation runs through and supports his universe. It took two centuries of crisis—a crisis of Faith and a crisis of Science—for man to regain the creative freedom that Descartes placed in God, and for anyone to suspect the following truth, which is an essential basis of humanism: man is the being as a result of whose appearance a world exists." See Sartre's "Cartesian Freedom," Literary and Philosophical Essays, trans. Annette Michelson (New York: Collier Books, 1962): 196. Also, René Laforge highlights the importance of a passage in Sartre's The flies, in which Orestes tells Jupiter that Jupiter created him as a free man and this freedom can be turned against the gods, so that a man and a

god “glide past each other, like ships in a river, without touching. You are God and I am free; each of us is alone, and our anguish is akin.” See Laforge’s Jean-Paul Sartre: His Philosophy, trans. Marina Smyth-Kok (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970): 133-34.

17. *Ibid.*, 310.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 307. Sartre does not face up to the truth that law, social order, and defense of values are not possible in a society which cannot make clean moral judgments against the choices of others. A situational factor must always be recognized, but cannot be pushed to moral neutrality.

20. Existential Philosophy: Kierkegaard to Merleau-Ponty, ed. George Alfred Schrader, Jr. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 37.

21. *Ibid.*, 34. Schrader believes there is a proper way to connect the root existential concepts to morality by noting that while most facts are value-neutral and separable from teleology, facts about human experience are not value-free, they carry implicit norms, and are essentially bound to teleology, so that from Sartre’s existential starting point, ought can properly be derived from is (41-42). In this same text, in his “Jean-Paul Sartre: Man, Freedom, and Praxis,” William Leon McBride observes that while the Sartrean free self cannot be totally reduced to body, it “must always occupy a particular position and a particular perspective because the human being is always a body.” Criticizing the vagueness of Sartrean morality, McBride asserts that surely some specific fixed values could be determined which have an on-going salutary effect on human freedom (274, 312-19).

22. Kierkegaard’s ideas also exerted an influence on Rothko, Newman, and Still, but much less than that of Sartre. The painters responded to Kierkegaard’s emphasis on anguish, paradox, and passion. They could not accept the theologian’s fully irrational blind leap of faith toward the Christian God. They liked Kierkegaard’s emphasis on aloneness. In his essay “That Individual” (in Kaufmann’s Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, 93-94, 97), Kierkegaard declares that all important work is done alone, “Hence where there is a multitude, there it is sure that no one is working, living, striving for the highest aim,” and even in a crowd action, the real agents are the separate unique individuals. Louis Mackey’s article “Søren Kierkegaard: The Poetry of Inwardness” (in Schrader’s Existential

Philosophers: Kierkegaard to Merleau-Ponty) helps to clarify what could be said about a religious sublime in Kierkegaard, a negative sublime in that God is felt as an infinite nothingness wherever some human hope or assurance breaks down. Rothko, Newman, and Still responded in a general way to what Mackey calls Kierkegaard's "poetry of inwardness" which "opens to the inquiring intellect and restless imagination the infinite wealth of possibility that is the material of the human selfhood" (76, 105).

23. I am using these four volumes from the Collected Works of Jung, Bollingen Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968). I will cite them by the following abbreviations: ACU for The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious, ST for Symbols of Transformation, PA for Psychology and Alchemy, and A for Aion.
24. ACU, 43.
25. *Ibid.*, 44, 48.
26. *Ibid.*, 59, 60, 69.
27. *Ibid.*, 28.
28. A, 189, 195.
29. ST, 229.
30. A, 35.
31. *Ibid.*, 189.
32. PA, 11.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, 12.
35. A, 267.
36. ST, 433.
37. ACU, 32-33.
38. PA, 11.
39. *Ibid.*, 15-16.
40. PA, 8.
41. PA, 25.
42. PA, 18, 19. Jung implies some limitations in Christology by noting that for the modern psyche, science has had to carry certain crucial meanings of nature and the spirit of classicism, and that alchemy and astrology carried crucial meanings which were improperly ignored by orthodox Christian symbol and myth, including

psychic bondings to nature (PA, 33, 34). Christology obviously could have been attached to both sex and nature by using the doctrine of the gospel of John that all things made are made by the logos that dwelt in Jesus; also, the inherent ordering of logos structures could have been attached to the ideas of classical form and classical learning.

43. ST, 178.

44. ST, 136, 149, and PA, 26.

45. PA, 12.

46. If Jung postulates something like the essential nouns and verbs for the grammar of the individual psyche, the importance of Lévi-Strauss lies in the concept of a universal grammar for the myths of mankind. George Steiner explains this by noting that Lévi-Strauss conceives myth patterns as analogous to music patterns, and seeks “a science of mythology, a grammar of symbolic constructs allowing the anthropologist to relate different myths as the structural linguist relates phonemes and language systems.” See Steiner’s Language and Silence (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 247, 249.

47. ACU, 17-18.

48. Ernst Cassirer’s myth theory is much less religious than Jung’s. Cassirer confines his framework to the web of culture, conceived as a serial order in which parts can represent wholes. Somewhat like Nietzsche, Cassirer views art, myth, religion, language, mathematics, science, and history as all being symbolic forms (requiring interpretation), all coming under a cultural schema of seriality (parts of a set). Importantly, Cassirer sees that because man is “a mythical animal,” myths continue to emerge from collective desires, and current political and social structures are operating as myth, even if unrecognized. Thus Cassirer alerts us to possible new and secular foundations for myth. Donald Verene observes that “Cassirer is the only major philosopher of the twentieth century to have developed a theory of myth.” See Cassirer’s Symbol, Myth, and culture, ed. Donald Philip Verene (New York: Yale University Press, 1979), 252-53. Verene’s remark comes in his introduction (13). Paul Tillich’s myth theory comes close to Jung’s as he uses the term “God” as a symbol for mankind’s ultimate concern. Tillich’s contribution to the theory of mythic symbols is to list six traits of true symbols: pointing beyond themselves, participating in that to which they point, opening new levels of external

reality, opening new levels of psychic depth, rising organically from individual or collective unconscious, and being susceptible to birth, growth, and death. See Tillich's The Dynamics of Faith, Harper Torchbooks (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 45, 41-43.

49. A merely rhetorical sublime would be one that does not allow any objectively real transcendence and confines the field of reference to language itself. Neil Hertz inclines toward a merely psychological view in claiming that the check, the blockage, is not followed by a real encounter with an Other, but rather leads to a re-establishment of "the self's own integrity as agent." See his The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 53.
50. Dickinson's poem is given the title "The Brain is wider than the Sky." In his study The Religious Sublime, David Morris notes John Dennis's argument that the religious sublime is the highest mode because, here, terror and awe are at their strongest. In his study, Robert Rosenblum treats a religious version of the romantic sublime from Friedrich to Rothko, claiming that the artists he treats face a common dilemma in their attempt "to revitalize the experience of divinity in a secular world that lay outside the sacred confines of Christian iconology." Etienne Gilson presents the theory that all artists imply a religious sublime because artistic creativity continues and extends the original divine creation. See Morris's The Religious Sublime (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1972), 47, 53; Rosenblum's Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 14; and Gilson's "The Religious Significance of Painting," The Philosophy of the Visual Arts, ed. Philip Anderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 212.
51. The changing attitudes toward nature as source of the sublime are treated by Christopher Thacker, The Wilderness Pleases (Bickenham: Croom Helm, 1983). The romantic sublime is also treated by James Twitchell, Romantic Horizons: Aspects of the Sublime in English Poetry and Painting (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1983). Twitchell tries to minimize the transcendent Other in the romantic version, and raise high the return to selfhood, the merely psychological aspect. Both elements, however, are clear when Twitchell gives (27-28) a crystallization of Coleridge's view by Albert O. Wlecke: "the 'sense sublime' refers

to an activity of the esemplastic power of imagination during which consciousness becomes reflexively aware of itself as an interfusing energy dwelling within the phenomena of nature." Coleridge shows a Kantian turn by remarking that a natural sensory object is not in itself sublime, but reaches sublimity when made a symbol for a grand idea, as Twitchell points out (71). Coleridge takes a metaphysical direction while Wordsworth takes a pantheistic one. Ernest Tuveson explains that it was easy for the romantics to locate the sublime in nature due to the tradition developing from Newton, Locke, and others that infinite space and infinite time allowed a merger between God and nature, with nature seen as "god's own theatre." See Tuveson's "Space, Deity, and the 'Natural Sublime,'" Modern Language Quarterly 12 (1951), 37, 27-30, 31.

52. David Morris analyzes the Gothic sublime as going beyond Burke's emphasis on physical pain, yet Burke clearly stated that he included mental and spiritual suffering. Morris suggests that Gothic sublimity usually involves a penetration into darkness and psychic depth, "a return of the repressed" related to incest and unknown psychic terrors, with no transcendence to higher ground. However the Gothic terror of Dante's Inferno has in view the Paradiso, and Poe's horror stories about renegade mankind have in view the original cosmic One, prior to Poe's exploding primary particle in Eureka. The Gothic psychological terrors would remain negative even in Jungian terms if there is no triumph of self over the dark terrors, yet a vision of genuine positive transcendence is not ruled out in a generally Gothic mode. There are too many Gothic forms in which the great evil does not triumph. Clyfford Still's jagged forms convey a Gothic terror, yet this does not eradicate the saving component, and the same applies to Rothko's blending of dread, doom, and hope—so that the Morris pattern needs revision. See Morris's "Gothic Sublimity," New Literary History 16 (Winter 1985): 307. Paul Fry declares that the romantic sublime took a Gothic turn as God became remote and the romantics turned to daemonic and Satanic imagery. See Fry's "The Possession of the Sublime," Studies in Romanticism 26 (Summer 1987): 190-91, 197.
53. While Heidegger is not often treated in relation to theory of sublime, Gary Shapiro observes that Heidegger's "ontological poetics can reasonably be viewed as a renewal of the aesthetics of the sublime." Shapiro generally favors the growing emphasis on the political, stating that "Today there is a widely held impression that

only criticism oriented toward the sublime is really interesting, regardless of its political tendency." See Shapiro's "From the Sublime to the Political: Some Historical Notes," New Literary History 16 (Winter 1985): 213, 217. Anyone wishing to pursue Heidegger's sense of the sublime would concentrate on his concept of the ontological thrown out Open space marked off for a harmonious joining of earth, sky, mankind, and the gods, as Heidegger develops this ideal of ontological mystery in his Poetry, Language, and Thought, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). For Heidegger there is a great shock when we encounter this new grounding half prepared for by us, and half sent from sacred Being. Mikel Duffrenne, in The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, trans. Edward S. Casey and others (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), approaches an ontological sublime in claiming that "art and reality are subject to being" and art "impregnates the real" by virtue of the "aura of meaning it diffuses and radiates throughout a world" (539, 545, 413). Among several writers who stress a sublime element in the sheer wonder at existence is R. W. Hepburn in "Wonder' and Other Essays (Edinburgh: University Press, 1984), 140, pointing to an "existential wonder" at "the sheer existing of a world."

54. In his Romantic Horizons, 105, Twitchell speaks of Turner's blood-red sun that "forces us to the vortex" to shatter the horizon at the edge of the supernatural. In Turner and the Sublime (London: British Museum, 1980), Andrew Wilton calls Turner's intense orange and crimson fields hymns to the sun that celebrate "the numinous power of nature" (101-102).
55. Philip Taaffe, "Now and forever, Amen," Arts Magazine (March 1986): 8-9. Taaffe's comments are part of a symposium discussion of Newman's Tyger's Eye article "The Sublime is Now." Louis Wirth Marvik's Mallarmé and the Sublime (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986) develops the general thesis that Mallarmé exemplifies the ironic sublime by showing that possible enthusiasm for the absolute is checked by the ironic awareness that it lies beyond representation, beyond reach. However, if Mallarmé still maintains that the transcendent spiritual Other is really genuine even if concealed, then the irony would not destroy the positive aspect. If the Other itself is in doubt, then the irony is stronger.
56. Raimondo Modiano, "Humanism and the Comic Sublime," Studies in Romanticism

26 (Summer 1987): 232-33, 239.

57. See Shapiro's "From the Sublime to the Political," 227. Shapiro places Rabelais and Falstaff in the ode of the comic sublime, and explains F. T. Vischer's model (in Vischer's On the Sublime and the Comic) that the sublime negates the beautiful as thesis and antithesis, then the comic sublime comes as synthesis to recognize both beauty and the disruptive sublime (226). Peter Allan Dale interprets Carlyle's Sartor Resartus as an inverse comic sublime—the humorist undermines the ostensible higher zones that fail to satisfy him, yet "annihilates in the faith that beyond all forms there is finally a spiritual force, a sublime entity that survives their destruction and fuels the next generation's efforts to achieve the ideal" (a condition close to Lyotard). See Dale's "Sartor Resartus and the Inverse Sublime: The Art of Humorous Deconstruction," Allegory, Myth, and Symbol, ed. Morton M. Bloomfield (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 312.
58. Burke, 61.

## Notes -- Chapter Four

1. Mark Rothko: 1903-1970 (London: The Tate Gallery, 1989).
2. *Ibid.*, 76. This catalogue is The Ten: Whitney Dissenters (New York: Mercury Gallery, 1938).
3. *Ibid.*, 77.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Longinus, 65.
6. This motif of existential risk is suggested by many passages in Kierkegaard, one of them being the following: "Every human existence which is not conscious of itself as spirit, or conscious of itself before God as spirit, every human existence which is not thus grounded transparently in God. . . . or which . . . takes its faculties merely as active powers . . . which regards itself as an inexplicable something which is to be understood *per se* . . . is after all despair." This passage is from Sickness unto Death in A Kierkegaard Anthology, ed. Robert Bretall (New York: The Modern Library, 1938), 348.
7. Mark Rothko, 77.
8. *Ibid.*, 78.
9. *Ibid.*, 78-79.
10. *Ibid.*, 80.
11. *Ibid.*, 81. The Tate retrospective also prints on this page a comment by Rothko supplied by Sidney James in his Abstract and Surrealist Art in America (New York, 1944), 118, that The Omen of the Eagle treats the generic "Spirit of Myth" and a pantheism in which man and nature "merge into a single tragic idea."
12. *Ibid.*, 82. These comments are in a 1945 catalogue by the David Porter Gallery in Washington, D.C. Throughout his life, Rothko speaks like a mystic but calls himself a materialist.
13. *Ibid.*, 82-83.
14. *Ibid.*, 83.
15. *Ibid.*, 83-84. This essay was published in Possibilities, no. 1 (Winter 1947/48): 84.
16. The remark appears in a letter to the editor, ArtNews 56 (Dec. 1957): 5.
17. *Ibid.*, 84.

18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 85.
21. Motherwell, Collected Writings, 280.
22. Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (New York: Free Press, 1967), 158-59, 177-79.
23. Mark Rothko, 85. This remark comes from a symposium in Interiors May 10, 1951.
24. Ibid., 86.
25. James Breslin, Mark Rothko: A Biography (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 389, 390. Rothko's defense of impersonal art aligns him with LeCorbusier, Matisse, Mondrian, and Duchamp, as well as with Eliot, Joyce, Hart Crane, and Wallace Stevens.
26. Ibid., 390.
27. Ibid., 392.
28. Breslin (394) makes this same point by recording that Rothko told Alfred Jensen he liked just the "I" experience of Kierkegaard, and Breslin declares that this would not include the Christian zeal. Breslin, throughout his biography, keeps trying in a Freudian way to explain Rothko's adult miseries in relation to childhood traumas, and here Breslin suggests, dubiously, that Rothko saw Abraham as "an idealized image of the father he had lost."
29. Ibid., 392.
30. Ibid., 394, 395.
31. Ibid., 395.
32. Ibid., 396.
33. Ibid., 396-97.
34. Ibid., 396.
35. Ibid., 357-59. We do not know if Rothko was thinking of Moby Dick when he speaks of "the ritual celebrating of the power of a god whose potential is destruction." Ahab does not propitiate the God of destruction, but challenges him (Ahab recognizes also an equal God of love plus an absolute deity higher even than both of these opposed deities who figure in the novel).
36. Ibid., 4.

37. Ibid., 7.
38. Ibid., 123, 131, 160, 244, 247.
39. Ibid., 261.
40. Ibid., 276, 301, 302.
41. Ibid., 311, 323, 325.
42. Ibid., 330, 331.
43. Ibid., 340.
44. Ibid., 359-61, 379.
45. Ibid., 400, 407, 408. We should keep in mind Newman's position that the myth and sublimity were shifted into the painters' own immediate actions, a position seconded by Motherwell.
46. Ibid., 446. Due to some cheap paint Rothko used, plus careless maintenance, these panels were seriously damaged and are now stored in the basement of Harvard's Fogg Museum.
47. Dore Ashton, About Rothko (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 25, 163, 167, 169, 177, 181, 187, 188.
48. Motherwell, The Collected Writings, 197, 199, 200.
49. Ashton, About Rothko, 141, 148, 177, 181, 191, 195.
50. Brian O'Doherty, The Voice and the Myth: American Masters (New York: Universe Books, 1988), 8, 154, 160, 297.
51. Breslin, 401, 402, 403, 481, 482. To these negative voices should be added Robert Goldwater who (in his essay "Reflections on the Rothko Exhibition" for the Tate catalogue) declares (32) that the paintings "represent nothing and lead nowhere." The essay appeared earlier in Arts Magazine 35 (March 1961).
52. Robert Hughes, "Blue Chip Sublime," New York Times Review of Books, Dec. 21, 1978, 16.
53. Ian Dunlop, "Edvard Munch, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko: the Search for the Sublime," Arts Magazine 53 (Feb. 1979): 129, 130.
54. Donald B. Kuspit, "The Illusion of the Absolute in Abstract Art," Art Journal 31 (Fall 1971): 28, 29, 27. Kuspit mellows when he later writes a chapter "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art" for The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985 (New York: Abbeville Press, n.d.). Here (319) he concedes that "Silent abstract painting works through its holistic effect. It seems to articulate

an irreducible unity.”

55. André Malraux, The Twilight of the Absolute, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Pantheon Books, 1950), 36, 52, 54, 122, 128, 152.
56. Rosenblum, Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, 214, 216.
57. Diane Waldman, Mark Rothko, 1903-1970: A Retrospective (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1978), 53, 54, 58, 59, 65.
58. Anna Carruthers Chave, “Mark Rothko’s Subject Matter,” Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1982, 170-73, 202, 216, 218. Her study has been published in book form.
59. William C. Seitz, Abstract Expressionist Painting in America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 100, 102, 108, 115, 131, 130.
60. *Ibid.*, 152-54.
61. Stephen Polcari, Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), xxiii, 3, 4, 16, 24, 29.
62. *Ibid.*, 33.
63. *Ibid.*, 48, 54, 55, 118, 121, 141, 144, 147, 149.
64. The studies of Rothko tend to mention Kierkegaard’s impact more than Sartre’s. For instance see Polcari, 145, and Ashton, 131. Ashton believes the most basic intellectual grounding for Rothko would lie in symbolism, existentialism, and Nietzsche (119).
65. Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, 310.
66. Philip Taaffe, in an interview with Lilly Wei, “Talking Abstract,” Art in America 75 (Dec. 1987): 122.
67. Almost all interpreters agree that Rothko’s religiosity is a secularized variety, not Jewish or Christian, influenced by Nietzsche, existentialism, and Jung. One exception to this position is offered by Werner Haftmann, who agrees that Rothko creates a “personal mythology,” yet connects Rothko’s coloristic veilings of the absolute to the Jewish veiling of the Ark of the Covenant, and connects Rothko’s abstraction to the Old Testament commandment against mimetic graven images for deity--so that Rothko creates a strongly Jewish “mystical-religious space.” See Haftmann’s catalogue essay in the Zurich catalogue Mark Rothko, x. The evidence for a specific Jewish mysticism is more clear in Newman than in Rothko. We have noted Rothko’s recommendation that students start with Plato and read in the whole

literature of Western mysticism.

68. Hubert Crehan, "Rothko's Wall of Light," Art Digest no. 1 (1954): 5, 19.
69. For instance Max Kozloff, "Mark Rothko's New Retrospective," Art Journal 20 (Spring 1961): 148-9.
70. Waldman, 58, 61, 68.
71. See Chave, 176; Max Kozloff, "the Problem of Color-Light in Rothko," Artforum 4 (Sept. 1965): 43, 44; Ashton, About Rothko, 137, 171; Polcari, 138; Breslin, 316, 469; Ann Gibson, "Regression and Color in Abstract Expressionism: Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still," Arts Magazine 55 (March 1981): 144-49.
72. See Irving Sandler's essay in Mark Rothko: Paintings 1948-1969 (New York: Pace Gallery, 1983), 12; Rosenblum, "The Abstract Sublime," 56; Polcari, "Mark Rothko: Heritage, Environment, and Tradition," Smithsonian Studies in American Art 2 (Spring 1988): 58; O'Doherty, 164, 165. Motherwell, Collected Writings, 167, 151.
73. See Schjeldahl, 82, 81; Evan R. Firestone, "Color in Abstract Expressionism: Sources and Background for Meaning," Arts Magazine 55 (March 1981): 143, 141; Claude Cernuschi, "Mark Rothko's Mature Paintings: A Question of Content," Arts Magazine 60 (May 1986): 56; Georgine Oeri, "Mark Rothko," Quadrum 189, no. 10 (1961): 74, 67.
74. See Donald Goddard, "Rothko's journey into the unknown," ARTnews 79 (Jan. 1979): 39; Lawrence Alloway, "Residual Sign systems in Abstract Expressionism," Artforum 12 (Nov. 1973): 39; James Snyder, Northern Renaissance Art (Englewood Cliffs and New York: Prentice-Hall and Harry N. Abrams, 1985), 217.
75. Motherwell, Collected Writings, 61, 124-5, 141, 153, 205, 244, 214. Michael Compton states that the color stacks carry morality since they "do not compromise with one another." Compton gives the painter's remark in an unpublished letter to Katherine Kuh: "My preoccupations are primarily moral." See Compton's essay in the Tate catalogue, 56, 58.
76. Ashton, "Rothko's Passion," 10; Polcari, Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience, 138; and Waldman, 53. Introducing the Waldman text, the Guggenheim director Thomas Messer observes that Rothko's works should be read

like music as “consecutive passages.”

77. Breslin, 401.
78. At the end of Wallace Stevens’s short ode “The Idea of Order at Key West,” the poet represents intuitions of highest human transcendence as “Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred.”
79. Ashton, About Rothko, 141, 181, 185; Waldman, 68, 69; Polcari, Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience, 149; Alloway, “Residual Sign Systems,” 39, 40; Ashton, “Rothko’s Passion,” 12; Joseph Liss, “William De Kooning Remembers Mark Rothko,” ARTnews 78 (Jan. 1979): 43; Motherwell, 266. Rothko’s general blending of joy with tragedy is seen by David Sylvester (in his Tate catalogue essay “Rothko,” 36) as a state in which “pain and serenity become indistinguishable.” The article first appeared in New Statesman, 20 Oct. 1961.
80. Breslin, 478, 480. Mark Stevens claims that Rothko’s measured forms, in their geometric simplicity, are effective as religious forms because “No matter how complex a religion may be in its details, it not infrequently retains a simple geometric form near its heart.” See Stevens’s “Mark Rothko,” Mark Rothko: Multiforms (Stuttgart: Daniel Blau and Gerd Hatje, 1993), 14. Stevens sees the 1947-1949 multiforms as Rothko’s search for a “gravitas” in style, a sense of weight appropriate for the subject of a transcendental One. Stevens correctly observes that in the current thought climate, “almost every serious prejudice works against Rothko,” 11-13, 15. In this same catalogue David Anfam notes that Rothko probably was influenced by “a sudden glimpse of Mediterranean radiance” in Bonnard’s 1948 retrospective in New York, but “No one would have empowered Rothko to develop in painterly dynamics more than Clyfford Still.” See Anfam’s “Rothko’s Multiforms: The Moment of Transition and Transformation,” 30, 28. However we should note that Rothko might well have responded also to the powerful sense of Bonnard’s dynamic self, the artist as aggressive agent, not fused into the color field of the painting in the way that woman and nature are fused.
81. In a 1993 essay, Andreas Franzke believes we should see Rothko as a strongly Jewish spiritual voice, but there is very little evidence to support such a claim. See Franzke’s “Clarification and Transition: Mark Rothko’s ‘Multiforms,’” Mark Rothko: “Multiforms”, 72-73.

## Notes -- Chapter Five

1. Ed. John P. O'Neill, int. Richard Shiff, notes Mollie McNickle (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).
2. Barnett Newman, 154-55, in part 12 of a diary-like private paper "The Plasmic Image."
3. Barnett Newman, "The Plasmic Image," 142.
4. Barnett Newman, 303, in Newman's last theoretic statement, a 1984 interview with Emile de Antonio for the documentary film Painters Painting, two months before Newman's death, and published in a book of the same name (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984).
5. Barnett Newman, 145-46, "The Plasmic Image."
6. Barnett Newman, 168-69, in an essay "The New Sense of Fate" written in 1948 for the third issue of Tiger's Eye, but not published.
7. Barnett Newman, 58. The editor's title for this casual essay is "Concerning Objective Criticism."
8. Barnett Newman, 62-65, in Newman's preface to the exhibition catalogue for "Pre-Columbian Stone Culture," Wakefield Gallery, New York, 1944.
9. Barnett Newman, 67, this essay being an exhibition review for a 1933 Museum of Modern Art show of modern painters, published in La Revista Belga, November issue, 1944, under the title "On Modern Art: Inquiry and Confirmation."
10. *Ibid.*, 69.
11. Barnett Newman, 72, in an essay "The Painting of Tamayo and Gottlieb," published in La Revista Belga for April 1945.
12. Barnett Newman, 89, 91. The title for this unpublished essay is "Painting and Prose/Frankenstein."
13. Barnett Newman, 97, 98. The letter was a memorial comment on the death of the art dealer Howard Putzel.
14. Barnett Newman, 123, in an unpublished review of Thomas B. Hess's Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase, in which Hess had called ambiguity a chief value in modern abstract art. Hart Crane's poetry was also called obscure by many, and Crane wrote a famous letter explaining the clear rationale behind each of the difficult lines in his lyric "At Melville's Tomb," giving Newman valuable support.

15. Barnett Newman, 145, in "The Plasmic Image."
16. Barnett Newman, 163, in a letter to Clement Greenberg.
17. *Ibid.*, 164.
18. Barnett Newman, 255, 257, in a television interview with Lane Slate for CBS, March 10, 1983.
19. Barnett Newman, 89, in the unpublished "Painting and Prose/Frankenstein."
20. Barnett Newman, 142, in "The Plasmic Image."
21. *Ibid.*, 147, 152, 155.
22. Barnett Newman, 164.
23. Barnett Newman, 253, in the Lane Slate television interview.
24. Barnett Newman, 306, in the film interview with Emile de Antonio.
25. Barnett Newman, 76, in the article on Tamayo and Gottlieb.
26. Barnett Newman, 107-08, a catalogue foreword for an exhibit at Betty Parson's gallery.
27. Barnett Newman, 131-32. Newman's comments were published in ARTnews, Summer 1969.
28. Barnett Newman, 69.
29. Barnett Newman, 97.
30. Barnett Newman, 158, in "The First Man Was an Artist," an article for Tiger's Eye, Oct. 1947.
31. Barnett Newman, 282, unpublished item.
32. Barnett Newman, 288, his remarks being "A Response to Reverend Thomas F. Mathews," at the First International Congress on Religion, Architecture, and the Visual Arts at New York and Montreal in 1967. Newman's comment was published in the conference proceedings entitled Revolution, Place, and Symbol.
33. Barnett Newman, 171.
34. Barnett Newman, 171.
35. *Ibid.*, 171.
36. *Ibid.*, 172.
37. *Ibid.*, 173.
38. Barnett Newman, 140.
39. *Ibid.*, 145.
40. Barnett Newman, 172, 173.

41. Barnett Newman, 278-9, in the conversation with Hess.
42. Barnett Newman, 289.
43. Barnett Newman, 187, Newman's catalogue comment for the Exhibition of The United States of America in Brazil, 1965.
44. Barnett Newman, 188, the catalogue title is Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross, Lema Sabachtani, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1966.
45. Barnett Newman, 250, in symposium remarks for the fourth annual woodstock Art Conference, Woodstock, New York.
46. Barnett Newman, 257-8.
47. Ibid., 258.
48. Ibid., 257.
49. Barnett Newman, 181, in a statement to accompany his 1983 synagogue design.
50. Barnett Newman, 259.
51. Barnett Newman, 186, in the catalogue for the Brazil Exhibition of The United States of America.
52. Barnett Newman, 190, in his article "The Fourteen Stations of the Cross," ARTnews 65 (May 1966): 26-28, 57.
53. Barnett Newman, 250, 251, the interview published in Art in America 50 (Summer 1962): 83-87.
54. Barnett Newman, 272, interview with Andrew Hudson for The Washington Post, March 27, 1966.
55. Barnett Newman, 292, 297, 300, the conversation published as "Through the Louvre with Barnett Newman," ARTnews 68 (Summer 1969): 34-39, 70-72.
56. Barnett Newman, 249.
57. Barnett Newman, 272.
58. Barnett Newman, 97.
59. Barnett Newman, 107, the catalogue for the Betty Parsons Gallery exhibit "Northwest Coast Indian Painting."
60. Barnett Newman, 45, 48, 50, 276.
61. Barnett Newman, 305.
62. Barnett Newman, 149.
63. Barnett Newman, 161, in his letter to Greenberg.
64. Barnett Newman, 262, 263.

65. Philip Taaffe, interview by Lilly Wei, "Talking Abstract," Art in America 75 (Dec. 1989): 122.
66. Harold Rosenblum, Barnett Newman (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1978).
67. Newman's two texts are given in Barnett Newman: Zim Zum II (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1992). The first essay appeared originally in Recent American Synagogue Architecture (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1963); the second text, "Response to the Reverend Thomas F. Mathews," is documented earlier in note 32.
68. Edward Hoffman, The Way of Splendor: Jewish Mysticism and Modern Psychology (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala, 1981), 53-55.
69. Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Company, 1974), 106, 108, 107, 197.
70. Hoffman, 53, 55.
71. The Kabbalah Unveiled, trans. S. L. Macgregor Mathers (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1968), 263. Rosenblum (Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition, 208, 209, 212) recognizes the Judaic and Kabbalistic tones in Newman, but is wise enough to recognize also a tonality of Blake plus a Protestant leaning.
72. The Kabbalah Unveiled, 30.
73. Michael Zakian, "Barnett Newman and the Sublime," Arts Magazine 62 (Feb. 1988): 34-37.
74. *Ibid.*, 37.
75. Michael Zakian, "Barnett Newman: Painting and a Sense of Place," Arts Magazine 62 (March 1988): 40-41.
76. *Ibid.*, 43.
77. Taaffe, "Sublimity Now and Forever, Amen," 18-19.
78. Paul Crowther, "Barnett Newman and the Sublime," Oxford Art Journal 7 (1985): 53.
79. *Ibid.*, 54, 55, 56.
80. *Ibid.*, 56, 57-58, 53.
81. Thomas B. Hess, Barnett Newman (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971), 15, 43, 38.
82. *Ibid.*, 52-53, 56-57.
83. *Ibid.*, 61, 59, 107, 121. Hess notes (57) that Newman's library held several books

on the Talmud and Kabbalism including studies by Scholem. Hess always stresses that Newman rejected orthodox Judaism, wanting “a culture without cult” (61).

84. *Ibid.*, 104, 107. The heavy male/female symbolism in the books of the Kabbalah relates to Hess’s theory that Newman uses sharp edges for male intuition and fuzzy edges for the sensory and female power (129). Hess does not connect this male-female polarity to Mondrian’s verticals and horizontals, though he does point out that Newman avoids Mondrian’s careful geometric balancing (133). Hess reveals that when Newman died, his studio, surprisingly, held two untouched canvases stretched as right triangles (137).
85. *Ibid.*, 139.
86. Harold Rosenberg, Barnett Newman, ed. John P. O’Neill (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1978), 23, 24, 27, 30.
87. *Ibid.*, 32, 36-37, 38.
88. *Ibid.*, 59, 61, 62.
89. *Ibid.*, 62-63, 71-73, 79-81, 83.
90. *Ibid.*, 83.
91. April Kingsley, The Turning Point (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 24, 69. Kingsley comments on how disturbed Newman was when Motherwell, Rothko, Still, and others in their group did not rush to his defense when critics ridiculed his 1950 show at the Betty Parsons gallery (70-71). Newman did get support from Pollock, Philip Pavia, and Tony Smith.
92. *Ibid.*, 75, 80. Kingsley finds the free existent to be the major theme of Be I and Be II. The title Be I has been added to a 1949 work first called Be, and Be II was painted in 1961 and reworked in 1964 (82).
93. *Ibid.*, 368-69.
94. Jean Clair, “The adventures of the optic nerve,” Bonnard: The Late Paintings, ed. Sasha M. Newman (New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 39-40, 36, 39, 44. The Terrasse remarks follow, “Bonnard’s notes,” 51.
95. Irving Sandler, The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 11, 13, 18, 23, 218, 312. As group names the New York School and abstract expressionism have won out, but when the question of a name was discussed by a group of artists in 1950, Newman says, “I would offer ‘Self-evident’ because the image is concrete.” Other suggestions were

“Abstract Symbolist,” “Abstract-Expressionist,” and “direct art.” Newman’s “Self-evident” points to the ideographic symbol as participating directly in the symbolized subject. This discussion among painters is given with other discussions of the Artists Sessions at Studio 35 in New York, published in Modern Artists in America, ed. Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt (New York: Wittenborn Schultz, n.d.), Newman’s comment p. 22. This work also prints The Western Round Table on Modern Art, held in San Francisco in 1949, in which Schoenberg emphasizes idea in art (33) and Kenneth Burke supports Tillich’s position that modern secular art is supplying the genuine modern religious values, the depth contents “over which men will lurk, and mull, and linger” (28).

96. David M. Quick, “Meaning in the Art of Barnett Newman and Three of His Contemporaries,” Ph.D. diss, The University of Iowa, 1978, 176, 181, 183. W. Jackson Rushing also takes the right direction in connecting Newman’s sublime to Nietzsche and Jung, but does not go deeper than the Apollonian/Dionysian concept, and does not sketch Jung’s general ideas. See his “The Impact of Nietzsche and Northwest Coast Indian Art on Barnett Newman’s Idea of Redemption in the Abstract Sublime,” Art Journal (Fall 1988): 187-95. Rushing reveals that Newman gained ideas about primitive art from Wilhelm Worringer’s 1908 Abstraction and Empathy (188). Rushing supplies valuable details about the ecstasy-seeking of Northwest Indian culture, and notes that Newman’s library held 14 titles treating North American Indian Art (189). Interpreting the zip in Onement I (too narrowly) as primitive first man, Rushing adds that “Despite the fiery passion of the painterly zip in Onement I, its iconic centrality, balance, and monumental repose speak of exaltation and of the sublime” (193). Like so many interpreters of Newman, Rothko, and Still, Rushing does not attempt to name the exact ideas that actualize Newman’s sublime subject, other than a sense of some absolute Nietzschean One, in a tragic perspective--though Rushing is one of the few who connects to Nietzsche’s core statement about the sublime as a source for Newman’s vision of redemption through art (193).
97. Alwynne Mackie, ART/TALK: Theory and Practise in Abstract Expressionism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 154-55, 157, 159, 161.
98. David and Cecile Shapiro, “Abstract Expressionism: The Politics of Apolitical Painting,” Pollock and After: The Critical Debate, ed. Frances Frascina (New

- York: Harper & Row, 1985), 137. This article first appeared in Prospects 3, ed. Jack Salzman, 1977.
99. Greenberg's essay in his Art and Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 5, 10, 11. All of Greenberg's thought should be understood as conditioned by his own political bent. His "The Plight of Culture" essay in Art and Culture declares his rejection of Eliot's model for Christian culture in favor of the socialist and Marxist model of a classless society (28-29). In another essay Greenberg rejects Jewish religious traditions in favor of merely a secularized Jewish way of life (269). This essay is "Kafka's Jewishness."
100. Nancy Jachec, "The Space Between Art and Political Action: Abstract Expressionism and Ethical Choice in Postwar America 1945-1950," The Oxford Art Journal 14, no. 2 (1991): 27.
101. Polcari, Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience, 31.
102. Crowther, "Barnett Newman and the Sublime," 56.
103. Rosenberg, Barnett Newman, 49, 51.
104. Modern Artists in America, 15.
105. Kingsley, 82, 202. She also thinks (relevant to Crowther's general emphasis on the power of painting to make us feel at home in a friendly world) that the verticals of Vir Heroicus Sublimis create a "protective feeling" (202).
106. Rosenberg, 70-71.
107. Crowther, "Barnett Newman and the Sublime," 56-57.
108. David Craven, "Abstract Expressionism, Automatism and the Age of Automation," Art History 13 (March 1990), 99.
109. Rosenberg, Barnett Newman, 77.1.
110. Quick, 235.
111. Kingsley, 84, 85.

## Notes -- Chapter Six

1. Clyfford Still (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1976), and Clyfford Still, ed. John P. O'Neill (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979).
2. Clyfford Still, 13.
3. *Ibid.*, 17.
4. *Ibid.*, 108.
5. *Ibid.*, 110.
6. *Ibid.*, 111.
7. *Ibid.*, 114.
8. *Ibid.*, 115, 116, 117.
9. *Ibid.*, 119.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 120.
12. *Ibid.*, 121, 122.
13. *Ibid.*, 122.
14. *Ibid.*, 122-23.
15. *Ibid.*, 123-24.
16. Clyfford Still, 11-12.
17. *Ibid.*, 24.
18. *Ibid.*, 27.
19. *Ibid.*, 29.
20. *Ibid.*, 32.
21. *Ibid.*, 47, 50, 54. The letter was written in 1959 and published in Artforum, Dec. 1963.
22. *Ibid.*, 57.
23. *Ibid.*, 177-78, 179.
24. *Ibid.*, 186.
25. *Ibid.*, 195-96.
26. *Ibid.*, 203.
27. *Ibid.*, There is a third interesting Still exhibition catalogue, though not as useful as it might be because the preface by Ti-Grace sharpless is more emotive than analytic. She does, however, give some key remarks by Still in addition to the statement

about his long interest in the sublime. Still declares, "I'm not interested in illustrating my time. A man's 'time' limits him, it does not truly liberate him." Declaring Still is full of joy and his "only despair seems to be our unawareness," she adds that his works are "About grandeur, and a deep gulf of passion, of fullness and freedom, of a deep laughter and awareness," and they have an "Upward" and "Outward" thrust, an "elevation of the spirit" (n.p.). This catalogue is Clyfford Still (Philadelphia: Insititue of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1963).

28. Patrick McCaughey, "Clyfford Still and the Gothic Imagination," Artforum 8 (April 1970): 57.
29. Donald B. Kuspit, "Clyfford Still: The Ethics of Art," Artforum 15 (May 1977): 34. This interview comment appeared in Gallery Notes, Albright-Knox Gallery (Summer 1961): 11.
30. Thomas Albright, "A conversation with Clyfford Still," ARTnews 75 (March 1976): 31, 33, 34.
31. *Ibid.*, 34, 35.
32. Robert Hughes, The Shock of the New (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 316.
33. Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War," Pollock and After, ed. Francis Frascina (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 110-112. The article appeared first in Artforum 12 (May 1973): 43-54.
34. Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War," in Pollock and After. The article first appeared in Artforum 12 (June 1974): 39-41.
35. David and Cecile Shapiro, "Abstract Expressionism: The Politics of Apolitical Painting," in Pollock and After. The original article is in Prospects 3, ed. Jack Salzman, 1977.
36. David Craven, "Abstract Expressionism, Automation, and the Age of Automation," Art History 13 (March 1990): 72-103.
37. David Anfam, "'Of the Earth, the Damned, and the Recreated': Aspects of Clyfford Still's Earlier Work," Burlington Magazine 135 (April 1993): 260-69.
38. David Anfam, "Clyfford Still and Stella, Gottlieb, Francis and Olitski," Burlington Magazine 133 (Jan. 1991): 57-58, an exhibition review article.
39. Donald B. Kuspit, "Clyfford Still: The Ethics of Art," Artforum 15 (May 1977): 32-39. The general impact of existentialism on the abstract expressionists is treated

by Steward Buettner, and to the earlier comments on Sartre in this study may be added Buettner's observation that Sartre saw "the imaginative act as something totally divorced from reality." See Buettner's American Art Theory 1945-1970 (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1981), 63. Buettner's point indicates another way by which Still, Rothko, and Newman would be encouraged to avoid political movements. Buettner comments (99) that "The emphasis which the Abstract Expressionist placed on personal freedom made political affiliation unnecessary."

40. Kuspit, "Clyfford Still," 40.
41. Patrick McCaughey, "Clyfford Still and the Gothic Imagination," Artforum 8 (April 1970): 56-61.
42. *Ibid.*, 60.
43. Ann Gibson, "Regression and Color in Abstract Expressionism: Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still," : Arts Magazine 55 (March 1981): 144-53.
44. Stephen Polcari, "The Intellectual Roots of Abstract Expressionism: Clyfford Still," Art International 25 (May-June 1982): 18-35.
45. *Ibid.*, 30.
46. David Anfam, "Clyfford Still," PH.D. diss., Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1984, 64-65, 99.
47. *Ibid.*, 161, 163, 173, 177.
48. *Ibid.*, 203, 205.
49. *Ibid.*, 208.
50. *Ibid.*, 239-40.
51. *Ibid.*, 226-27.
52. *Ibid.*, 247.
53. The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell, 125, 141, 52, 53, 86, 152, 153, 166-67.
54. William C. Seitz, Abstract Expressionist Painting in America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 100, 101-102, 115, 131, 166, 97.
55. Nancy Marmer, "Clyfford Still: The Extremist Factor," Art in America 68 (April 1980): 107, 112.
56. Thomas Albright, "Clyfford Still: 'Seeking the Vastness and Depth of a Beethoven Sonata or a Sophocles Drama,'" ARTnews 79 (Sept. 1980): 159, 160. Albright's

- correct emphasis on metaphysical idea contrasts to the inadequate attempt by Ben Heller to try to treat Newman's "subjects" without moving beyond formalism. Thus constricted, Heller divides Newman's works into four sets, each with a formalist subject: a blue family whose subject is surface changes, dark hues, and close values; a yellow family whose subject is "Pressure from the Sides"; a maroon family whose subject is "Edge"; and a black family whose subject is "Beyond the Canvas." While Heller does point to important painterly interests of Still, his study reveals also the serious weakness of any merely formalist analysis. See Heller's Clyfford Still: Dark Hues, Close Values (New York: Mary Boone Gallery, 1990). Pages are not numbered in this exhibition catalogue. Two other treatments made dull by formalism are E. C. Goosen's "Painting as Confrontation: Clyfford Still," Art International 4, no. 1 (1960): 39-43; and Greenberg's "Clyfford Still," Arts Magazine 55 (Oct. 1980): 114-17. Both of these treatments are hostile to Still's formal strategies, which are never connected to his ideas.
57. Thomas Kellein, "Approaching the Art of Clyfford Still," Clyfford Still: 1904-1980, ed. Thomas Kellein (Munich: Prestel, 1992), 13, 16, 17. This most valuable work combines and reproduces the holdings of Still's paintings by the Buffalo Albright-Knox Gallery and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The Greenberg comment is in his "Clyfford Still," 116, cited in the preceding note.
  58. Michael Auping, "Clyfford Still and New York: The Buffalo Project," Clyfford Still: 1904-1980, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34.
  59. *Ibid.*, 35, 37, 38, 40, 42-43.
  60. Newman, Rothko, Still: Search for the Sublime, text Irving Sandler (New York: C & M Arts, 1944). Catalogue pages are not numbered.
  61. *Ibid.*
  62. Meyer Schapiro pointed to two basic modes for the abstract expressionists: a calm and measured mode for Rothko, and then an impassioned mode (probably thinking of Still, Pollock, and de Kooning) with "excited movements, scattered spots and dashes, fervent streaking, an explosive release." See Schapiro's "Younger American Painters of Today," The Listener 15 (Jan. 26, 1956): 146.
  63. Polcari, Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience, 33.
  64. Ronald Paulson, "Versions of a Human Sublime," New Literary History 16 (Winter 1985), 435, 428.

65. It is not quite right to call Still an action painter, though he is closer to that than Rothko and Newman. Still's forms are too carefully adjusted by reason to qualify as spontaneous action. Stephen C. Foster reprints an article by Rosenberg in which Mary McCarthy's rejection of the idea of action painting is given: "You cannot hang an event on the wall, only a picture." See Foster's The Critics of Abstract Expressionism (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1980), 88.
66. Moby Dick (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 62.

## Notes--Chapter Seven

1. See Note 109, Chapter One.
2. See the Harvard Classics edition of Emerson's Essays and English Traits (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1937), 134, 135, 148.
3. These passages came in the chapter "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," Here he declares that he must dig deep to reach the eternal, and "My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing . . . and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these Hills." I am using the Norton Critical Edition of Walden and Civil Disobedience, ed. Owen Thomas (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1966), 61, 66.
4. The passage is puzzling, but important. It is in the short chapter "Candles." Ahab says that if his supernatural foe would come "in thy lowest form of love, and I will kneel and kiss thee," but if he comes in cruel power, Ahab will respond in kind, "But thou art but my fiery father; my sweet mother, I know not." In Manichaeism each person is partly the offspring of a god of hate, and partly of a god of love, and Melville seems to lay down this framework. Ahab then adds that he has one advantage over the cruel dark god. This god of aggression "knowest not thy beginning. . . . I know that of me, which thou knowest not of thyself. . . . There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical." There seems to be no way to explain this except to assume that Ahab has knowledge of his origin in the true absolute God, who dwells in true eternity beyond these earthly clashes of love and hate. And this framework might connect to Father Mapple's sermon.
5. It is certainly the case that Ahab challenges "proud gods." This passage was quoted earlier in relating Still to Ahab.
6. Nietzsche's appreciation for Emerson has been given in note 129 for Chapter One.
7. For one thing, she consistently sets revelations from nature ahead of revelations from deity. She is indebted to Emerson for a considerable amount for her bold radicalism.
8. Though Whitman ponders his own selfhood, he universalizes (and democratizes) his insights in his first section with the claim, "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." Section five asserts an equality between man and God.
9. For instance in Absalom! Absalom!, Sutpen sees the land only as a passive field to be exploited in his dream to be a self-made plantation aristocrat, and his death is

brought about because he sees women as nothing but brood mares to help him beget a son and heir, and in Light in August, the Puritanically repressed Protestant spinster explodes from self-imposed frigidity into an irrational nymphomania. A good example of an American sublime project is Faulkner's effort to encapsulate the south by creating and populating an entire mythical Mississippi county.

10. Eliot's critique is most clear in his The Idea of a Christian Society and his After Strange Gods.
11. This still point registers phenomenologically as an astonishing paradox, somewhat like an emotionally and existentially charged revelation of Aristotle's unmoved mover.
12. Not only did Crane eagerly read Eliot's poetry, he also created a protagonist in The Bridge similar to Eliot's Tiresias in The Waste Land.
13. Traditional Christian elements appear in the death and resurrection motif of the "Quaker Hill" section of The Bridge, and Stevens's major man would have absorbed all of Christian history and Christology.
14. Crane's sustained passages of intense mystical passion in the final section are a remarkable effort to reach the sublime of rhetoric. Tom Chaffin offers a sublimicist reading of Crane, claiming that The Bridge "derives much of its force from the tradition of the sublime. . . . Crane sought in The Bridge to bring to bear on contemporary American life a vision commensurate with Whitman's--a faith that sought its main strength not in irony but in the sublime." See Chaffin's "Toward a Poetics of Technology: Hart Crane and the American Sublime," The Southern Review (Jan. 1984): 69. Chaffin's general thesis is that in addition to the romantic sublime of nature, Crane also develops a more Burkian terror-stained technological sublime, centered in the power/energy aspect of urban machinery. This might suggest perhaps a postmodern futurism sublime in Crane, just as we might say that Joyce's Ulysses is modernist while Finnegans Wake is postmodern. This kind of combination will be emphasized in the next chapter.
15. Letters of Wallace Stevens, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 369, 378. My poetry quotations are from The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), and Stevens's essays are collected in The Necessary Angel (London: Faber and Faber, 1942).
16. Letters, 372, 435.

17. Ibid., 431-32.
18. Robert Hughes, American Visions (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 79.
19. Ibid., 84.
20. Ibid., 137.
21. Ibid., 138.
22. Ibid., 139.
23. Ibid., 143, 144, 145-46.
24. Ibid., 160, 167, 164, 164-65.
25. Ibid., 168-69, 170, 172-73.
26. Ibid., 191.
27. Ibid., 196.
28. Ibid., 200.
29. Ibid., 266.
30. Ibid., 280.
31. Ibid., 374, 373.

## Notes--Chapter Eight

1. Mark Rosenthal, Abstraction in the Twentieth Century (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996), 5.
2. John Russell, The Meanings of Modern Art (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 35.
3. Ibid., 41.
4. Rosenthal, 36.
5. This note is available in The New Art--The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian, ed. and trans. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), 319.
6. Rosenthal, 39.
7. Ibid., 59.
8. Ibid., 44.
9. Ibid., 85.
10. Bacon's remarks came in a 1968 interview with David Sylvester, and these few crucial remarks are given by Edward Lucie-Smith, Movements in Art since 1945 rev. ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 65-66. Lucie-Smith also lists 13 fully abstract painters in England and on the European mainland who were contemporaries of Rothko, Newman, and Still, names like Jean Fautrier, Alberto Burri, Henri Michaux, Asger Jorn, and Alan Davie, but Lucie-Smith finds their programs weaker and more tentative than the bold rawness of the first generation American abstract expressionists. See Lucie-Smith, 80.
11. Crowther has shown that, in effect, late essays by Greenberg moved away from strict formalism to recognize the role of organizing ideas. See Crowther's "Greenberg's Kant and the Problem of Modernist Painting," British Journal of Aesthetics (Autumn 1985): 318-319. Matthew Rampley shows how Nietzsche opposes the Kantian-Romantic formalism of his age. Nietzsche makes disinterested formalist contemplation look feeble and absurd as he connects art to bodily organic desires and to the will to power, the structured art forms reflecting the artist's desire to impose his perspective on the world and force it into meaningful structures. Rampley notes that current Marxist theorists such as Bourdieu attack the concept of disinterested formalism as an impediment to the creation of Utopian socialism, a direction Nietzsche would not accept, since he would demand the total artistic

- freedom of the will to power. As we have seen, Rothko, Newman, and Still favored the Nietzschean model of imposing sublime subjects through bold art. Rampley and Crowther help explain why formalism is inadequate, though it is a strong vector in modernism. See Rampley's "Physiology as Art: Nietzsche on Form," The British Journal of Aesthetics, 33 (July 1993): 271-282.
12. Thomas Docherty, After Theory: Postmodern/Marxism (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 16.
  13. *Ibid.*, 13.
  14. My list is drawn up by utilizing Docherty and the following texts: Jessica Prinz, Art Discourse/Discourse in Art (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991); Brenda K. Marshall, Teaching the Postmodern (New York and London: Routledge, 1992); Charles Jencks, Postmodernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture (New York: Rizzoli, 1987); Postmodernism and Its Discontents, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London and New York: Verso, 1988); and The Postmodern Moment: A Handbook of Contemporary Innovation in the Arts, ed. Stanley Trachtenberg (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1985). And I have drawn partly on the texts of Ferguson, Crowther, Weiskel, and Lyotard.
  15. Lyotard, "What Is Postmodernism," The Postmodern Condition, 79.
  16. Jencks, 7, 19-20.
  17. See Dana Polan, "Postmodernism and Cultural Analysis," in Postmodernism and Its Discontents, 46.
  18. The seven rules of Jencks are dissonant harmony, pluralism, urban context, a human body anthropomorphism, a sense of historical relatedness, a return to content and realism, and a mode of ironic ambiguity.
  19. Slavoj Zizek, The Sublime Object of Ideology (London, New York: Verso, 1989), 230.
  20. *Ibid.*
  21. *Ibid.* 18, 19.
  22. *Ibid.*, 20.
  23. *Ibid.*, 21.
  24. *Ibid.*, 33.
  25. *Ibid.*, 74-75.
  26. *Ibid.*, 123..

27. Ibid., 126.
28. Ibid., 163.
29. Ibid., 194.
30. Ibid., 206.
31. Ibid., 89-92.
32. Ibid., 59.
33. Ibid., 155.
34. Kirk Varnedoe, A Fine Disregard: What Makes Modern Art Modern (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 22.
35. See Derrida's "Some Statements and Truisms about Neo-Logisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms," The State of 'Theory': History, Art, and Critical Discourse, ed. David Carroll (New York: Columbia University Press), 68, 69.

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