

Bahá'u'lláh's Influence on the New York School of Painting The "Unapprehended Inspiration" of Newman and Rothko

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Abstract

As members of the New York School of painters, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko announced not only the passing away of an entire creation but also the bringing forth of a new one. Though unaware that they were living and painting in the City of the Covenant whose light would one day rise from darkness and decay to envelop the world even as their painting of light consciously arose from the void of a blank canvas, Newman's and Rothko's work may nevertheless be best understood as a powerful first evidence of what Bahá'u'lláh called "the rising Orb of Divine Revelation, from behind the veil of concealment." Their work may yet find its true spiritual location in the spiritual city founded by 'Abdu'l-Bahá on his visit to New York in 1912.

Résumé

Barnett Newman et Mark Rothko, en tant que membres de la New York School de peinture, annoncèrent non seulement la fin d'une création tout entière, mais aussi la naissance d'une création nouvelle. Bien que, sans le savoir, ils vivaient et peignaient dans la Ville de l'Alliance dont la lumière, un jour, jaillirait des ténèbres et de la décrépitude pour illuminer le monde entier, tout comme, dans leurs tableaux, la lumière s'élevait consciemment du néant de la toile, néanmoins l'oeuvre de Newman et de Rothko peut être mieux comprise comme étant une première et puissante manifestation de ce que Bahá'u'lláh appela «l'Orbe de la Révélation Divine [émergeant] hors des voiles qui le cachaient». Leur oeuvre pourrait même trouver ses assises spirituelles dans la ville spirituelle que fonda 'Abdu'l-Bahá lors de son passage à New York en 1912.

Resumen

Como integrantes del New York School de pintores, Barnett Newman y Mark Rothko pregonaron no sólo el fallecimiento de una creación entera sino a su vez la aparición de una nueva. Aunque inconsciente de que vivían y pintaban en la Ciudad del Convenio cuya luz surgiría algún día de la oscuridad y el decaimiento para envolver al mundo, tal como sus cuadros de luz surgieron conscientemente del vacío de un lienzo en blanco, las obras de Newman y

Rothko podrán sin embargo entenderse mejor como fuertes ejemplos primeros de aquello que Bahá'u'lláh denomina "la Orbe naciente de Revelación Divina, saliendo tras del velo de encubrimiento." Sus obras quizá aún logren su verdadera localización espiritual en la ciudad espiritual fundada por 'Abdu'l-Bahá en su visita a Nueva York en 1912.

Commenting upon a poem by Háfiz, the Báb declared: "It is the immediate influence of the Holy Spirit that causes words such as these to stream from the tongue of poets, the significance of which they themselves are oftentimes unable to apprehend" (quoted in Nabíl, *Dawnbreakers* 258). For the purposes of this article, what is most significant about the Báb's remark to Mullá Húsayn (who was the first to believe in the Báb) is the spiritual fact that the divine inspiration directing the pen of the prophet also directs the strong poet so that the poet's words carry or contain the truth of the Word itself. What among other things distinguishes the strong poet from the prophet is the inferior degree of consciousness informing what the strong poet writes. "Poets," writes the English poet Shelley, "are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire . . ." (quoted in Reiman, *Shelley* 508). In what follows, an attempt will be made to explore the unconscious influence of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh on the tragic work of two contemporary New York painters, Barnett Newman (1905–1970) and Mark Rothko (1903–1970).

There is (so far as I know) no available evidence that either painter was consciously aware of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. They were, in this sense, "the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration" so that their own attempts to describe the source of their inspiration demonstrate the inadequacy of any human understanding fully to comprehend an inspiration beyond its reach. The "new creation" that their work celebrates is in their human hands a work we must still struggle to grasp, its meaning being still far from apparent. Indeed, we must patiently continue to decipher it, as one must struggle to decipher the esoteric meaning of the *Bayán*, the "Mother Book" of the Bahá'í Era.

Crucial to some partial understanding of what the Báb calls "the immediate influence of the Holy Spirit" upon the work of the strong artist is some knowledge of how that "immediate influence" manifests itself. In the fields of theology, philosophy, and psychology, the nineteenth century was preoccupied with the signs of some such "immediate influence" operating within what Shelley calls "the mind in creation." "A man cannot say, 'I will compose poetry,'" Shelley writes in 1821:

The greatest poet cannot say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to a transitory brightness:

this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. (Quoted in Reiman, *Shelley* 503–4)

The increasing focus throughout the nineteenth century upon the operations of the unconscious (Shelley's "power" that "arises from within") culminated at the turn of the century in the work of Freud, whose *Interpretation of Dreams* was published in 1900. Though the effect of his sexual theory was to separate the operations of the unconscious from any spiritual source, Jung as Freud's foremost disciple sought in breaking with him to heal the breach by demonstrating the workings of the holy spirit in the operations of the unconscious. In an early essay on the unconscious published in 1918, Jung argued that "we receive along with our body a highly differentiated brain which brings with it its entire history, and when it becomes creative it creates out of this history—out of the history of mankind." The prophet, like the great artist, he explains, transcends merely personal unconscious made up of "personal memory-traces" by descending into "the inherited brain-structure itself" to release as a living reality all that it contains, which is to say, "the unending myth of death and rebirth" ("Role of the Unconscious" 10).

Lacking in this reading of what Jung calls the "collective unconscious" as distinct from the personal unconscious is the realization that "the unending myth of death and rebirth" as Bahá'u'lláh demonstrates it in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Book of Certitude) is progressive rather than merely cyclic. The "highly differentiated brain" we inherit is not bound to its inheritance. Differentiation continues as consciousness itself expands so that with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh a new consciousness is released. Differentiation continues because revelation is progressive. Bahá'u'lláh releases in the "brain structure itself" not simply what it has "inherited" from its own history but something new which that history concealed. Precisely for this reason, the operations of the holy spirit in this age are genuinely apocalyptic; they manifest themselves both creatively and destructively in energy patterns unknown to the past, inaccessible or inexplicable to the modes of consciousness that governed it.

"O My Servants!," exclaims Bahá'u'lláh of his Revelation, comparing it to an ocean, itself the dominant image of the unconscious as the source of energy and life:

The one true God is My witness! This most great, this fathomless and surging Ocean is near, astonishingly near, unto you. Behold it is closer to you than your life-vein! Swift as the twinkling of an eye ye can, if ye but wish it, reach and partake of its imperishable favor, this God-given grace, this incorruptible gift, this most potent and unspeakably glorious bounty. (*Gleanings* 326)

Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, it will be argued, entered, like all other manifestations of creativity in this era, "the fathomless and surging Ocean" of

this Revelation even though “the conscious portions of [their] natures” remained “unprophetic” of it. What they did know was that “some invisible influence” had awakened their minds “to a transitory brightness” and that in this awakened state the influence appeared to be closer to them “than [their] life-vein.” Indeed, Rothko lying dead in a pool of his own blood on his studio floor surrounded by his paintings in various stages of completion seemed to be affirming, however unconsciously, that the “invisible influence” was at once his “life-vein” and a life-force that had overwhelmed him with its power.

Though it is clearly beyond the limits of this article to explore the ways in which all life is now bound to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh as its source, that unconscious binding is assumed.¹ More than that: in the raising of that

1. The author of this article has for some time been working on a study of the unconscious as the place of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. The radical impact of the movement of the “Most Exalted Pen” (*Gleanings* 27) first upon Bahá'u'lláh (“I was asleep on My couch, when lo, the Breeze of God wafting over Me roused Me from My slumber” [*Gleanings* 90]) and then upon the entire creation (“Lo, the entire creation hath passed away! Nothing remaineth except My Face. . . .” [*Gleanings* 29]) registers upon every human soul born into the world. The soul shaped by and contained within the religious dispensations of the past is released from the configurations those dispensations prescribed. “We have,” Bahá'u'lláh writes, “caused every soul to expire by virtue of Our irresistible and all-subduing sovereignty” (*Gleanings* 29). The result in the context of Judgment is a confrontation with chaos or the void (“nothingness”) described by Bahá'u'lláh as “the destruction of the world and its people” (Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 1). In the simultaneously revealed context of Resurrection, the result is the presence of “My Face” within the “nothing” that “remaineth.” “Verily I say,” writes Bahá'u'lláh, “this is the Day in which mankind can behold the Face and hear the Voice of the Promised One” (*Gleanings* 10). The metaphorical nature of Bahá'u'lláh's utterance (which Bahá'u'lláh explores at length in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*) can be further amplified through a close study of the language of the unconscious (semiotics, for example), which has in this century revolutionized our understanding of the operations of the psyche as they are enacted in the metaphorical body of the Word. Precisely in our growing understanding of those operations the realm of the so-called unconscious is being absorbed into consciousness. The result is a vast and continuing expansion of consciousness that Bahá'u'lláh metaphorically describes as a “new creation.” At the very core of this “new creation” is not the oneness of humankind (which has always been one) but the consciousness of this oneness. “In this wondrous Revelation, this glorious century,” writes Bahá'u'lláh, “the foundation of the Faith of God, and the distinguishing feature of His Law, is the consciousness of the oneness of mankind” (quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 119). The tragic vision of Newman and Rothko, it may be argued, resides in their unconsciousness of the true source of their inspiration, an unconsciousness that enacts the larger tragedy of the planet itself caught in the destructive grip of forces which are not as yet understood. Until human consciousness is bound to its divinely creative source (“My Face”), its creativity must remain essentially destructive or, at best, tragic.

unconscious binding to consciousness resides the “new creation” (*Gleanings* 29) or divine civilization embedded in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

God, Artist, Void

In a strange, eleven-part essay entitled “The Plastic Image,” probably written between 1943 and 1945, the American painter Barnett Newman argued that the French Impressionists² burst the confines of European art and entered a new era. They dissolved objects into waves of light, releasing in their agitated brushstrokes and innovative use of color the energy that is congealed in matter. In the New York School of painting,³ to which Barnett Newman belonged as one of its founding members, this movement away from objects toward their source in a charged or energized void reached its apotheosis in an identification with the source itself.

The function of art was now, as Newman described it, not only to restore the artist's creations to their source but also to renew them from that source. Newman announced both in his art and his polemics the passing away of an entire creation enshrined in the conventions and subject matter of European art from, say, Giotto (d. 1337) to Cezanne (d. 1906). His painting proclaimed a new creation. That new creation, he believed, was symbolically represented in a series significantly entitled *Onement*, which Newman began in 1948. Perhaps nowhere in modern art has the vision of Bahá'u'lláh taken up a more intuitive, though still unconscious, residence than in this apocalyptic series.

“Canst thou discover any one but Me, O Pen, in this Day?” the Ancient of Days asks Bahá'u'lláh in the tablet “The Divine Springtime is come”:

What hath become of the creation and the manifestations thereof? What of the names and their kingdom? Whither are gone all created things, whether seen or unseen? What of the hidden secrets of the universe and its revelations? Lo, the entire creation hath passed away! Nothing remaineth. . . . (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 29)

2. The school of painting known as French Impressionism received its name from a canvas painted by Claude Monet in 1872 entitled *Impression. Sunrise*. Their first group exhibition was held in 1874.

3. The New York School of Painting is identified with the painter Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) who, spreading his canvases on the floor, literally entered them, dripping paint directly from the can somewhat in the manner of the Navaho Indians making pictograms flat on the ground by spilling sand and colored earth through their fingers onto the earth's surface. In the resultant spontaneous patterns, the Navaho artist read the hieroglyphic message of the presiding Spirit of the Universe as that Spirit spoke (wrote) through the artist. Conscious that earlier modes of artistic inspiration now imprisoned rather than released a new outpouring of spirit binding the planet together into new and as yet unimagined forms of organization, Pollock brought forth from the unconscious an all-over composition whose center, it may be argued, was nowhere and whose circumference was everywhere. He was depicting the face of God as an unknowable essence in the guise of a new creation that initially stunned and then transformed the art world.

The questions that the Ancient of Days addresses to Bahá'u'lláh as His "Most Exalted Pen" in this Tablet were repeated in a state of considerable consternation by the critics who came between April 15 and May 15, 1874, to view the exhibition of the Impressionists in the Boulevard des Capucines studios of the French photographer Nadar. What they thought they saw was anarchy let loose on canvas, a revolution in painting that not only coincided with the Paris insurrection of 1871 but which also appeared to many of them actively to affirm the insurrection. For the more conservative critics who made up the majority, the Impressionists ought therefore to be put down with equal determination. "A little more," wrote Gustave Geffroy of the exhibition, "and their paintings would have been handed over to the firing squads" (quoted in Courthion, *Impressionism* 28).

In commenting on the response of the Academie des Beaux Arts to the Impressionists, Barnett Newman argued that its attack showed a better understanding of the revolutionary implications of Impressionism than that of many who attempted to defend it. By stressing the continuity of Impressionism with the art that preceded it, its defenders, Newman suggests, denied its essence. More than that, in Newman's view, the Post-Impressionists, Cezanne in particular, aborted the Impressionist Revolution by absorbing it into the European tradition through their retrogressive return to single-focus objects and to Renaissance perspective. The "Nothing" which "remaineth" in an Impressionist painting was for Newman not the chaos perceived by its critics. It was, rather, the visionary source in light, a source that Newman in his *Onement* series would attempt to paint. The "Nothing" which "remaineth," declares the Ancient of Days to Bahá'u'lláh, is "My Face, the Ever-Abiding, the Resplendent, the All-Glorious" (*Gleanings* 29). Newman's subject is the absent or unknown Face of the "Ever-Abiding, the Resplendent, the All-Glorious."

Newman spent the winter, spring, and summer of 1948 studying *Onement I* in an effort to grasp what he had created in apparently getting rid of everything the inheritors of Renaissance art had thus far accomplished. He struggled to come to grips with the passing away of the entire Renaissance achievement by confronting in his painting what most who viewed it considered to be nothing at all. The passing away so that "Nothing remaineth" is in *Onement I* a solid, untextured, red-brown that adheres to the canvas as if it were a "'blank'" "stamped out" (Newman quoted in Hess, *Barnett Newman* 55) metal plate firmly cemented to it. Splitting the red-brown abstract ("'blank'") surface in two is a red-orange stripe, which appears to be anchored in it. Newman called this splitting stripe, present in so many of his paintings, a "zip" (Hess, *Barnett Newman* 55). What he had in mind was, as Hess remarks, an "instant divider," something well beyond fast or slow motion as normally perceived, something "instantaneous, like lightning" (Hess, *Barnett Newman* 55).

In this "zip" or "instant divider," Newman perceived the essence of painting.

He saw the first brushstroke upon the blank canvas, which, symbolically understood, is the stroke of creation itself, the artist's repetition of the divine fiat "Be" and "It Is." Newman's concern, however, was less creation as an object ("It Is") than creation as an act or gesture ("Be"). His concern was less with the Word as *written* (noun) than with the Word as *gesture* (verb): the Word as *act*, the movement of the brush, like the movement of Bahá'u'lláh's Pen, as the act of creation itself.

In the tablet "The Divine Springtime is come," the Ancient of Days addresses Bahá'u'lláh, who as the "Most Exalted Pen" is momentarily unable to "move." "Methinks that thou hast halted and movest not upon My Tablet," the Ancient of Days declares. "Could the brightness of the Divine Countenance have bewildered thee, or the idle talk of the froward filled thee with grief and paralyzed thy movement?" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 28). In a purely human context, Newman in New York was himself overwhelmed by the immensity of what he felt called upon to do as an artist, particularly in relation to the almost universal hostility that greeted his initial attempts. (His first one-man show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York in 1950 received only one favorable review—and that from the critic of the *New York Times* who relied for his judgment upon his interview with the artist. Newman's second exhibition was virtually ignored.) The deed he felt called upon to perform differed, he argued, from any deed previously performed in the entire history of art. The difference lay in consciousness, in the understanding of the brushstroke, the "zip," which is for the painter the act of creation itself. By identifying the brushstroke, the "zip," with the divine fiat "Be," Newman as the maker of that stroke down or across an empty canvas had to assume responsibility for it. That responsibility lay in his understanding, in the endowing of the stroke with a consciousness that, he believed, had never in painting previously inhabited it. Consciousness was unlocking the mystery by assuming as artist responsibility for the creative action of the brushstrokes as if in the making of the stroke God were now placing in human hands the burden of God's originating act. In the making of the stroke, humankind, in and through the artist, was making a covenant with God to assume as co-creator human responsibility for the creation itself.⁴

4. In his 1955 PhD dissertation on Abstract Expressionism, William Seitz included Mark Tobey rather than Jackson Pollock among the six painters studied. "If Pollock [who died in his automobile in 1956] had been accessible to Seitz," writes the New York painter Robert Motherwell in his foreword to the published version of Seitz's thesis, "he would have been, I presume, one of the books key figures—perhaps in place of Mark Tobey who alone of the six was not a member of the new New York scene (Seitz, *Abstract* xi). In a Bahá'í lecture (October 30, 1951) Mark Tobey, like the Ch'an and Zen Buddhists, describes the brushstroke as "the symbol of the spirit" (quoted in Seitz, *Abstract* 14). The difference between Newman's brushstroke ("zip") and Tobey's calligraphic gesture is the mythical drama of creation that Newman's brushstroke both

In reviewing the history of art, Newman clearly identifies the consciousness that now as artist separates him from that history. The terror of the unknown—the unconscious brushstroke—belongs to the primitive world, to primitive art. “But that time is over,” he writes in “The Plastic Image,”

The war, as the Surrealists predicted, has robbed us of our hidden terror, as terror can only exist if the forces of tragedy are unknown. We now know the terror to expect. Hiroshima showed it to us. We are no longer then in the face of a mystery. After all, wasn't it an American boy who did it? That terror has indeed become as real as life. What we now have is a tragic rather than a terror situation. (Quoted in Hess, *Barnett Newman* 42)

Addressing his contemporaries—his fellow artists—Newman concludes:

In this new tragedy that is playing itself out on a Greek-like stage under a new sense of fate that we have ourselves created, shall we artists make the same error as the Greek sculptors and play with an art of over-refinement, an art of quality, of sensibility, of beauty? Let us rather, like the Greek writers, tear the tragedy to shreds. (Quoted in Hess, *Barnett Newman* 43)

By tearing the tragedy to shreds, Newman means understanding our fate rather than merely aestheticizing it. He means rendering the brushstroke conscious, entering a covenant of knowing.

initiates (“Be”) and enacts (“It Is”). His deification of the artist as prophet-creator or co-creator manifesting an otherwise unknowable God brings into play a Luciferian consciousness that is at once uniquely American and avowedly tragic. In embracing the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, Tobey rejects any such deification of the artist, distinguishing as he does between the station of the Manifestation and the station of humanity. In their scale, mode of execution, and spiritual vision, Tobey's paintings avoid the hubristic sublimity of the leading members of the New York School. Indeed, when Tobey won the gold medal for painting at the Venice Biennale in 1958, he became known in Europe as “an intimate Pollock” (quoted in Schmied, *Tobey* 8) as though, far more timidly and delicately, he was following in Pollock's giant footsteps. The truth is, however, Tobey's radical breakthrough was achieved at least eight years before Pollock's, and for this reason alone he, rather than Pollock, may yet be recognized as the unacknowledged founder of the New York School. What Pollock later achieved as a result of impulse and violent gesture on a huge canvas spread out on the floor, Tobey had already achieved “on a tiny piece of paper, with a hair fine brush” and a magnifying glass while “submerged in meditation at his writing table” (Schmied, *Tobey* 8). Leaving New York in 1922 and settling in Seattle (though returning often to New York) with its West Coast oceanic connection to the Orient, Tobey deliberately distanced himself from the giganticism of the New York School as well as from New York itself. As a Bahá'í, the city nevertheless continued to fascinate him, particularly as what 'Abdu'l-Bahá designated as the City of the Covenant. This spiritual vision of New York as the city of light is celebrated again and again in Tobey's art. One thinks of such works as *Broadway Norm* (13¹/₈"x 9¹/₄"), *Broadway Boogie* (31³/₈"x 24³/₈"), and, above all, *City Radiance* (19³/₈"x 19¹/₄").

Knowing for Newman is also atonement. "The dark-red painting with an orange stripe down its middle, which was to provide a starting point for almost all Newman's later work," writes Thomas Hess,

was titled *Onement*, a word which suggests wholeness, harmony, but also, as Newman himself pointed out, refers to At-onement, Atonement, the events of Yom Kippur, which is a day of remembrance of the dead, but for the Kabbalists, also was the ideal moment for meditation on the Messianic secret, on rebirth, new life—in a word, Creation. (*Barnett Newman* 53)

Newman's art beginning with *Onement I* constitutes his "meditation on the Messianic secret,"⁵ a secret mysteriously displayed in the act of his own hand dividing a canvas even as the God of Genesis separated light from darkness. "*Onement I*," writes Thomas Hess in his brilliant reading of it,

is a complex symbol, in the purest sense, of Genesis itself. It is an act of division, a gesture of separation, as God separated light from darkness, with a line drawn in the void. The artist, Newman pointed out, must start, like God, with chaos, the void: with blank color, no forms, textures or details. Newman's first move is an act of division, straight down, creating an image. The image not only re-enacts God's primal gesture, it also presents the gesture itself, the zip, as an independent shape—man—the only animal who walks upright, Adam, virile, erect. The red-orange stripe on its red-brown field could have suggested another metaphor from the Kabbalists' interpretation of Genesis; red-brown is the color of earth; Adam is the man created by God; the Hebrew word for earth is *adamah*; and "Adam was made from the matter of earth, literally from the clay." However, as Philo wrote: "It is conceivable that God wishes to create his man-like form with the greatest care and that for this reason he did not take dust from the first piece of earth that came to hand, but that from the whole earth he separated the best, from the pure primal matter the purest and finest parts, best suited to his making." Thus the fine cadmium red light of the stripe relates to the cadmium red dark of the field as the body of man relates to the body of the earth. The orange form is fleshy, bodied, with sensuous edges. (*Barnett Newman* 56)

In October, 1948, having devoted months to reflecting upon *Onement I*, Newman began to paint again, and by December, 1949, he had, Hess points out, "completed twenty paintings in an extraordinary spurt of energy unique in his career" (*Barnett Newman* 57). In these paintings Newman increasingly identified himself not only with God's act of creation mythically described in Genesis but also with the implications of that creation myth for an understanding of the covenant. The creation myth of Genesis posited for Newman a God who created humanity in his own image and likeness so that humanity might in its own acts mirror back to God his own divine act. The

5. For a valuable background discussion of "Messianic secret" still kept secret in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, see Buck, "Bahá'u'lláh as 'World Reformer'" 25–26.

highest forms of human creativity thus became for Newman a mirror in which God beheld himself and declared what he saw good. Some of the titles of Newman's 1949 paintings provide some insight into the profoundly religious nature of his art: *Onement II*, *Be I*, *Galaxy*, *Abraham*, *Concord*, *Covenant*, and *The Promise*. *Abraham*, now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, may perhaps best epitomize Newman's radical understanding of the artist and his role—an understanding and a role destined to have, like the painting itself, a profound influence upon American art.

Abraham is a black on black painting nearly seven feet high and three feet wide. The right-hand side of the “zip,” the shiny black of which sets it off from the comparatively matte black field, cuts, as Hess has pointed out, “straight down the center of the painting” (*Barnett Newman* 59). Since, however, the “zip” itself is, again as Hess points out, “one-third of the width of the right section of the field and half the width of the left-hand part” (*Barnett Newman* 59), its placement as a whole is off-center, a field twice its width appearing on the left and thrice its width appearing on the right. The relationship of Abraham to God is off-center; he at once mirrors and distorts God's wholeness, while at the same time, because of the width of the zip, Abraham, in the words of Hess, “almost becomes a section of the ground” (*Barnett Newman* 59). Crucial to anything close to an adequate reading of the painting is the highly ambiguous relationship between Abraham and God, a relationship in which Abraham initially divides the ground into two equal parts and then, widening or thickening the “zip,” divides it again into two unequal parts, two on the left and three on the right. The result is asymmetrical rather than symmetrical. Newman, it would appear, is exploring a mystery, what Hess calls a “secret symmetry” (*Barnett Newman* 59), which is powerfully reinforced by the black on black.

The comparatively black matte illuminated by the shiny black “zip” explores the hidden as opposed to the revealed nature of God, the *Deus Absconditus* who is hidden in his own self beyond the reach of any mirroring image. Rejecting the Christian notion of an incarnate God—a rejection that rendered the human figuration of the Godhood abhorrent to both Jew and Muslim—Newman depicts God's unknowableness as a black field, affirming that unknowableness in a shiny black widening “zip,” which paradoxically reveals the darkness. In that revelation presence is perceived as an absence which both separates us from the Godhead and, by a “secret symmetry,” wonderfully adjusts us to it. It is therefore as a painting darker, more tragic and brooding than the more openly declarative (“Be”) *Onement* series.

In his powerful rendering of black on black executed on a larger than human scale, Newman intuitively depicts the relationship between the unknowable God and the revelation of Godhood that Bahá'u'lláh describes. “Exalted, immeasurably exalted, art Thou above the strivings of mortal man to unravel Thy mystery, to describe Thy glory, or even to hint at the nature of Thine

Essence" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 3–4). "Far, far from Thy glory be what mortal man can affirm of Thee, or attribute unto Thee, or the praise with which he can glorify Thee!," Bahá'u'lláh continues. He then concludes:

Whatever duty Thou hast prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves. (*Gleanings* 4–5)

Revelation, that is, does not bring mortals to a knowledge of God's essence. It brings them, rather, to "the knowledge of their own selves," which is, in the final analysis, a knowledge that cannot be equated with God's knowledge of himself. In the relationship of the black "zip" to its black field, Newman appears to be exploring humanity's separation from God as the ground of its limited understanding of God, an understanding that is at the same time for Newman humanity's tragic knowledge of itself.

Newman was not, of course, directly or consciously responding in 1948–49 to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. He was, however, directly and consciously responding to two-thousand years of Jewish mystical thought circling the "Messianic secret." Deliberately cutting himself off from Judaism's orthodoxies, Newman, in Hess's telling description of him, fought as a "passionate anarchist" for "a culture without cult" (*Barnett Newman* 61). That culture without cult allowed Newman to celebrate in the liberated world of his art what Hess calls "the existence of Eternal Glory, the coming of the Messiah, and the ultimates of justice and bliss" (*Barnett Newman* 61). Removed from collective forms of worship, his celebrations of creativity are devoid of the accepted rituals of paint. His strokes annihilate what is past in order to create what is new, which is to say, what is *now* as the instant of creation itself. Precisely this situation renders Newman what Hess calls "the artist as a modern man, alone, surrounded by chaos, by social events over which he has no control, a transient material being—absurd" (*Barnett Newman* 61).

In his essay on Nietzsche ("Literary History and Literary Modernity") in *Blindness and Insight*, Paul de Man explores the situation with which an empty canvas confronted Newman in a broader context than Hess offers, a context that further illuminates Newman's radical modernity. "Moments of genuine humanity," writes de Man describing Nietzsche's position:

. . . are moments at which all anteriority vanishes, annihilated by the power of an absolute forgetting. Although such a radical rejection of history may be illusory or unfair to the achievements of the past, it nevertheless remains justified as necessary to the fulfillment of our human destiny and as the condition for action. (*Blindness* 147)

In order to act, Nietzsche argues (invoking Goethe's support), the artist "is unfair toward what lies behind and knows only one right, the right of what is now coming into being as a result of his own action" (de Man, *Blindness* 147). Developing Nietzsche's apocalyptic point, de Man continues:

We are touching here upon the radical impulse that stands behind all genuine modernity when it is not merely a descriptive synonym for the contemporaneous or for a passing fashion. Fashion (mode) can sometimes be only what remains of modernity after the impulse has subsided, as soon—and this can be almost at once—as it has changed from being an incandescent point in time into a reproducible cliché, all that remains of an invention that has lost the desire that produced it. Fashion is like the ashes left behind by the uniquely shaped flames of fire, the trace alone revealing that a fire actually took place. But Nietzsche's ruthless forgetting, the blindness with which he throws himself into an action lightened of all previous experience, captures the authentic spirit of modernity. (*Blindness* 147)

More than any other artist acting on the world stage, Newman in his radical canvases captured "the authentic spirit of modernity." Though today in their museum settings his apocalyptic paintings may be robbed of their "radical impulse" so that they are "changed from being an incandescent point in time into a reproducible cliché" ("an invention that has lost the desire that produced it"), they nevertheless remain in their inception, which the paintings themselves enact, a heroic attempt to restore the presence of God by the bold act of re-imagining God as essentially imageless.

Newman understood far better than his critics the tragic absurdity of his art when it was set against the prevailing ethos of his culture whose every action proclaimed the death of God. In his vast stretches of untextured paint divided by a stroke, he saw at work in himself a Nietzschean will to creation that had lost its metaphysical supports. Embracing the void, epitomized for him in the passing shows of his beloved city, Newman saw in the void the tragedy of modern people who, cut off from the rituals of a divine presence, had now to invent radically new rituals that were in their very inception immediately threatened by the absence of what they struggled to invoke. The condition of the New York painter, as Newman experienced it daily in his New York studio, was the condition of the woman in Revelation who, "clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet," cried, "being with child, . . . travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered." Standing before her was a red dragon "for to devour her child as soon as it was born" (Rev. 12: 1–4). Creation, that is, was threatened by the void waiting to devour it. If in that void God is not present, God is nevertheless invoked, though the invocation be no more than a "zip"—a single, dividing stroke.

"When our Father Abraham came," writes Gershom Scholem of the *Book of Yetsirah*,

he contemplated, meditated, and beheld, investigated and understood and outlined and dug and combined and formed [that is, created], and he succeeded. Then the Lord of the World revealed Himself to him and took him to his bosom and kissed him on the head and called him His friend [another variant adds: and made him His son] and made an eternal covenant with him and his seed. (Quoted in Hess, *Barnett Newman* 61)

Newman also “contemplated, meditated, and beheld, investigated and understood and outlined and dug and combined and formed. . . .” More than that, he in his own mind “succeeded,” though his success lay for most of his viewers in revealing as nothing a mythical account of creation that was now for a modern consciousness devoid of meaning. Himself the child of that consciousness, Newman paradoxically exploited what appeared to be its spiritual emptiness as revealing a human will to fullness enacted on behalf of an absent God. In the black on black that secretly enacts Abraham’s covenant with God, Newman does not declare that “the Lord of the World revealed Himself to him and took him to his bosom and kissed him on the head and called him His friend and made an eternal covenant with him and his seed.” He declares, rather, that Abraham sought to inhabit the void, progressively claiming it for his seed, biblically understood as a promise of a Messiah. With that promise Newman aligns himself as artist, announcing with a single brushstroke the appearance of that Messiah whose presence is now.

Barnett Newman, I suggest, intuitively painted what he did not consciously know: the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh as the appearance of the Jewish Messiah destined to be the fruit of Abraham’s seed. “The First Man Was an Artist,” wrote Newman in *Tiger’s Eye* (1947). “According to the great tradition of Jewish mysticism,” explains Hess interpreting Newman’s remark. “Abraham was the first man to create; he was the godlike artist” (*Barnett Newman* 61). Newman, I suggest, thought of himself as “the first man to create” in a radically conscious and modern way. Rejecting Genesis as ignorance and error, that modern consciousness operating in Newman drove him to render the coming of the Messiah (God’s covenant and promise) as if it were nothing at all. Viewed as a grace, however, as an initiation into a radically new way of seeing, Newman’s paintings enact an apocalypse fulfilled, a “Be” that, despite our blindness, “Is.”

Tragic Enactment of a Divine Source

Creation *ex nihilo* is an affirmation of the radical sovereignty of God whose supreme act of creation is independent of “aught else besides Him.” “A sprinkling from the unfathomed deep of His sovereign and all-pervasive Will hath, out of utter nothingness, called into being a creation which is infinite in its range and deathless in its duration,” declares Bahá'u'lláh (*Gleanings* 61). For Newman “utter nothingness” confronts the artist in the blank canvas. The “sprinkling from the unfathomed deep” is the pigment by which, through the

operation of the artist's "sovereign and all-pervasive Will," a creation is called into being which, Newman asserted of his own work, is "infinite in its range and deathless in its duration." The artist as God, usurping the role of God.

"DO I BELIEVE IN GOD?" asks Matisse in *Jazz*. "Yes," he replies to his own question, "when I am working." He then continues:

When I am submissive and modest, I feel myself to be helped by someone who causes me to do things which exceed my capabilities. However, I cannot acknowledge *him* because it is as if I were to find myself before a conjurer whose slight of hand eludes me. Therefore I feel robbed of the benefits of the experience that should have been the rewards of my efforts. I am ungrateful and without remorse. (xvii)

Though Matisse recognizes that in his acts of creation he is "submissive and modest," that he is "helped by someone who causes [him] to do things which exceed [his] capabilities," he must nevertheless refuse to acknowledge that help in order to contain his achievement within his own efforts. What in its outcome appears to exceed his capabilities must be absorbed into them as the product and the reward of his own efforts. If it is not absorbed, if the author of his work is not himself but "someone" who causes him to do what he himself cannot do, then his work remains forever out of his hands, out of his control. For this reason, he as an artist absorbing into his own consciousness all he has unconsciously done is "ungrateful and without remorse." The modern artist, like Matisse who greatly influenced the New York School, must deny on the conscious level the God he or she unconsciously affirms. In signing his or her name to the work, the artist is forging the signature of God in a radical Faustian usurpation of power.

The artist's "strength/Of usurpation" (to use Wordsworth's phrase in *The Prelude* [VI: ll. 599–600] to describe the imagination) conducted in the New York School to what Wordsworth, describing that strength, called "despondency and madness" ("Resolution and Independence" in *Poetical Works* 155). That "despondency and madness," he further explained, lay in the artist's self-deification ("By our own spirits are we deified" ["Resolution and Independence" 47]). Correcting the tragic excesses to which self-deification gives rise, Bahá'u'lláh in our time renews in his Revelation the eternal covenant between humanity and God, a covenant that is forged by the Prophet or Manifestation (Moses, Christ, and Muḥammad, for example). In that renewal of the covenant the tragedy, including suicide, which overtook the leading figures of the New York School, is given a spiritual context that may help us better understand the tragedy inherent in their art, a tragedy which, beginning with Newman, they themselves acknowledged, most eloquently in and with their lives. "The death of Mark Rothko on February 25, 1970, at the age of 67," writes Diane Waldman,

brought to a close an era in which the myth of the artist as hero seemed as important as the period's legendary paintings. Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, David Smith, Franz Kline and others of the New York School had also met untimely ends, but it is Rothko's suicide that is the most disturbing, symbolically, of all these deaths. For it came in an age that values neither the hero nor the antihero and it demonstrated clearly, not a disbelief in art, but in the central role of the self in painting—a concept vital to Rothko and his contemporaries but antithetical to the ideas of a subsequent generation which views detachment on the part of the artist as essential.

Rothko's ambition was to rank with the greatest figures of Western art. The painter of genius wanted to achieve the grandeur of tradition and at the same time to rebel against tradition. The struggle to attain this paradoxical goal ultimately destroyed his confidence. The tragedy of Rothko's death, then, lies not only in its termination of a brilliant career, but in that it marked the end of an attitude towards the role of the artist and art itself. (*Mark Rothko* 17)

Without the acknowledged presence of the Manifestation, it is not possible to surrender to an unknown and unknowable God, for such a surrender proves finally in the human enactment of it to be in the absence of the Manifestation a surrender to a nothingness devoid of the everything it potentially contains. The tragedy of Rothko, as we shall see, was his growing fear that the “grandeur of tradition” against which he felt compelled to rebel had become in his art nothing at all. The absence of Moses became the presence of a void. “And the sublime comes down/To the spirit itself,” writes Wallace Stevens in “The American Sublime” (1935):

The spirit and space,
The empty spirit
In vacant space.
What wine does one drink?
What bread does one eat?

(*Collected Poems* 131)

When Rothko was discovered dead in his studio from a self-inflicted bullet wound, the nightmare of the blood on the floor replacing the pigment on the canvas raises the enormous issue of the God who sacrifices himself for his creation only to renew or redeem it through that sacrifice. In his suicide, what wine did Rothko drink, what bread did he eat? Was it, finally, his own flesh and blood, for which, having reached what Diane Waldman in her catalogue essay calls “the farther shore of art,” he had no further use? “Now,” she concludes her essay, “he had left behind all that spoke of the carnate, the concrete. He had reached the farther shore of art” (*Mark Rothko* 69). Had he in reaching it, however, rejected his creatureliness in the name of a Creator he did not and could not know? Had the unmanifest—God devoid of prophets—called for Rothko's extinction as an artist? Did the absence of Moses symbolically enact

Rothko's extinction? That question needs now to be explored, for, like the suicide of Rothko in the name of an unknown sublime, it haunts the seared consciousness of this century, a consciousness heroically enacted by the New York School, nowhere more emphatically than in Barnett Newman's monumental canvas (almost eight feet high and eighteen feet long) entitled *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950–1951). "He had taken his image of Genesis, of the creative act, of the artist as God," writes Hess of the painting,

and expanded it into an ardent, pulsing glow of color. The secret symmetry that informs his structure, that was his starting point on the blank canvas and that had opened up a space for him to paint in, was as invisible as the God to whose actions it alludes and to whose presence the Kabbalists testified in ways as private and as hermetic as Newman's. (*Barnett Newman* 71)

In Rothko's paintings the "pulsing glow of color" is finally the pool of blood in which he was found dead in his studio. Rothko's major works, begun in the same year that Newman made his final breakthrough, carry Newman's "pulsing glow of color" to its point of highest intensity where, reaching beyond the senses, they finally and fatally burst beyond the prescribed limits of human life.

But what were the members of the New York School seeking in the suicidal thrust of their art? In a statement accompanying the Guggenheim exhibition of his Stations of the Cross (*The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, 1966), Newman wrote:

Lema Sabachthani—why? Why did you forsake me?
Why forsake me? To what purpose? Why?

This is the Passion. This outcry of Jesus. Not the terrible walk up the Via Doloroso, but the question that has no answer.

This overwhelming question that does not complain, makes today's talk of alienation, as if alienation were a modern invention, an embarrassment. This question that has no answer has been with us so long—since Jesus—since Abraham—since Adam—the original question.

(Quoted in Hess, *Barnett Newman* 98)

They were, it may thus be argued, seeking a fellowship with an unknowable essence, a fellowship that Bahá'u'lláh declares is denied even to the prophet. "Ten thousand Prophets, each a Moses, are thunderstruck upon the Sinai of their search at His forbidding voice, 'Thou shalt never behold Me!'; whilst a myriad Messengers, each as great as Jesus, stand dismayed upon their heavenly thrones by the interdiction, 'Mine Essence thou shalt never apprehend!'" (Bahá'u'lláh *Gleanings* 62).

Denied the fellowship they sought in their art, Newman and Rothko finally confronted the terror and the absurdity of nothingness or the void. Humanity's

tragic fate, they in their darker moments insisted, lies in confronting as no-thing the object of its insatiable desire. Inventing what for them did not otherwise exist, Newman and Rothko simultaneously celebrated their inventions and declared them to be fictions. "The subject matter of creation is chaos," Newman wrote in "The Plastic Image" (quoted in Hess, *Barnett Newman* 37). "Yes, I know, we are only empty forms of matter," the French poet Mallarmé (1842–1898) wrote to his friend Cazalis,

but most sublime because we have invented God and our Soul. So sublime. my friend! that I want to present myself with this spectacle of matter, conscious of being, and yet rushing frantically into dreams, which it knows do not exist, celebrating the Soul and all such divine impressions which have accumulated in us since the first ages and proclaim, in the face of the nothingness that is truth, these glorious falsehoods. (Quoted in Hartley, *Mallarmé* xix)

The "truth" of "nothingness," Bahá'u'lláh explains, resides not in the "nothingness" itself but in the creation God brings out of it, thereby rescuing humanity from its primordial fear of extinction. "Nothingness," that is, assumes creation and is inconceivable without it. "All-praise to the unity of God," Bahá'u'lláh writes,

and all-honor to Him, the sovereign Lord, the incomparable and all-glorious Ruler of the universe, Who, out of utter nothingness, hath created the reality of all things, Who, from naught, hath brought into being the most refined and subtle elements of His creation, and Who, rescuing His creatures from the abasement of remoteness and the perils of ultimate extinction, hath received them into His kingdom of incorruptible glory. (*Gleanings* 64–65)

The tragedy confronting Newman and Rothko—and acted out by Rothko—lay in their failure to acknowledge a divine creation as other than the fictions of it they themselves as artists constructed. The horror of their plight lay in their identification of God with the creative action of their own minds. God the Creator, that is, became their own sublime invention. "Jewish mysticism," writes Hess quoting Mallarmé's letter, "perhaps becomes Newman's 'glorious falsehood', perhaps something more" (*Barnett Newman* 53).

The "something more," at least the possibility of it, is clearly suggested in the bold emptiness of many of his greatest canvases, an emptiness that has both enraged many Canadian taxpayers and spiritually inflamed others who recognize in his vast, barely relieved expanses "THE VALLEY OF TRUE POVERTY AND ABSOLUTE NOTHINGNESS" (*Seven Valleys* 36). Bahá'u'lláh quotes the Persian poet, Rúmí, in describing this seventh valley:

When the qualities of the Ancient of Days
 stood revealed,
 Then the qualities of earthly things did
 Moses burn away.
 (36)

Newman's *Voice of Fire* (18'x8'), purchased by the National Gallery of Canada, is Newman's painterly enactment of Moses burning away "earthly things" as he hears in the Burning Bush the voice of "the Ancient of Days."⁶ Felix Holtman, member of parliament for Portage-Interlake, Manitoba, chairman of the Canadian House of Commons Committee on Culture, declared upon viewing the work that he could produce a similar painting with a couple of cans of paint, two rollers, and ten minutes of effort.

These two radically opposing views, I suggest, bring again into focus not simply the continuing controversy over the New York School of painting but also the much larger issue of revelation and delusion that defines the inevitable human response to the unveiling of the "Messianic secret" in the prophet's return. Newman, by his own admission, addressed his art to that "secret," the enigma of which his work embodied without, however, unveiling. As "the hierophant of an unapprehended inspiration," the meaning of Newman's art remained tragically hidden from him, which is to say from that knowledge of himself which Bahá'u'lláh says is "but a token of [God's] grace . . ." (*Gleanings* 4). Though tempted as a modern man to dismiss grace as delusion, Newman, as "artist-prophet" aware of a larger reality "beyond and above consciousness" (Shelley, quoted in Reiman, *Shelley* 486), explored it less as a delusion than as the tragic enigma his consciousness could not resolve. His inspiration, though wonderfully sustained, remained nevertheless "unapprehended." "*My signs have encompassed the earth, and My power enveloped all mankind, and yet the people are wrapped in a strange sleep!*" (Bahá'u'lláh quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 6).

Mirroring vs Creating

Against the "glorious falsehood" that inevitably confronts artists in their attempts at self-deification (inventing God and the soul), Bahá'u'lláh affirms

6. "When standing before *Voice of Fire*," writes Jacalyn Duffin, "one is engulfed by the work as it embraces the entire field of vision. The feeling of being subsumed by the painting is a vital component of its purpose. The vibrations, the movement, and the sheer imposing presence of the painting compels a meditative cast of mind. . . . The leap from meditation to spirituality is not a long one. The vibration between the bands is almost hypnotic: If the viewer is receptive, a pulsation between one's inner world may commence. In the resulting silence, a real contact with one's core, the unconscious being within—what some call the soul—may be found. The courage to make this connection is itself monumental; the result is rewarding and refreshing" ("Barnett Newman's" 887).

God's "all-encompassing grace, His all-pervading mercy." Addressing God's rescue of humanity from "the perils of ultimate extinction," Bahá'u'lláh declares that "nothing short of His all-encompassing grace, His all-pervading mercy, could have possibly achieved it." How else, Bahá'u'lláh asks, "could it, otherwise, have been possible for sheer nothingness to have acquired by itself the worthiness and capacity to emerge from its state of non-existence into the realm of being?" (*Gleanings* 65).

Nothingness as "sheer" nothingness lacks "worthiness" or "capacity"; it cannot of itself emerge from "its state of non-existence into the realm of being." That emergence requires what Bahá'u'lláh calls "the direct operation" of an "unconstrained and sovereign Will," the evidence (though not the source) of which is preeminently present in humanity when it acts in submission to God's grace. In its knowledge and love of God, humanity becomes not the co-creator with, but the mirror of God. Because humanity is given this "unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him," humanity itself, "alone of all created things . . . singled out for so great a favor," is, Bahá'u'lláh asserts, the "generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation . . ." (*Gleanings* 65).

Understood in the radical spiritual perspective of creation rather than nothingness, the achievement of the New York School exemplifies the operation of what Bahá'u'lláh calls the "generating impulse and primary purpose underlying the whole of creation." Newman is right in the exalted role he boldly assigned to the apocalyptic art of a new era and to humanity itself as what Bahá'u'lláh calls "a mirror of His own Self" (*Gleanings* 65). Elaborating upon the mirror metaphor, however, Bahá'u'lláh stresses dependence rather than autonomy. The source of what the mirror reflects is not in the mirror itself. For the mirror to claim as its own what it reflects is to draw humanity, as Narcissus was drawn, into a fatal delusion. What Narcissus saw in the reflecting pool was the image and likeness of God, which he fatally confused with his own physical or temporal self.

This fatal confusion enacted by Narcissus's drowning in an image he took to be his own as if he indeed were God bypasses what lies at the core of every revealed religion: the station of the Manifestation as the mediator between humanity and God. "And since there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation," Bahá'u'lláh continues,

and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute, He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure and stainless Soul be made manifest in the kingdoms of earth and heaven. Unto this subtle, this mysterious and ethereal Being He hath assigned a twofold nature; the physical, pertaining to the world of matter, and the spiritual, which is born of the substance of God Himself. (*Gleanings* 66)

Perhaps Newman above all sought to portray in his vast stretches of untextured color, in which even the evidence of the brushstroke is removed, the manifestation of “a pure and stainless Soul” joining heaven and earth, a stainless Soul whose physical nature “pertaining to the world of matter” was liberated from all save the color (the purest vessel of light) sufficiently to reveal symbolically “the substance of God Himself.” Perhaps, that is, he was unconsciously affirming a divine Revelation still from him concealed and tragically displaced onto his work.

In Rothko's case even color—the direct staining of the raw canvas with many thin washes of paint that saturated the canvas threads—became an obstacle to his goal of pure light, “the substance of God Himself.” By allowing some of the colors in his bottom layers of washes to appear through the top coat of pigment, Rothko was able, as Diane Waldman remarks, to achieve “the effect of a hidden light source.” “In most of the paintings of this period [1950 to 1956],” she explains,

Rothko creates a quality of inner light which seems to emanate from the very core of the work, a quality that calls to mind the palpable and spiritual light of Rembrandt, an artist whom he very much admired. Rothko often enhances this effect of inner light by floating a thin seam or sliver of another color through his rectangles or around their edges. (*Mark Rothko* 61–62)

The “quality of inner light,” however, is gained only by placing obstacles in its way. Light in Rothko's powerful paintings struggles toward release from the paintings themselves.

So powerful was the struggle within Rothko that he complained he felt trapped by his paintings. In the mural series he executed for the Four Seasons restaurant in the Seagram Building in New York City in 1958—a series which, when completed, he refused to deliver because he rejected the space for which the paintings were intended—he reduced his palette in his third set to two colors: deepest maroon and black. “After I had been at work some time,” he explained, “I realized that I was much influenced subconsciously by Michelangelo's walls in the staircase room of the Medicean Library in Florence . . . [Michelangelo] makes the viewers feel that they are trapped in a room where all the doors and windows are bricked up, so that all they can do is butt their heads forever against the wall” (quoted in Waldman, *Mark Rothko* 65).

Rothko's final and most important commission—murals for a chapel in Houston executed between 1964 and 1967—was dedicated almost a year to the day after he committed suicide. For the chapel, originally intended to be Roman Catholic and part of the University of St. Thomas and finally realized as an interdenominational chapel affiliated with the Institute of Religion and Human Development, Rothko designed three triptychs, five single panels, and four

alternatives. His theme was the Passion of Christ. "In these murals on the Passion of Christ," writes Waldman,

Rothko evokes with his red and black his belief in the passion of life, the finality of death, the reality of spirit. . . . Black, however, does not signify only death. It is one of the richest colors in the artist's palette. Rothko had reduced his painting in the fifties by restricting it to the simplest shapes and to color; now he was purifying it even of colors, limiting himself to red and, finally, black. These reds and blacks do not any longer seem to exist as physical color, but rather, as tranquil, tragic, twilight dreams of color. Even more than the Four Seasons or Harvard murals, the Houston paintings create a total environment, a unified atmosphere of all-encompassing, awe-inspiring spirituality. (*Mark Rothko* 68)

Rothko had created his own tomb.

Rothko, it may be argued, was, far more than Newman, the prisoner of his own art. He sought in painting a release from its limitations, demanding for himself as artist a spiritual substance beyond the reach of his nature. He demanded as a painter a reality for his art that was "born of the substance of God Himself." He demanded a stainless purity beyond the reach of art. He demanded, that is, what belongs not to humanity but to the Manifestation of God.

Elaborating on the "twofold nature" of the Manifestation, Bahá'u'lláh in his tablet continues:

The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifyeth the tradition: "Manifest and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is." And in like manner, the words: "Arise, O Muḥammad, for lo, the Lover and the Beloved are joined together and made one in Thee." He similarly saith: "There is no distinction whatsoever between Thee and Them, except that They are Thy Servants." The second station is the human station, exemplified by the following verses: "I am but a man like you." "Say, praise be to my Lord! Am I more than a man, an apostle?" These Essences of Detachment, these resplendent Realities are the channels of God's all-pervasive grace. Led by the light of unfailling guidance, and invested with supreme sovereignty, they are commissioned to use the inspiration of Their words, the effusions of Their infallible grace and the sanctifying breeze of Their Revelation for the cleansing of every longing heart and receptive spirit from the dross and dust of earthly cares and limitations. Then, and only then, will the Trust of God, latent in the reality of man, emerge, as resplendent as the rising Orb of Divine Revelation, from behind the veil of concealment, and implant the ensign of its revealed glory upon the summits of men's hearts. (*Gleanings* 66-67)

Wonderfully and tragically enacted in the major works of Mark Rothko is the attempt through the use of color to cleanse the "longing heart and receptive spirit from the dross and dust of earthly cares and limitations." Not only did

Rothko agonize over his paintings, he agonized over sending them into the world, often recalling them from their owners or, as in the case of the Seagram commission, refusing to deliver them. For his first important one-man museum exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MOMA) in 1961, he directed the installation himself and, as Waldman points out, “made radical decisions about lighting and placement” (*Mark Rothko* 66). For the *15 Americans* show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1952, Rothko asked “that his paintings be hung in blazing light and placed so close together that they touched one another (Waldman, *Mark Rothko* 66). Later, when one of the paintings was installed in the MOMA’s collection galleries, he asked that the lighting be dimmed. “A painting,” he explained, “lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky act to send it out into the world. How often it must be impaired by the eyes of the unfeeling and the cruelty of the impotent who would extend their affliction universally” (quoted in Waldman, *Mark Rothko* 63).

Lacking, then, in the New York School, whose achievement in art matches the Cubist achievement of Picasso and Braque in the Paris of 1908–1912, is that ultimate act of surrender, which is the measure of trust. Describing “the Trust of God, latent in the reality of man,” Bahá’u’lláh declares that its emergence, “as resplendent as the rising Orb of Divine Revelation, from behind the veil of concealment,” can only finally take place when the human soul has turned toward the Manifestation. Only then, Bahá’u’lláh suggests, will art resplendently enact “the rising Orb of Divine Revelation, from behind the veil of concealment.” In its still unconscious response to the “rising Orb,” which is the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, the New York School created an art which in its worldwide circulation and influence brilliantly announced that Revelation in what may best be described as a prefigurative enactment of it. That enactment, though tragic in its immediate context, anticipates in its achievement a golden age yet to come. As one reflects upon the titles of Newman’s New York paintings (*Onement, Abraham, Covenant, and Promise*), as one reflects too upon his celebration of the passing away of an entire dispensation of art in the birth of a new one, one may also wish to think of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in New York. In Brooklyn, on June 19, 1912, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, appointed by Bahá’u’lláh as the Center of the Covenant, authoritatively and publicly declared his station, naming in the context of that declaration New York as the City of the Covenant whose light would one day envelop the earth. The worldwide recognition of the New York School as the successor to the School of Paris may perhaps one day be best understood as a powerful first evidence of that light whose “rising Orb” is the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh.

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