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Introduction to *Totality: Abstraction and Meaning in the Art of Barnett Newman*

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TOTALITY

Abstraction and Meaning in the Art of
Barnett Newman

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INTRODUCTION

BARNETT NEWMAN CONSIDERED ART to be a mode of thinking, a means of rendering ideas sensible and intelligible. Painting, especially, was to him a medium for pictorially expressing abstract *thought*, not simply an occasion for the sensuous display of abstract imagery. In his essays, art criticism, and interviews, Newman maintained a distinction between the meaning of a work of art and the material conditions under which artists strove to declare “metaphysical” statements. Hence, he believed that any reduction of meaning to causal conditions broadly construed—to historical or social circumstances, to political ideologies, to social or biographical narratives, to physical or technical constraints—would inevitably compromise the status of an artwork as a creative proposition. To Newman, such accounts were directed by narrowly objective or formalistic, not interpretive, imperatives. As he told Thomas Hess in 1966: “I have no objection to describing a painting—it’s blue, it’s eighteen feet long, it’s ten feet high, it has rabbit-skin glue, and so on. But it seems to me that to insist on this alone can only lead to a

doctrinaire position.” A merely formalistic approach fails to meet, or even to register, the challenge a painting by Newman places on viewers to develop the language—the internalized thought or pattern of attentiveness—to articulate its mode of pictorial address and to advance arguments about the intent of the work’s sensory and cognitive effects.

Thus in *Totality*, I attempt to interpret the meaning of particular works the artist produced from 1945 to 1970. My effort to speak about aspects of the manifold dimensions of thought, feeling, and expression that Newman wanted to communicate proceeds technically and formally (though not formalistically), and also historically. Despite the extraordinary critical and scholarly attention it has received, Newman’s art merits more looking and writing. Just a few monographic treatments have appeared since those of his earliest advocates, Thomas B. Hess (1969, 1971) and Harold Rosenberg (1978). The standout exceptions are book-length catalogue essays by Armin Zweite (1997), Ann Temkin (2002), and Richard Shiff (2004). If gathered together, the articles written by Yve-Alain Bois between 1988 and 2002 collectively present an important account of Newman’s art. From the 1960s, the critical writings of Lawrence Alloway, Michael Fried, and Barbara Reise are indispensable. Numerous other scholars, too, have made significant contributions to assessing the artist’s achievement, especially since the publication of *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné* in 2004, a definitive resource and reference point. My work would have been impossible without these antecedents, even as I might criticize aspects of their arguments and, regretfully, lack adequate space to highlight what about them I admire most.

So, while contemporary scholarship on Newman continues to offer valuable interpretations of his ideas, explores his influence on a younger generation of artists, and investigates his technical processes, a significant task remains in developing more precise accounts of how particular works of art communicate the symbolic content and meaning Newman asserted they held. Newman’s works, straightforward though his signature composition of bands and fields might appear, are phenomenologically complex and semantically dense. Their meaning seems resistant to explication or even paraphrase, despite the artist’s incredible statement that they are “self-evident.” His modes of pictorial address, and the structures of beholding to which they give rise, complicate discussion. Even though Newman thought that paintings “can’t be talked about,” I have sought to live up to his aspirational mandate to “try to talk about them.”

One belief guiding my approach to Newman’s art is that almost every work he made projects a mode of pictorial address of such phenomenological complexity and interest that it sustains a maximum degree of attention, description, and interpretation. Thus, I have aspired to emulate the many writers and observers who, in seeking to come to terms with the demands of Newman’s art, have brought an extraordinary intensity of looking and thinking to bear on specific instances of his output. At the same time, I have tried to resist the widespread impulse to treat Newman’s paintings as illustrations of the social, cultural, historical, biographical, and political conditions

from which they emerged. Rather, I attempt to explain how the philosophical thought he wanted his works to communicate challenges and potentially transforms our presuppositions about the relationship of artistic creation to “experience” at large.

To direct inquiry, I have adopted some of the terms Newman used to verbalize his aims, including “totality.” An immediate caveat: the word should not be read to suggest that *Totality* offers a comprehensive and synthetic overview of the artist’s body of work, relatively small in quantitative terms though it may be. Rather, “totality” comprises the concepts and phenomena designated by my chapter titles: Symbol, Surface, Self-Evidence, Space, Standpoint, and Scale. Characteristically, Newman outlined these terms (and more) allusively and indirectly, even as they came to signify aspects of profound content in visual art. While the vocabulary does not lend itself to strict dictionary definition, it is my hope that drawing out their meaning for Newman through arguments about particular works will help us understand more precisely his contribution to the history of modernist art.

In chapter 1 (“Symbol”), I evaluate Newman’s developing concept of pictorial meaning in the years immediately preceding the creation of *Onement I* in 1948. As a curator and participant, Newman organized *The Ideographic Picture* exhibition in collaboration with Betty Parsons in 1947. It was his third curatorial intervention with Parsons in as many years, following *Pre-Columbian Stone Sculpture* (1944) and *Northwest Coast Indian Painting* (1946). Together, the events and their associated criticism—Newman wrote essays for all three ventures—demonstrate his effort to realize a new mode of symbolism and to clarify its significance as the means by which art communicates thought. Attempting to frame contemporary art in relation both to models of so-called “primitive” or “archaic” art and to the main precedents of modernism stylistically considered (geometric formalism, biomorphic abstraction, and surrealism), Newman advanced into contested territory on multiple fronts. Tactically, he deployed terms uncommon in standard art-critical dogma (for instance, “ideographic,” “plasmic,” “plasmatic,” “cohesion”). Mutually implicated and elaborated across multiple writings, the inventive jargon accrues sense incrementally. In certain contexts, key words are defined by metaphor or analogy; in others, by negative contrast to more conventional terminology that Newman nonetheless handled in idiosyncratic ways. The flexible strategy enabled him to craft novel arguments when debating what he took to be the misguided claims of professional art criticism, in particular certain conclusions propounded in the 1940s by Clement Greenberg and in the 1960s by Museum of Modern Art curator William Rubin. Correspondence with both men reveals Newman’s concern with explicating the distinctiveness of the symbolic content of his ideographic painting in contrast to modern precedents that, while they might appear morphologically related, gave rise to antithetical meanings. (Here Newman’s amateur coursework in the subject of botany proves surprisingly illuminating with regard to his incorporation of a highly specific range of plant life into his early imagery.) Disputing in particular Rubin’s association of his painterly forms with surrealist automatism,

Newman's self-analysis provides the background for my accounts of *Gea* (1945), *Euclyidian Abyss* (1946–47), and *Genetic Moment* (1947), among other works.

My account in chapter 2 (“Surface”) tests Newman's declarations about the meta-physical content of “plasmic” art against the modes of pictorial address and structures of beholding instituted by *The Beginning* (1946), *Moment* (1946), and *Dionysius* (1949). Attending to the specific manner by which those paintings formally and technically establish the conditions through which Newman's thought is signified, I suggest that his interest in creating effects of illusion (vs. *illusionism*) and sensation (vs. *sensualism*) was grounded in his reevaluation of nineteenth-century theories of the artistic symbol (vs. *symbolism*). Newman's studies of impressionist theory and practice provide the argumentative framework. In 1944 he completed a translation of the French critic Jules Laforgue's 1883 essay “Impressionism,” and wrote an incisive defense of its premises and implications. Remarkably, both the translation and the preface have so far remained unexamined in the literature. The first published English rendition of Laforgue's text seems not to have appeared until 1956, making Newman's undertaking all the more striking. The study emerges at the very start of his professional effort to publish art criticism—an effort that, despite his lasting reputation as a writer, is confined to a period of just five years, from 1944 through 1948 (leaving out later interviews, lectures, and correspondence). The Laforgue material also accompanies a barrage of letters Newman wrote to MoMA to protest what he took to be the institution's systematic distortion of the history of modernist art by reducing the visibility of impressionists in favor of post-impressionists. Examining those texts in light of Newman's conviction that impressionism was “an expression of thought, of important truths,” I argue that the movement provided him with a concentrated model of pictorial self-reflexivity. Its chiasmic structure—projecting the fullness of a world while drawing attention to the distinction between the virtual image and the material basis of its appearance—implied to Newman an idea about the irreducibility of *what* is represented to the *means* of representation. The insight he drew from impressionism helps us to understand the “abstruse thought” toward which plasmic art gestures, and to approach the real content of Newman's “abstraction.”

The argument I present in chapter 3 (“Self-Evidence”) revolves around *Onement I* (1948), *Be I* (1949), and *Concord* (1949). Predictably, the pictorial complexity of those paintings and their centrality to Newman's own account of his purposes generate a line of inquiry and evidence analogously complex. An indirect route is required to evaluate the artist's assertion of the “self-evident nature of the artistic act” (as he put it in “Ohio, 1949,” a short text written while visiting the prehistoric Native American mounds in the state's southwestern territory). Just what is it about Newman's art that is “self-evident”? After correlating the material and technical construction of *Be I*'s manufacture with the “standpoint” Newman anticipated the viewer to occupy, either imaginatively or empirically, when facing it, I situate the work's critical reception with reference to wider issues prevalent in contemporary literary criticism. In particular, I discuss Newman's canvas in connection to certain theories of poetic meaning

advanced by I.A. Richards and William Empson. Empson's theory of compacted doctrines—the capacity of single words to represent the irreducible coexistence of two distinct meanings—plays a fundamental role in my analysis, as does R.P. Blackmur's writing on "language as gesture." In scope, the focus moves from general issues informing New Criticism at midcentury, to an overlooked evaluation of Blackmur's poetry and ideas in the pages of *Tiger's Eye*, a quarterly of arts and literature with which Newman was deeply involved. Beyond that, I offer a reading of one of Newman's poems from the 1930s ("Prayer") on the theme of the Self. Surprisingly, I know of no other commentary that has attempted to correlate the ideas expressed in the once-aspiring-poet's early verse with those embodied in his subsequent visual imagery. The excursions into literary-poetic domains run parallel to an extended account of *Onement I* and *Concord*, and illuminate how the modes of pictorial address and structures of beholding entailed by each of those works realize Newman's mandate for creating something that he said both "speaks for itself" and "means what it says."

In chapter 4 ("Space") I explicate the relationships between artist and artwork, artwork and viewer, and artist and viewer that Newman desired his paintings to sustain within the virtual "spaces" they project. He proclaimed his intent to "give someone who looks at [my painting] a sense of place so he sees and feels himself." That statement implicitly suggests a form of relatedness in which the autonomy of both the viewer and the work of art is the condition for communication. I explore the artist's commitment to regulating the viewer's embodied situation and reflexive awareness alongside his major work, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950, 1951). And, I do so in relation to other works early and late, including *Onement IV* (1949), the exceedingly narrow canvas *The Wild* (1950), and the monumental *Now II* (1967). One of my goals in this chapter is to interpret the effect on viewers of Newman's mode of direct address in those paintings and others—that is, his work's fictional capacity to speak to the viewer as an "I" to a "YOU." On this important point, I follow Bois's lead, even if my conclusions about the implications of direct address depart considerably from his. My analysis rests in large part on Christian Metz's study of impersonal enunciation in film, in which enunciation concerns not only dialogic structures of verbal exchange between a source (I) and target (YOU) but also those aspects of a work that speak to us about its status as a work; in other words, how a work reflexively indicates its standing as a creative act.

Chapter 5 ("Standpoint") concentrates on Newman's painting *Adam* (1951, 1952), a work he completed and exhibited before deciding to modify it significantly and declare it completed yet a second time. Working through the connotative range of reference implied by the work's title (as well as its companion piece, *Eve* [1950]), I adduce Newman's motivations for allegorizing creative activity with respect to certain Judeo-Christian motifs. Although the association seems obvious enough, the particularity with which Newman handles the theme emerges with precision once the body of evidence is expanded beyond strictly theological considerations. In this case, I turn to a series of photographic portraits (by Hans Namuth, Aaron Siskind, William Vandivert,

and Ugo Mulas) that stage Newman in specific relation to the works under review. Additionally, I discuss his incorporation of what I term an “immanent iconography” deriving from Matthias Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altar* and Pablo Picasso’s appropriation of Grünewald’s imagery in a number of “bone” drawings published in the surrealist periodical *Minotaure* in 1933. Lastly, a major debate between Erwin Panofsky and Newman concerning the Latin title of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* illuminates the depth to which the painter intended the interrelationships he posited among his works to direct our interpretations of their content, and helps frame my expanded account of *Onement I*, *Untitled 1, 1950* (1950), and *Untitled 2, 1950* (1950).

In the concluding chapter 6 (“Scale”), I attend primarily to Newman’s *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* (1958–66). Because the individual works are the same physical size, share conspicuous aspects of format, and are all made with black or white oil, acrylic, or Magna paint on exposed canvas, commentators have often remarked on internal correspondences between one work and the next within the structure of the series. My analysis extends outward to demonstrate the motivated connections, both thematic and formal, between certain paintings in the set and others that preceded them, including *Adam* (1951, 1952), *Outcry* (1958), and—yet again—*Onement I*. But I also draw into the discussion *White Fire II* (1960) and two paintings to which it is intimately related—*Yellow Painting* (1949) and *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue II* (1967)—that testify to a specific form of attentiveness Newman assumed as both the creator and also first viewer of his art. The practical and moral consideration on the part of the artist to comprehend the values embodied by works he previously created sets the stage for my interpretation of the expression in *The Stations* of what Newman called the “original question,” the “unanswerable question of human suffering,” namely Christ’s cry, “*Lema*” or “To what purpose?” To advance the claim that Newman’s understanding of scale involves a moral perspicuity that can be communicated as pictorial content, I consider *Ulysses* (1952) and finally *Uriel* (1955) in light of the writings of the philosopher Simone Weil. Her political and theological assessment of Homer’s epic account of Odysseus (or Ulysses) in the *Iliad* helps illuminate the moral parameters of Newman’s interpretation of the Passion of Christ.

Throughout the book, my account of Newman’s meaning progresses from highly focused examinations of the technical manufacture and pictorial appearance of his works, to critical arguments about the content—the thought and feeling—the artist intended to express. Technically and formally managing the mutual determination of effects and address within or against conventions, one could say, was Newman’s way of creating the structures of beholding he envisioned as fulfilling the artist-audience exchange and of communicating his abstract thought.

But must we not forever hold a distinction between the sensation of a painting and a thought? This is the question Newman questions. The “totality” toward which his works gesture emerges as a proposition about the capacity of a visual medium to voice an answer.