



Abstraction and Illumination

The Sublime and Kabbalistic Creation Motifs in the artworks of Barnett
Newman and Mark Rothko

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Abstract

This study will examine the artworks of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko in relation to the aesthetics of the sublime and the *Zoharic* Creation account. It will draw most heavily from Pseudo-Longinus' *Peri Hypsous*, paying particular attention to its elevation of the early verses of Genesis. References will also be made to the Burkean and Hegelian conceptions of sublimity.

Introduction

The term “sublime” is ‘derived from the Latin *sublimis*’.¹ It ‘refers to the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know and to express a thought or sensation is defeated’ and, ‘through this very defeat, the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language’.² As a result of its otherness, the sublime is frequently ‘associat[ed] with the transcendent’, specifically with the concept of an unparalleled Creator.³ In being beyond comprehension, it stands to reason that the sublime likewise shares a complicated relationship with visual expression. Still, one artistic genre which has been frequently linked to the sublime is abstract expressionism. This style of art ‘emerged in New York during the 1940s and remained dominant until the late 1950s’.⁴ As its name suggests, abstract expressionism is a fusion of abstraction (‘art which is...non-representational’) and expressionism (‘art in which conventional ideas of realism and proportion seem to have been overridden by the artist’s emotion’).⁵ In doing away with literal representation, it is logical why this style of art has been connected to the tradition of the sublime which, as stated, defies the possibility of literal representation. Two figures of the abstract expressionist movement were Mark Rothko (1903-1970) and Barnett Newman (1905-1970). The works of both artists will hence be presented as suggestive of the notion of sublimity, especially as it was initially understood by Pseudo-Longinus in his treatise *Peri Hypsous*. Furthermore, owing to the Jewish origins of the sublime, readings of the artworks of Rothko and Newman as inspired by Kabbalah will also be presented. Kabbalah is a mystical strain of Judaism which emerged in the thirteenth century in Spain.⁶ Notably, it places great importance upon its Creation narrative which is uniquely illustrative. Rothko and Newman have been selected for this study because although links have been suggested between their artworks and sublimity, this is rarely done in a Longinian framework. Similarly, there is room for a greater theological depth to be established with regards to any Kabbalistic readings of their artworks.

¹ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1.

² Shaw, *Sublime*, 3.

³ Shaw, *Sublime*, 2.

⁴ Edward Lucie-Smith, *The Thames and Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 9.

⁵ Lucie-Smith, *Art Terms*, 9; 78.

⁶ Joseph Dan, *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

To contextualise, Mark Rothko (formerly Marcus Rothkowitz) was born in 1903 in Dvinsk, Russia (now Daugavpils, a part of Latvia) into a Jewish family.⁷ He received a typically Jewish education attending a *cheder* school, meaning that by the age of ten he could speak Yiddish and was 'fluent in Hebrew'.⁸ Despite this, it is well documented that Rothko expressed a 'repeated resistance to attending synagogue or following Jewish ritual practices'; thus, 'whilst he broke with organized religion at a young age' he probably 'retained a reasonable amount of Jewish knowledge'.⁹ In 1910, his father and brothers moved to the United States as a result of the 'roiling anti-Semitism in Russia as well as economic hardship'.¹⁰ Three years later in 1913, 'Rothko and his sister and mother followed the rest of the family to Portland, Oregon'.¹¹ By the late 1920s and 1930s Rothko was producing predominantly figurative artworks. In the early 1940s, surrealist influences then permeated his catalogue as he gave focus to biomorphic forms. By the end of the decade, these designs had been replaced by groupings of busy, abstract shapes also known as "multiforms". As the 1950s commenced, Rothko's compositions became evermore reductive, and the works for which he has become known for – canvases of coloured oblongs or "sectionals" – emerged.

Barnett Newman was conversely born in 1905 in New York, the child of Jewish parents who had moved to America from Poland.¹² Newman attended Hebrew school and 'taught himself Yiddish'; whilst the family did not study their Jewish heritage 'systematically', they certainly 'treasured bits and pieces of Jewish lore and customs' and 'read its Book'.¹³ The influence which this had on Newman came to be reflected in his artwork titles, many of which draw on Old Testament figures and themes. Some examples of these are *Abraham* (1949), *The Name II* (1950), *Adam* (1951-52), and *Jericho* (1968-69). His earliest surviving pieces date from 1944 and 1945 and are crayon drawings and watercolour works.¹⁴ From these he progressed into what would become his most frequented medium – oil paints –

⁷ Dore Ashton, *About Rothko* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 6.

⁸ Ashton, *About*, 7;

Matthew Baigell, *American Artists, Jewish Images* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 64.

⁹ Aaron Rosen, "Finding Rothkowitz: The Jewish Rothko", *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 12, no. 3 (2012): 485;

Baigell, *American Artists*, 64.

¹⁰ Rosen, "Finding", 483.

¹¹ Rosen, "Finding", 483.

¹² Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (London: Tate Gallery Publications Department, 1972), 9

¹³ Hess, *Newman*, 9; 13.

¹⁴ Ann Temkin, *Barnett Newman* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), 114; 124.

and he was using them fairly consistently by 1946.¹⁵ In 1948, Newman finally found what would become his signature style: a vertical strip of paint surrounded by a colour field. It is this composition which Newman exploited throughout his career.

Both artists' familiarity with sublimity and Kabbalah is varied. Rothko appears not to have been explicitly influenced by either. Despite referring to the 'transcendental' in his writings, this was not in reference to his own creations; likewise, he makes no mentioning of Kabbalah.¹⁶ Conversely, Newman was acquainted with both topics. In 1948 he wrote an article for *The Tiger's Eye* entitled "The Sublime is Now". In it, he critiques Pseudo-Longinus, Kant, and Hegel, all who have written on the subject, for failing to disentangle the sublime from the beautiful.¹⁷ In spite of the inaccuracy of this claim (Kant explicitly distinguished the two in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*), it is not the purpose of this discussion to pick apart Newman's own understanding of the notion. Rather, it seeks to show that this background knowledge was translated into his own artworks, most explicitly in the painting *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (Latin for "Man, Heroic, Sublime") from 1951.

Evidence suggests that Newman was equally interested in Kabbalah. 'There were several books on...Kabbalism in his library' and he incorporated Kabbalistic concepts into the titles of his artworks.¹⁸ Examples of this are *Black Fire I* (1961), *White Fire II* (1960), and *Zim Zum II* (1969). Furthermore, in 1963 Newman was invited to participate in the exhibition "Recent American Synagogue Architecture".¹⁹ For it, he crafted a design for a synagogue which was again, seemingly inspired by Kabbalah. Of his hypothesised place of worship, he said that it was 'more than just a house of prayer. It is a place, Makom'.²⁰ This utilises language from the Kabbalistic Creation account meaning a "place" or "space". Additionally, he explained that 'Here in this synagogue, each man sits...under the tension of that "Tzim-Tzum" that created light and the world, he can experience a total sense of his own personality before

¹⁵ Hess, *Newman*, 86.

¹⁶ Mark Rothko, "The Romantics were prompted, 1947", in *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel López-Remiro (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 58.

¹⁷ Barnett Newman, "The Sublime is Now", in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neil (California: University of California Press, 1992), 171.

¹⁸ Hess, *Newman*, 36.

¹⁹ Mollie McNickle, "From *Recent American Synagogue Architecture*", in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neil (California: University of California Press, 1992), 180.

²⁰ Newman, "Synagogue", 181.

the Torah and His Name'.²¹ This is yet another reference to a moment in the Kabbalistic creation narrative: that of God's contraction. Despite this, Annalee Newman, wife of the artist, refuted that the doctrine had influenced her husband. She stated that although Newman did use Kabbalistic titles for some of his paintings, this was not because they had any relation to what he wanted to express; rather, he did so 'because the language was poetic and fanciful'.²² Whilst this study does not make any claims to possess more knowledge of the artist than those who knew him, judging by the information provided, it does not appear unreasonable to suggest that Newman was interested in Kabbalah.

There are further grounds for connecting Rothko's and Newman's artworks with the theme of Creation. A glance at their earlier catalogues and writings reveal a preoccupation with the origins of existence and the emergence of lifeforms. In the case of Rothko, the text *I adhere to the reality of things* (1945) and the paintings *Swirl at the Edge of the Sea* (1944) and *Birth of Cephalopods* (1944) are good examples of this. Likewise, Newman's *The Plasmic Image* (1945) and artworks *The Blessing* (1944) and *Genesis – The Break* (1946) are equally demonstrative of this fascination with beginnings. Resultantly, this opens a space for theorising about whether the Kabbalistic Creation narrative could have also served as an inspiration for the artists. To explain, Scholem asserts that Rabbinical Judaism can be characterised 'as a reaction to mythology'.²³ It stresses a fundamental 'gulf between the Creator and His creature' meaning that the engenderment of the world will always remain a mystery; any attempt to understand it through 'images and symbols' is rejected.²⁴ The aim of Rabbinical Judaism is thus to maintain God's purity – a particular concern for Rabbis in the Medieval Period.²⁵ The emergence of Kabbalah in the thirteenth century can therefore be understood as a reaction to what Scholem calls this 'empty[ing]' of God by the Rabbis.²⁶ Its reinterpretation of the Genesis narrative through vivid images of light and colour presented the 'full, rich life of the Creator', meaning that God was no longer empty but a

²¹ Newman, "Synagogue", 181.

²² Matthew Baigell and Annalee Newman, "Barnett Newman and the Kabbalah", *American Art* 9, no 1. (1995): 117.

²³ Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 88.

²⁴ Scholem, *Symbolism*, 88.

²⁵ Scholem, *Symbolism*, 88.

²⁶ Scholem, *Symbolism*, 88.

‘living reality’.²⁷ Consequently, at least for Scholem, artists of a Jewish background who meditate upon the nature of Creation – as Rothko and Newman seemingly do – will do so through the colourful and vivid imagery of the Kabbalah, whether they know it or not. This is because Kabbalah attests to a very specific need in the history of Judaism not only to ponder upon the primal moments, but to then explore these through visual motifs, all the while knowing that these ‘approximat[ions]’ will only ever be ‘symbolic’.²⁸ Therefore, Scholem’s ‘return of the myth’ is one line of reasoning which could establish a link between Rothko and Newman and Kabbalah – their artworks could be a potential response to this deeply embedded impulse.

To briefly broaden the discussion, the emergence of abstract expressionism is a matter which is both ‘diverse’ and ‘complex’.²⁹ Whilst it is not the purpose of this study to examine the reasons behind this movement’s arrival, it is nevertheless appropriate to acknowledge its relation to the Second World War, for it is frequently understood to be a catalyst of the movement. This is a coherent argument; following an ‘event of apocalyptic dimensions and implications’, it is unsurprising that artists may have found the realm of representation to be inadequate in responding to this destruction, turning to abstraction as a result.³⁰ Moreover, as several figures of abstract expressionism were of a Jewish heritage (Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Adolph Gottlieb, Lee Krasner), its creations are also understood on a more specific level as a response to the Holocaust.³¹ Again, this is plausible; to express the depth of an unparalleled trauma, it stands to reason that one might be forced to adopt a new mode of artistic expression, a set of symbols which paradoxically communicate its incommunicability. Rothko’s son, Christopher Rothko, assures that that every ‘artist of [his] father’s generation’, his father included, was affected by ‘the horrors...the Holocaust’.³² Likewise, Newman revealed that ‘the feelings I had at the time of the war in ‘41 was that the world was coming to an end. And...the whole issue of painting, I felt, was over because it was impossible to

²⁷ Scholem, *Symbolism*, 89.

²⁸ Scholem, *Symbolism*, 96.

²⁹ John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 7.

³⁰ Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975), 196.

³¹ Matthew Baigell, *Jewish Art in America: An Introduction* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), xxiii.

³² Christopher Rothko, *Mark Rothko: From the Inside Out* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 269.

paint flowers, figures, etc., and so the crisis moved around the problem of what I can really paint'.³³ Matthew Baigell is one scholar who interprets Rothko's classic sectional paintings in light of the Holocaust.³⁴ Resultantly, whilst this study will take the work of Rothko and Newman in a different direction, it does not seek to refute the likes of Baigell; the subsequent interpretations are *different* but not *dismissive*.

Similarly, this study does not seek to discount any other interpretations of Rothko's and Newman's creations. It recognises that Rothko was interested in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Kafka's literature, and Greek mythology, all of which could have influenced his paintings.³⁵ It is also aware that Newman was equally interested in the philosophy of anarchism which could similarly have had a bearing on his catalogue.³⁶ Furthermore, much has been written regarding the contested influence of the Second Commandment ("You shall not make for yourself an idol") on the reductive creations of those abstract expressionists who identified with Judaism in one way or another.³⁷ Although, as Baigell stresses, one must be cautious of making generalisations regarding Jewish experiences as these are not 'singl[ular]', Rothko's later canvases have nonetheless been especially interpreted in light of the Biblical prohibition.³⁸ Morely suggests that 'the absence of the kind of imagery we might expect to see in a [Rothko] painting can be understood as motivated by the artist's belief...in the superior reality of an invisible and transcendent absolute'.³⁹ This may well possess a level of legitimacy, especially when one considers that Rothko was born in Russia, a country whose Orthodoxy likewise wrestles with the non-representability of the Divine. Indeed, the tradition's iconography adheres to an

³³ Barnett Newman, interview with Alan R. Solomon, 20th March, 1966, transcript, Alan R. Solomon Papers, Box 1, Folder 78, Archives of American Art, accessed 16th September 2020, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/alan-r-solomon-papers-7165>.

³⁴ Matthew Baigell, *Jewish Artists in New York: The Holocaust Years* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 102.

³⁵ Mark Rothko, "Whenever one begins to speculate, 1954", in *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel López-Remiro (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 109;

Mark Rothko, "Address to the Pratt Institute, November 1958", *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel López-Remiro (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 126;

Nicholas Madden, "Rothko", *Irish Theological Quarterly* 65 (2000): 184.

³⁶ Richard Shiff, "Introduction", in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neil (California: University of California Press, 1992), xvi.

³⁷ See Melissa Raphael, "The Creation of Beauty by its Destruction: The Idoloclastic Aesthetic in Modern and Contemporary Jewish Art", *Approaching Religion* 6, no. 2 (2016): 14-22.

³⁸ Baigell, *America*, xxi.

³⁹ Simon Morley, "Painting the Page", *Journal of Visual Art Practise* 8, no. 1-2 (2009): 152.

‘aesthetic simplicity’ which ‘avoids[s] mimetic, detailed representations’ and instead employs ‘reduced...[and] simplified ways of presentation and repeated compositions’; ‘a realistic picture’ of the Divine is an impossibility.⁴⁰ This description evidences numerous parallels between itself and Rothko’s classic compositions which are equally minimalistic and repetitive in style, strengthening the possibility of its potential impact on the artist.

At the same time, there is no evidence which demonstrates that either artist wanted their work to be viewed through a specific lens. As Shiff points out, to ‘impose one’s thoughts on another’ would have conflicted with Newman’s alignment with anarchism.⁴¹ Likewise, Rothko stated that he felt ‘abhorrence for forwards and explanatory data’ which ‘tell the public how...pictures should be looked at and what to look for’.⁴² Therefore, it appears that neither artist would have objected to their works being interpreted in line with the sublime and Kabbalah. Nevertheless, this study is ultimately underpinned by Wimsatt’s and Beardsley’s intentional fallacy. This argues that ‘the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging...a work of literary art’.⁴³ Rather, a work ‘is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it’ – it ‘belongs to the public’.⁴⁴ Although this is presented in reference to literary works, there stands no reason why it cannot be extended other creative mediums. Thus, several Rothko’s and Newman’s pieces will here be analysed in relation to the Hebraic and Kabbalistic Creation accounts. This purpose of this is to demonstrate that their artistic compositions consistently insinuate specific moments of these narratives, regardless of their original objectives. At the same time, discussing these theological doctrines alongside visual depictions aims to bring a greater sense of clarity to their complexities.

Accordingly, Chapter One presents the literature that exists on Rothko, Newman, the sublime, and Kabbalah, outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the writings in these

⁴⁰ Andrzej Dudek, “On Some Aspects of Word, Image, and Human Values as Reflected by Russian Orthodox Icons and Western Religious Paintings”, *Politeja* 44 (2016): 72; 73.

⁴¹ Shiff, “Introduction”, xvi.

⁴² Mark Rothko, “Letter to Katherine Kuh: July 14th, 1954”, in *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel López-Remiro (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 91.

⁴³ W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3.

⁴⁴ Wimsatt, *Verbal*, 5.

areas. Importantly, it also highlights where the gaps lie in these different fields, and how this study seeks to fill them. Subsequently, Chapter Two is more theologically orientated. It explores the often-overlooked Jewish origins of the sublime in Pseudo-Longinus' *Peri Hypsous*, stressing its intrinsic relation to the Genesis narrative and the Creator's unparalleled power. The popularity of the sublime in Romanticism is then examined in reference to Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Burke's attitude towards the expression of sublimity in artworks will be identified, resulting in a critique of his narrowing of the concept. This culminates in a dissection of Robert Rosenblum's theory of 'the abstract sublime' which emerged in the 1960s. His association between abstract expressionist artworks and the imagery of Genesis demonstrates the relevance of the Longinian sublime to discussions on artworks from this period. Accordingly, Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* (1967) and Rothko's *Untitled* (1969) have been selected as classic examples of the abstract sublime. They will hence be argued to be fitting evocations of the primal moments of Creation as laid out by Pseudo-Longinus.

Following this, Chapter Three hones in on the manner in which Creation is engendered in the Hebraic context: light is brought forth via a speech act. The mystery surrounding this mode of Creating is explored before another artwork is introduced into the discussion – Newman's *Onement I* (1948). A case is then made for said painting to be considered as emblematic of God's announcement of "Let there be light". Chapter Four then moves to the sphere of Kabbalah. It gives historical context to its foundational text, the *Zohar*, and then makes a case for its Godhead (*Ein-Sof*) to be considered as sublime. This is achieved via a comparison with Hegel's conception of the sublime Deity. Chapter Five thus furthers the argument for the insinuation of the *Zoharic Ein-Sof* in abstract artworks. It places Rothko's and Newman's creations in the form of a narrative, contending that the former's works can be understood as symbolic of *Ein-Sof* prior to His creation of the world, whilst the latter's works symbolise the moment when this occurs. In doing this, it proposes a reimagination of the Rothko Chapel in a *Zoharic* context, alongside analyses of Rothko's *Number 207 (Red over Dark Blue on Dark Grey, 1961)* and Newman's *Onement I*.

The aims of this study are thus as follows: first, to reassert the often-overlooked Jewish origins of the sublime as presented by Pseudo-Longinus. Second, to demonstrate that the

artworks of Rothko and Newman can consistently be interpreted as symbolic of the Longinian sublime. Third, to bring the scholarship of the sublime and Kabbalah into dialogue with one another. Lastly, to demonstrate that the artworks of Rothko and Newman can likewise be understood as emblematic of the initial moments of the *Zoharic* Creation narrative. As this study is expansive, two restrictions have been embraced to ensure that the selected doctrines and artworks can be sufficiently examined. First, although both artists have produced drawings and Newman has worked in sculpture, this study will just deal with their paintings. Second, as the Biblical and Kabbalistic Creation accounts are lengthy, this study will just concentrate on the particulars prior to the engenderment of the world, as well as the first few moments after it is brought forth.

Chapter One – Literature Review

Unsurprisingly, there is a wealth of biographical literature on both Rothko and Newman. With regards to Rothko, it stands to reason that the compilation of his writings, letters, lectures, and interviews in *Writing on Art* (2006) are of the upmost relevance. Among other things, these texts reveal the artist's intentions and why he made certain aesthetic decisions. In terms of secondary literature, *Mark Rothko: From the Inside Out* (2015) which was written by Christopher Rothko is another invaluable resource. It makes insightful remarks on the artist's manipulation of scale and colour, his disinterest in titling his creations, as well as refuting some of the erroneous assumptions which are oft levelled against him. Particularly useful is the author's fascination with the emotional impact of his father's works on the viewer, perhaps reflective of status as a qualified psychologist.⁴⁵ Additionally, Aaron Rosen's "Finding Rothkowitz: The Jewish Rothko" (2012) and Matthew Baigell's *American Artist's, Jewish Images* (2006) both provide details on Rothko's religious upbringing, and the varying ways in which this can, or cannot, be said to have influenced his catalogue. To turn to Newman, it is again understandable that the anthology of his musings, published works, correspondences, and conversations which are drawn together in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (1992) are revelatory. Concerning secondary literature, Thomas Hess' monograph *Barnett Newman* (1972) is of exceptional value. It was written by the long-time friend of the artist to accompany an exhibition at the Tate Gallery, offering in-depth analyses of the artist's creations both relating to, and outside of, their original context. Likewise, *Barnett Newman* (2002) edited by Ann Temkin offers thorough considerations of many of the pieces in Newman's catalogue, giving focus to his methods and techniques.

Shifting to the sublime, there again exists a wealth of information on the topic. Philip Shaw's *The Sublime* (2006) is a strong example from the field. Shaw examines how the notion of sublimity has surpassed its roots in oratory, being taken up in the realms of poetry, fictional literature, aesthetics and politics. Additionally, *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (1996) edited by Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla offers a compilation of writings from its title's period. Despite their breadth, both studies are

⁴⁵ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 5.

demonstrative of a wider trend in the discourse of the sublime which has throughout history, and continues to, give minimal attention to its Jewish origins. This study thus aims to reassert this, homing in on the Hebraic God's incomparable power as expressed in the early verses of Genesis via *creatio ex-nihilo* and its imagery of light.

Due to the proliferation of landscape art in Romanticism, there is an abundance of art criticism on the expression of sublimity in this era. However, said discussions frequently frame sublimity in terms of an unfathomable sense of wonderment – reflective of Burke's reformulation of the concept – and gravitate away from its original context concerning the beginnings of Creation. This trend extends to the criticism on abstract expressionism; sublimity is spoken of in terms of the transcendent or Absolute, but rarely in terms of the Genesis narrative. *The Sublime: Documents in Contemporary Art* (2010) and *The Contemporary Sublime: Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock* (1995) are two examples of this.⁴⁶ Important exceptions to this are Rosenblum's 1961 essay "The Abstract Sublime" and his *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko and On American Modern Art* (1975). In these, he considers the works of Rothko, Newman, Pollock, Still as sublime, specifically in their evocation of the beginnings of Creation.

It is also worth noting that there is a pervasive trend in the literature on Rothko whereby his creations are described in the language of the sublime – as otherly, mysterious, or overwhelming – but this seldom extends to discussion on Pseudo-Longinus' intertwining of it with the early verses of Genesis. The multiple essays in *Rothko: Dark Palette* (2016) serve as a consistent example of this pattern. In a similar vein, aside from Rosenblum, the most explicit connection between Newman's creations and the sublime is, to the best of my knowledge, by Paul Crowther. Nevertheless, his "Barnett Newman and the Sublime" is oriented towards the Burkean and, to an even greater extent, the Kantian sublime, with its bearing on one's cognitive faculties.⁴⁷ Consequently, this study aims to combine Rosenblum's initial association between abstract expressionism and Genesis with varied

⁴⁶ Simon Morley, ed., *The Sublime: Documents in Contemporary Art* (London: Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Ltd, 2010);

Paul Crowther, ed., *The Contemporary Sublime: Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock* (London: Academy Group Ltd, 1995).

⁴⁷ Paul Crowther, "Barnett Newman and the Sublime", *Oxford Art Journal* 7, no. 2 (1984): 52-59.

studies into Rothko's and Newman's artworks and practises, constructing a case for their designs to be considered as emblematic of the Longinian sublime.

Moving to Kabbalah, the field is wholly indebted to the work of Gershom Scholem. Of particular relevance to this study is his translation of the *Zohar* from (predominantly) Aramaic – the foundational text of Kabbalah. In addition, his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941) gives an unparalleled insight into Jewish mysticism. Still, there are writings on the topic by other authors which are also of value. For example, Joseph Dan's *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction* (2007) offers a succinct history of the topic, highlighting the doctrinal differences between its various developments. Likewise, Bloom's *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975) is useful in its unpacking of some of Kabbalah's most dense principles. Despite this, both summaries ultimately rely on quotations and analogies made by Scholem, evidencing the essentiality of his work to any study on the subject.

In light of this there exists, again to the best of my knowledge, no work which draws together Kabbalah and the sublime; this is probably the result of the persistent glossing over of the sublime's Jewish origins. It is also surprising, considering that Kabbalah and the Longinian sublime are both uniquely concerned with the bringing forth of Creation. This study will hence unite the two areas, using Hegel's justification for Judaism as 'the religion of sublimity' as a bridging device.⁴⁸ Writings on Kabbalah and art are also scarce, a fact which is equally remarkable since the Kabbalistic doctrine is one which renowned for its imagery. Alexander Gorlin's *Kabbalah in Art and Architecture* (2013) stands as the only study of the subject. Gorlin tracks the Kabbalistic Creation account through its historical developments, beginning with Ezekiel's vision of the celestial chariot in early Jewish mystical writings and finishing with *tikkun* (reparation or restitution). The author argues that each stage has influenced contemporary art and architecture in one way or another. As a result of its breadth, any mentioning of Rothko's or Newman's paintings in Gorlin's book are thus brief, passing up the opportunity to discuss the likes of artistic practise, the impact of scale, or the symbolisation of colour.

⁴⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. Vol. 2: Determinate Religion*, trans. R.F. Brown, P.C. Hodgson, and J.M. Stewart (London, England: University of California Press, 1987), 423.

Aside from Gorlin, the only other association between Rothko's artworks and Kabbalah is by Dore Ashton in her *About Rothko* (1983). Her comment is again brief and makes no reference to specific paintings. With regards to Newman, a greater number of scholars have offered Kabbalistic readings of his artworks, although the pool is still relatively small. This increase is probably the result of Newman's documented interest in Jewish mysticism. Hess was the first person to understand Newman's creations through a Kabbalistic lens in his abovementioned 1972 publication. Of these readings, he was clear to point out that 'it is possible that I am pushing the Kabbalist interpretation too far'.⁴⁹ These were, therefore, Hess' own understandings of Newman's artworks, and he never claimed a concrete relation between them and Kabbalah, despite the criticism oft levelled against him. Hess' analyses will hence be signalled and evaluated throughout this study, and then extended in various directions. Matthew Baigell's "Barnett Newman Stripe Paintings and Kabbalah" (1994), Micheal Leja's "Barnett Newman's Solo Tango" (1995), and Evan R. Firestone's "Barnett Newman's *Onement I*: 'The Way Up and Down is One and The Same'" (2004) are three other publications which interpret Newman's artworks in line with different tenets of the Kabbalistic Creation narrative.⁵⁰ They will likewise be integrated into this study and challenged where required.

As a result of the limited linkage between Rothko, Newman, and Kabbalah, and the subsequent non-existent connection between these areas and the notion of sublimity, this research will thus draw from a range of sources. These will include religious and philosophical texts and plastic artworks as well as the perspectives of theologians, artists, art critics and historians, curators, architects, and those trained in art conservation. Exhibition catalogues and reviews will likewise be utilised in attempt to attain a sense of how Rothko's and Newman's creations have been publicly received. Accordingly, with regards to methodology, this study finds itself at the juncture of textual criticism and formal element analysis. With regards to the latter, particular attention will be paid to the methods used to compose the selected artworks, their manipulation of shape, colour, texture, scale,

⁴⁹ Hess, *Newman*, 36.

⁵⁰ Matthew Baigell, "Barnett Newman's Stripe Paintings and Kabbalah: A Jewish Take". *American Art* 8, no. 2 (1994): 33-43; Michael Leja, "Barnett Newman's Solo Tango", *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 3 (1995): 556-580; Evan R. Firestone, "Barnett Newman's *Onement I*: 'The Way Up and Down is One and The Same'", *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 24, no. 1 (2004): 44-49.

and contrast, how the artworks are presented or curated, and the effects which all of these engender in the viewer.

Chapter Two – The Longinian, Burkean, and Abstract Sublime

The ‘first properly theoretical discussion on the sublime’ is *Peri Hypsous* (*On the Sublime*), usually attributed to Pseudo-Longinus in the first century A.D.⁵¹ Pseudo-Longinus describes the sublime as ‘a certain loftiness and excellence in language’.⁵² It occurs in those passages which possess such an ‘irresistible force’ that they ‘take the reader out of himself’, ‘confound our judgement’, and ‘eclipse that which is merely reasonable’.⁵³ Accordingly, Pseudo-Longinus cites ““God said”—what?—“let there be light, and there was light: let there be land, and there was”” (Genesis 1:3 and 1:9) as the pinnacle of sublimity.⁵⁴ With regards to this declaration, there are a number often overlooked details which require emphasis.

First, Pseudo-Longinus relates this Biblical passage in a Jewish context. He is making reference to the incomparability of the creative act as executed specifically by the ‘lawgiver of the Jews’ – the sublime is inherently Jewish.⁵⁵ Secondly, Pseudo-Longinus’ combination of Gen. 1:3 and 1:9 stresses that it is the instantaneous manner of the world’s creation which is to be marvelled at; from nothing, suddenly, ‘there was’ something. Thirdly, the Longinian sublime is intrinsically bound up with light and, therefore, colour. Initially, Gen. 1:2 tells that ‘darkness covered the face of the deep’ before illumination was brought forth – the notion of contrast is embedded into the narrative. Pseudo-Longinus consistently employs language throughout *Peri Hypsous* which supports this argument, likening the sublime to ‘the vividness of a lightning-flash’, ‘radiance’, and ‘the all-encompassing rays of the sun’.⁵⁶ Lastly, Pseudo-Longinus maintains that the true hallmark of a sublime passage is that it is ‘pregnant with suggestion’.⁵⁷ When this is considered in conjunction with his fusion of Gen. 1:3 and 1:9, it is clear why they are regarded as supreme. Whilst these verses do conjure an image of a God who is overwhelmingly powerful, possesses unrivalled creative abilities, and is brimming with potentiality, they are simultaneously enigmatic. Indeed, whilst telling the reader that

⁵¹ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 12;

Pseudo-Longinus, *On the Sublime, with an Introduction by Andrew Lang*, trans. H.L. Havell (London: Macmillan and Co., 1890), xiv.

⁵² Pseudo-Longinus, *Sublime*, 2

⁵³ Pseudo-Longinus, *Sublime*, 2.

⁵⁴ Pseudo-Longinus, *Sublime*, 18;

Here and in the following all biblical references are taken from the NRSV.

⁵⁵ Pseudo-Longinus, *Sublime*, 18.

⁵⁶ Pseudo-Longinus, *Sublime*, 3; 41.

⁵⁷ Pseudo-Longinus, *Sublime*, 12.

the world was engendered through an act of speech, the snippets do not divulge any specificities such as why God decided to create the world or if He has done so on more than one occasion. Consequently, the Longinian sublime lies at the intersection of the Jewish God's superlative might and His enduring mystery.

The way in which Pseudo-Longinus' Genesis quotation is simultaneously divulging and unfathomable encapsulates the sublime's paradoxicality. Pseudo-Longinus himself acknowledges that 'to grasp some definite theory and criterion of the true Sublime...is a hard matter'.⁵⁸ As Shaw expounds, this is because 'whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, *then* we resort to the...sublime'.⁵⁹ Even to categorise God as the apex of sublimity due to His otherly nature automatically negates His otherliness – He becomes confined. Rather, as Guerlac asserts, 'we cannot "face" the sublime in its highest form', 'we might better approach it obliquely' – insinuation trumps direct illustration.⁶⁰ All this demonstrates the challenges that one faces when the pinnacle of sublimity (God and His bringing forth of Creation) is articulated through language. Therefore, it is natural to raise the question: how does the sublime relate to visual portrayals? Although it is apparent that, by Pseudo-Longinus' conception, any direct representation of sublimity will always fall short, perhaps images which merely allude to it will be more successful.

Considering this, *Peri Hypsous* mentions plastic artworks just once. It states that 'a similar illusion [to the rhetorical sublime] is produced by the painter's art. When light and shadow are represented in colour, though they lie on the same surface side by side, it is the light which meets the eye first'.⁶¹ Not only does this open up the possibility for achieving a sublime effect through pictures; it suggests that it is those visuals which are able to overpower all which surrounds them that edge closest to such an aesthetic. Similarly, Pseudo-Longinus' very reference to the beginnings of Genesis – whereby God is envisaged as 'the Creator' – is imbued with artistic connotations. As well as the aforementioned engendering of light and darkness, the Jewish God made a division between the land and the waters and gave shape to these forms. He is hence portrayed as the supreme artist

⁵⁸Pseudo-Longinus, *Sublime*, 11.

⁵⁹ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 2.

⁶⁰ Suzanne Guerlac, "Longinus and the Subject of the Sublime", *New Literary History* 16, no.2 (1985): 279.

⁶¹ Pseudo-Longinus, *Sublime*, 41.

whose power is matchless. The primal Longinian conception of the sublime therefore demonstrates that a connection between itself and some type of visual is not as unfeasible as one might think.

Although *Peri Hypsous* was translated from Greek to Latin in 1554, it was Boileau's 1647 French edition and William Smith's 1739 English publication of the work that prompted a substantial growth in its popularity.⁶² In Britain, this growth culminated in the publication of Edmund Burke's *Enquiry*.⁶³ One of the most 'fame[d]' texts on the sublime, the *Enquiry*'s popularity is consistently attributed to it being the first 'coherent and unified theory' on the subject.⁶⁴ Gone is Pseudo-Longinus' ambivalence towards providing a concrete description of sublimity – Burke provides a definition. He states that '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*'.⁶⁵ The *Enquiry* positions the Christian Godhead as the 'highest of all' these sources, 'a complex idea of power, wisdom, justice, [and] goodness' whose grandeur is reflected in magnificent natural scenery.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, it maintains that the next best way to achieve sublime effects is through 'words'.⁶⁷ This is because they 'are capable of making deep and lively impressions' on the passions by conjuring 'obscure and imperfect idea[s]'.⁶⁸ As Ibata explains, for Burke, language 'transcend[s] finite meanings by being connotative rather than denotative, suggestive rather than precise'.⁶⁹ Although this coincides with Pseudo-Longinus' elevation of rhetoric, Burke goes one step further, specifically criticising the relation between the sublime and paintings. He roots this in the literalness of artworks: they are too 'clear and determinate' and therefore are 'an enemy to all enthusiasms'.⁷⁰

⁶² Shaw, *Sublime*, 27.

⁶³ See Philip Shaw's *The Sublime* (2006) for the complete evolution of the sublime in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain.

⁶⁴ Frances Ferguson, "Reflections on Burke, Kant, and *Solitude and the Sublime*", *European Romantic Review* 23, no. 3 (2012): 313.

⁶⁵ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 39.

⁶⁶ Burke, *Enquiry*, 70; 60.

⁶⁷ Burke, *Enquiry*, 68.

⁶⁸ Burke, *Enquiry*, 60; 173.

⁶⁹ Hélène Ibata, "Beyond the 'narrow limits of painting': strategies for visual unlimitedness and the Burkean challenge", *Word & Image* 31, no. 1 (2015): 28.

⁷⁰ Burke, *Enquiry*, 62; 60.

Despite Burke's problematisation of pictures, his *Enquiry* precedes to list qualities which invoke the sublime, many of which are visually orientated. For example, his assertion that sublimity produces terror – 'a passion which always produces delight when it does not press to close' – immediately introduces a spatial dimension to the notion.⁷¹ Additionally, he makes specific remarks on the relation between size and sublimity. It is those sources which are of 'great' dimensions, 'bound[less], and make 'an approach towards infinity' which are most affecting.⁷² Likewise, Burke takes compositional design into account in his *Enquiry*. He argues that 'uninterrupted progression', 'uniformity', and 'obscurity' are all sources of the sublime.⁷³ Even more pictorially related, Burke passes comment on colour and texture. He objects to shades which are 'soft' or 'cheerful', instead insisting on 'sad and fuscous colours, [such] as black, or brown, or deep purple, and the likes'.⁷⁴ Moreover, with regards to contrast, he praises 'a quick transition from light to darkness, or from darkness to light' (*chiaroscuro*).⁷⁵ This is reminiscent of Pseudo-Longinus' rooting of the sublime in God's announcement, "Let there be light", demonstrating once more its inseparability from its Jewish beginnings. Such a claim is bolstered by Burke's lauding of 'privations' like 'darkness, solitude, and silence', as well as 'sudden[ness]' – four characteristics which are typically associated with the Genesis narrative.⁷⁶ Further to this, Burke holds that the 'effects of a rugged and broken surface seem stronger than where it is smooth and polished' – sublimity and texture are connected.⁷⁷

Nevertheless, it remains uncertain if an existent must possess every trait which Burke lists for it to be categorised as sublime. If so, it seems unlikely that such a thing would exist and, consequently, the utility of the term becomes constrained. Equally, if only one characteristic is required for something to communicate sublimity, then a wide spectrum of things would be considered so – the sublime thus loses its primal alterity. Still, it is important to note that the *Enquiry* was written in the eighteenth century, a period distinguishable by its 'longing for clear distinctions and definitions'.⁷⁸ Whilst Burke's inflexible approach is hence

⁷¹ Burke, *Enquiry*, 46.

⁷² Burke, *Enquiry*, 57; 63.

⁷³ Burke, *Enquiry*, 74; 58.

⁷⁴ Burke, *Enquiry*, 81; 82.

⁷⁵ Burke, *Enquiry*, 80.

⁷⁶ Burke, *Enquiry*, 70; 83.

⁷⁷ Burke, *Enquiry*, 72.

⁷⁸ Andrew Wilton, *Turner and The Sublime* (London: British Museum Publ., 1980), 31.

understandable, Ashfield and de Bolla's declaration that it ultimately 'seeks to fracture and fragment our experiences of the sublime' is proved accurate.⁷⁹ Indeed, its foremost Longinian meaning of that which consistently resists meaningful definition and expression is lost – the infinite becomes finite.

Notwithstanding the given critiques of Burke's *Enquiry*, its paradoxical focus on visually orientated language is reflective of the Romantic interest in alluding to the sublime – that is, Divinity – in landscape paintings. The works of Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) and J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) are classic examples of this. For instance, Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (Fig. 1) depicts a small monk standing at the edge of a shoreline.



Fig. 1: Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea*, 1808-10, oil on canvas, 110 x 171.5 cm.
Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie.

⁷⁹ Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5.

The minute dimensions of the figure set against the hazy elemental bands invokes the finitude of humanity in comparison to the infinity of the Almighty. Similarly, Turner's *Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* (Fig. 2) insinuates His boundless power through its vortex-like composition.



Fig. 2: J.M.W. Turner, *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, 1842, oil on canvas, 91.4 cm x 121.9 cm. London, Tate Modern.

It can be argued that the association between landscape paintings such as these and God is of a greater specificity: they suggest the primal beginnings as laid out in Genesis. This claim is not unfounded; Hazlitt compared Turner's paintings to 'the first chaos of the world'.⁸⁰ Likewise, Rosenblum drew parallels between Friedrich's landscapes and 'the primeval

⁸⁰ William Hazlitt, "On Imitation", in *The Round Table: A Collection of Essays on Literature, Men, and Manners*, 3rd ed., ed. his son (London: John Templeman, 248 Regent Street, 1841), 159.

emergence of order out of chaos'.⁸¹ Regardless of the intention of these two artists, the Genesis crux of the Longinian sublime is hence embedded into their works; they both retain a Jewish undertone.

There are several similarities between *Monk by the Sea* and *Snow Storm*: they are both seascapes, boast a cool colour palette, and are remarkably empty. Still, it is arguably their tendency towards abstraction which begets sublimity most effectively. In Friedrich's painting, the sea and sky are barely distinguishable as the shades of blue bleed into one another; this is particularly perceptible on the left side of the work. Turner's masterpiece is equally indistinct; the steamboat in the background only becomes discernible after a sustained period of observation, as one must first wrestle with the hecticness of the foreground. The reasons for the successfulness of such abstracted visuals in alluding to the Longinian sublime are twofold. First, as the concept is ultimately undefinable and unrepresentable, artworks which lean towards nonrepresentation are naturally most fitting. Whilst they insinuate the Creator's incomparability and the uniqueness of His engendering of Creation, they do not directly illustrate it. Therefore, by only referencing His powerfulness implicitly, they in turn amplify its extent. Second, as Pseudo-Longinus praises that which is 'pregnant with suggestion', and hence inherently mystifying, the quality of vagueness in artworks is most apt; it reaffirms the mysteriousness of the Creator's creative impulses and processes. Consequently, as Burke maintained the irreconcilability of sublimity and images due to their literalness, perhaps those which gravitate towards abstraction would have been more agreeable to him.

With this in mind, in 1961 Rosenblum published "The Abstract Sublime". In it, he argued that the Romantic impulse towards sublimity persisted in artworks from then onwards, being particularly exploited by American abstract expressionists in the 1950s. For Rosenblum, the 'breathtaking [*sic*]...boundlessness' of the vast and reductive canvases of Rothko, Newman, Still, and Pollock defiantly echoed the immense and obscure natural expanses of Friedrich and Turner.⁸² He hence coined the term 'abstract sublime' to refer to

⁸¹ Rosenblum, *Northern*, 23.

⁸² Robert Rosenblum, "The Abstract Sublime, 1961", in *The Sublime: Documents in Contemporary Art*, ed. Simon Morley (London: Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Ltd, 2010), 109.

such an aesthetic which was simultaneously ‘terrifying’ and ‘exhilarating’.⁸³ Rosenblum went on to comment that the two groupings of artists were ‘link[ed]’ by the evocation of the Infinite through the ‘shapeless[ness]’ which frequently characterised their work – the abstract sublime thus retains a theological dimension.⁸⁴ More specifically, Rosenblum asserted that the ‘awesom[e] simpl[icity]’ of many abstract expressionist canvases was evocative of ‘the primaeval movement of creation’.⁸⁵ In mentioning the early moments of Genesis, he thus established the possibility – whether knowingly or not – for discussing the artistic movement in relation to the Longinian sublime which has a uniquely Jewish core.

Rosenblum expanded his presentation of the abstract sublime in his *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*. He tactfully acknowledges that his ‘alternate reading’ of a sublime proclivity throughout the history of modern art is just that – *alternate*.⁸⁶ Still, it is possible to contend that the abstract expressionist style is exceptionally, perhaps even uniquely effective in its communication of sublimity. If it is the inclination towards abstraction which is most productive of God’s intrinsic alterity in Romantic artworks, as was argued, then it stands to reason that a style which is entirely nonrepresentational will be able to do this to an even greater degree. Gone are Friedrich’s monk and Turner’s steamboat; they have been replaced by masses of colour and unadorned contours. This reasoning reinforces the premise that was inferred in the earlier analysis of *Peri Hypsous* – that insinuation trumps direct illustration whenever sublimity is concerned. Two abstract expressionist paintings, Newman’s *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* (1967) and Rothko’s *Untitled* (1969), will be next be presented as capable of alluding to various element of the Longinian sublime.

Newman’s *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* is the third in a series of four paintings which are entitled whose *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*; the artist completed the works between 1966 and 1970. As suggested by their titles, all four canvases are comprised of the primary colours. Each work is distinguished by the proportion, placement, and shaping of said colours, although they remain equally united in their minimality. Out of the four paintings, *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* has been selected on the grounds

⁸³ Rosenblum, “Abstract”, 111.

⁸⁴ Rosenblum, “Abstract”, 109; 110.

⁸⁵ Rosenblum, “Abstract”, 111.

⁸⁶ Rosenblum, *Northern*, 7.

that it is one of the larger of the group, as expansivity is, as abovementioned, important for communicating sublimity. The work consists of a bright red region which is bordered by two strips of colour: blue on the left and yellow on the right.

Several visual components in *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* (Fig. 3) can be inferred in view of Pseudo-Longinus' acknowledgement of the inimitable power of the Jewish God.



Fig. 3: Barnett Newman, *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III*, 1967, oil on canvas, 224 x 544 cm. Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum.

Yet, it is worth taking a moment to observe that the feeling which this can induce – one of trepidation – is present in the title itself. As Rich states, 'the pictures...as their title indicates, are and were very much about fear'.⁸⁷ Before even considering the work's composition, its very name therefore evidences that an association between itself and sublimity is not unsubstantiated. The astounding size of *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* further

⁸⁷ Sarah K. Rich, "Bridging the Generation Gaps in Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?*" *American Art* 19, no. 3 (2005): 17.

insinuates the immensity of God's force. In measuring 224 x 544 cm, horizontally it occupies eighteen feet, dwarfing any viewer who confronts it.⁸⁸ Rich is in agreement, admitting that 'it is easy to see why [the scale]...might intimidate some viewers'.⁸⁹ It is important to note that Newman's evocation of such formidability was not unintentional. Hess recalls that at the artist's 'first one-man show at the Betty Parsons Gallery' in 1949, he 'tacked a statement to the wall urging the audience...to stand close to the pictures'.⁹⁰ Interestingly, Rich suggests that the hugeness of works such as *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* are capable of making viewers 'tremble' before them.⁹¹ This is an image which is consistently employed in the Old Testament to stress God's matchless potentiality, especially in the Psalms. For example, Ps. 99.1 reads 'The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble!'. Although this observation does not seek to draw a direct comparison between Newman's painting and the Creator, as He is incomparable, it evidences that the piece is capable of engendering potent emotions which edge towards sublimity.

The scale of *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* is exaggerated by its lack of focal point. Once the eye connects with the piece, Newman offers nothing to anchor itself to. Instead, it passes over the near-infinite mass of colour which remains uninterrupted; the artist's classic zip motifs have been banished to the margins. Such barrenness did (and still does) account for much of the criticism levelled against Newman, and abstract expressionism as a whole. Indeed, in discussing the reception of *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III*, Visser details that 'people would write really long and elaborate letters to say how much they hated [it]'.⁹² They would exclaim 'Why is this art? I paid to see art, damn it, not red paint on a canvas'.⁹³ Through a Longinian lens, the rage-inducing simplicity of *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* is undeniably its strength. As the Creator's power exceeds representation, a work which is paradoxically 'blank' is the most appropriate evocation of this. Denny endorses the

⁸⁸ Rich, "Bridging", 17.

⁸⁹ Rich, "Bridging", 17.

⁹⁰ Hess, *Newman*, 36.

⁹¹ Rich, "Bridging", 19.

⁹² Reporter John Fecile spoke with Barbara Visser, Petra Ten Cate, Ysbrand Hummelen, and Carol Mancusi-Ungao, "The Many Deaths of a Painting", *99% Invisible* (podcast), 26th March 2019, accessed 8th August 2020, <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/the-many-deaths-of-a-painting/transcript/>.

⁹³ Fecile, "Deaths".

association drawn here between ‘nothing[ness]’ and might, maintaining that Newman’s ‘empt[y]’ canvases possess ‘immense power’.⁹⁴

Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III is equally suggestive of the mysteriousness surrounding God’s bringing forth of the world – another feature accentuated by Pseudo-Longinus. Newman has applied the red consistently, creating a surface which appears ‘two-dimensional’.⁹⁵ Resultantly, the work repeatedly resists any attempt to advance into it; the eye is blocked by the colour’s opaqueness. This impenetrability is an apt symbolisation of Genesis 1:3 and 1:9. Whilst both verses reveal some details regarding God’s actions, they leave a great deal more unexplained. When compared to the central mass of colour, the proportions of the yellow and blue bands at either side of the painting further highlight the ultimate unfathomability of God’s creative potency. If one imagines that they represent all which we know of Him, they constitute only a fraction of the whole picture. In a similar vein, Rich emphasises the ‘perceptual challenge’ which the painting presents the onlooker with.⁹⁶ When observed in the flesh, it ‘is too big to be visually possessed at one time’.⁹⁷ The impossibility of considering *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* in its fullness is moreover emblematic of sublimity. Indeed, Pseudo-Longinus’ citing of ‘the lawgiver of the Jews’ is on the very grounds that His creative aptitude is incomprehensible. In turn, as Rich notes, Newman’s canvas acts as a reminder that ‘human beings are not omnipotent, not infinite in time and space; the mortal, finite viewer must always see things partially, in an unstable fashion’.⁹⁸

Lastly, the colours in *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* can also be related to the Longinian sublime. Out of the three shades in the painting, the red is the one which is most demanding. It is near pulsating in its vividness; Rich describes it as ‘vibrat[ing]’.⁹⁹ Such brilliance is reminiscent of God’s declaration of “Let there be light”, which one can imagine being of such exceptional luminosity that it momentarily plunged its surroundings into the shadows. Additionally, despite their comparative smallness, the blue and yellow areas of the

⁹⁴ Ned Denny, “Nothing to It”, *New Statesman* 15, no. 727 (2002): 41.

⁹⁵ Phyllis C. Yaffe “Barnett Newman’s ‘Voice of Fire’: The Politics of Art Acquisition”, *Queen’s Quarterly* 98, no. 4 (1991): 886.

⁹⁶ Rich, “Bridging”, 29.

⁹⁷ Rich, “Bridging”, 29.

⁹⁸ Rich, “Bridging”, 29.

⁹⁹ Rich, “Bridging”, 17.

painting act as a subtle reminder that the early verses of Genesis 1 are centred on images of contrast. The tonal variance and physical partition between the two colours brings to mind that narrative, whereby first there was darkness (Gen. 1:2), then light (Gen. 1:3), and then a separation of the two (Gen. 1:4). Furthermore, it can be argued that Newman's decision to use only red, yellow, and blue pigments links the painting intrinsically to the notion of primal origins. In being the three primary colours, they are those 'from which all others are derived, and which cannot be resolved or decomposed into other colours'.¹⁰⁰ Not only are the primary colours wholly unique, they are also the source of all others; it is hence plausible to relate them in a discussion regarding beginnings. Newman's colour palette in *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* also serves as an example of the core problem with Burke's *Enquiry*. Despite establishing here a case for the painting to be considered as emblematic of the sublime, Burke disqualified 'yellow' and 'blue' from being considered as such.¹⁰¹ Does the inclusion of these tones on Newman's canvas therefore negate all the other qualities which make it sublime? As shown, one can argue the very opposite – that the originality of the primary colours makes them highly redolent of sublimity. This artwork thus demonstrates the unfeasibility of stifling the sublime into a series of classifications. As underlined by Pseudo-Longinus, it is much more imprecise.

Rothko's *Untitled* (Fig. 4) can likewise be interpreted through a Longinian lens. It is one of eighteen paintings which are referred to as the 'Black and Greys': a series executed in the last year of the artist's life which are united in their near-monochromatism and bipartite compositions.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Lucie-Smith, *Art Terms*, 152.

¹⁰¹ Burke, *Enquiry*, 82.

¹⁰² Rothko, *Inside Out*, 207.



Fig. 4: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 233.7 x 200.3 cm. Collection of Christopher Rothko.

Due to their dark colourings and evermore reductive appearance, the Black and Greys are typically interpreted in light of Rothko's suicide which occurred one year later in 1970; Chilvers contends that they 'evoke his painful state of mind'.¹⁰³ Whilst the series does demonstrate a departure from his typical dazzling hues, as Rosenblum observes 'this sombre excursion into a rock-bottom vocabulary of black and grey had long been part of Rothko's repertory, even in the early 1940s'.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, the artist created a number of

¹⁰³ Chilvers, ed., *Art and Artists*, 460.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Rosenblum, "Rothko's Sublimities", in *On the Sublime: Mark Rothko, Yves Klein, James Turrell*, ed. Tracey Bashkoff (Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim, 2001), 55.

works in 1969 that did not conform to a dull colour palette; he frequently leaned towards both bright and pastel shades (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6).



Fig. 5: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1969, acrylic on paper, 127.2 x 107.3 cm. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art.



Fig. 6: Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1969, acrylic on paper, 188.3 x 122.3 cm. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art.

Resultantly, a reading of *Untitled* which positions the work not as a statement resignation but instead one which can recall the enlivenment of the beginnings of Creation is not nonsensical. In fact, fellow artist Helène Aylon recalls that Rothko was 'very pleased...when she told him that his black and grey stacked rectangles of the late 1960s invoked in her mind the opening verses of Genesis'.¹⁰⁵

The divided structure of *Untitled* is the feature which is most suggestive of the Creation narrative. God's parting of the light from the darkness (Gen. 1:4), the sky from the waters (Gen. 1:6), and the waters from the land (Gen. 1:9) are all brought to mind, the latter of which Pseudo-Longinus draws particular attention to. The clarity with which Rothko has painted the adjoining edge between the two masses of colour emphasises God's superlative

¹⁰⁵ Ashton, *About*, 77.

ascendency over these elements, in terms of both bringing them into fruition and then organising them spatially. Additionally, unlike Rothko's typical sectionals wherein the areas of colour are 'floating', in *Untitled* they appear pinned down to the canvas – they have become the backdrop.¹⁰⁶ Not only does this apparent pinning down perpetuate the image of God as supremely authoritative; it also gives the impression of a solid foundation from which the rest of Creation will unfold onto, a definitive beginning point. Despite this quality of firmness, the bottom half of the painting simultaneously emits a sense of dynamism. It is comprised of varying tones of grey which have been layered on top of one another – this is particularly noticeable in the bottom right corner. Rothko appears to have used rapid, fluid movements to create the series of intersecting strokes. His son aptly describes these markings as 'danc[ing]' and wrestl[ing] in vigorous interplay' and subsequently possessive of 'an almost primordial energy'.¹⁰⁷ The occurrence of this zealous undercurrent of activity alongside the aforementioned stability in the same work effortlessly captures the contradictory nature of the sublime; the Jewish God cannot be bound by reason.¹⁰⁸

Several other features in *Untitled* point towards God's illimitability. Although not as expansive as Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III*, the work is in keeping with the typical largeness of abstract sublime pieces measuring 233.7 x 200.3 cm.¹⁰⁹ In a 1954 letter to curator Katharine Kuh, Rothko specified that his works were designed to be 'encountered at close quarters'.¹¹⁰ Thus, he advised to 'hang the pictures low rather than high'.¹¹¹ Instructions such as these would further augment the impact of *Untitled* and the likes because, as Christopher Rothko notes, they 'violat[e] the natural panorama'.¹¹² It would be impossible to consider such a work in its entirety; instead, one would have to scan from the eye-level upwards and back down again, causing us to 'crane our neck'.¹¹³ Being confronted with an artwork which is so much larger than oneself is undeniably reminiscent

¹⁰⁶ Achim Borchardt-Hume, "Shadows of Light: Mark Rothko's Late Series", in *Rothko: The Late Series*, ed. Achim Borchardt-Hume (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 25.

¹⁰⁷ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 212.

¹⁰⁸ Pseudo-Longinus, *Sublime*, 2

¹⁰⁹ Briony Fer, "Seeing in the Dark", in *Rothko: The Late Series*, ed. Achim Borchardt-Hume (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 43.

¹¹⁰ Mark Rothko, "Letter to Katharine Kuh: September 25th, 1954", in *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel López-Remiro (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 99.

¹¹¹ Mark Rothko, "September 25th", 99.

¹¹² Rothko, *Inside Out*, 82.

¹¹³ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 82.

of the sublime Creator's powerfulness which is, by nature, unfathomable. Such boundlessness is further insinuated in *Untitled* by Rothko's erasure of an earlier established border. Whilst all the other works in the Black and Grey series boast a white band around the edge of their canvases, in *Untitled* it has been demarcated and then covered over; this is most apparent in the upper segment of the work on left hand side. Although it is unclear why the artist made this decision, Christopher Rothko is spot on in his observation that it makes the work appear as if it is 'pushing outward'.¹¹⁴ Such an impression is a fitting symbolisation of God's force which defies any attempt to be contained.

The materials utilised in the painting, and the specific ways in which these are manipulated, further imply His unfathomability. In Rothko's earlier sectionals he built up 'layers of translucent and opaque paints', leaning most frequently towards oils.¹¹⁵ This combination produced the 'luminous glow' which his canvases are famed for.¹¹⁶ Contrastingly, Rothko used acrylic paints for the Black and Grey series which has made them 'less permeable'; *Untitled* thus keeps the viewer 'at an arm's length'.¹¹⁷ This can be especially said for the upper section of the work which upon first glance appears to be nothing but a black mass of colour. Resultantly, later Rothko canvases such as these are frequently described as 'void[s]'; Fer maintains 'there is a lack of anything to see'.¹¹⁸ The frequent association between the work and 'the abyss' or 'nothingness' once more strengthens the case for it to be considered sublime from a Longinian perspective.¹¹⁹ As abovementioned, it is those artworks which are most reductive in style which allude to the Jewish God's otherliness, which perpetually defies any attempt to directly illustrate it. At a conference at the Pratt Institute in New York in 1958, Rothko himself acknowledged that 'there is more power in telling little than in telling all'; it is as though he was echoing the very crux of Pseudo-

¹¹⁴ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 211.

¹¹⁵ Jane Qiu, "Rothko's Method Revealed", *Nature* 456 (2008): 447.

¹¹⁶ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 37.

¹¹⁷ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 37.

¹¹⁸ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 216;

Dare Oduye, *Abstract Expressionist Interior Spaces: A Comparison of the effects of colour in Le Corbusier's Chapel at Ronchamp and Mark Rothko's mural paintings in the Rothko Chapel*, 1st ed. (N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 54;

Rosenblum, "Abstract", 110;

Fer, "Seeing", 33.

¹¹⁹ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 216;

Rosenblum, "Sublimities", 57.

Longinus' argument.¹²⁰ Consequently, in the context of sublimity, the artist's well known declaration that 'there is no such thing as a good painting about nothing' falls apart – a painting about nothing is superlative.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Rothko, "Pratt Institute", 126.

¹²¹ Mark Rothko, "Rothko and Gottlieb's Letter to the Editor, 1943", in *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel López-Remiro (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 36.

Chapter Three – Genesis 1:3

This Chapter will move from considering the Creation narrative in its generality, and home in specifically on Gen. 1:3 – ‘Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light’. Aside from describing the beginnings of the bringing forth of the world, two important details can be teased from this passage. The first is that this engenderment is instantaneous – from nothing ‘there was’ suddenly something. The second is that the Creator accomplished this through the means of speech: ‘God said’. Consequently, it is perhaps unsurprising that Pseudo-Longinus positions Gen. 1:3 as the apex of sublimity as *Peri Hypsous* is a treatise which, despite its theological consideration here, is first and foremost an examination of language. Although not the primary aim of this study, it is interesting to pause and consider the reasons why God might have chosen to create through an utterance, a matter explored by Yovel.¹²²

Yovel raises a valid point when questioning why an omnipotent God would ‘require a mediating device—such as language—rather than simply act through a performative [*sic*] will?’¹²³ Likewise, he is equally rational in asking ‘How is it possible for him [God] to use a word for light prior to the creation of *light*? Before there was something for the word “light” to refer to, not temporally and contingently as a historical matter, but as a matter of ontological impossibility?’¹²⁴ He rectifies these two quandaries by arguing that because of language’s ‘reflexivity’ (‘i.e. its metapragmatic application to itself’), the only way for it to come into being was for it to be ‘perform[ed]’.¹²⁵ He expands on the theological implications of this: ‘The only way for God to create a prohibition to serve as a justification for future sanction (e.g. prohibit Adam and Eve from consuming the fruit of certain trees) would be through communicating it. God could not simply *will* a prohibition’.¹²⁶ Yovel assures the reader that ‘this is not a constraint on omnipotence as it is generated from the nature of language itself’.¹²⁷ Regardless of the accuracy or inaccuracy of this claim, Yovel’s reliance on

¹²² See Jonathan Yovel “The Creation of Language and Language without Time: Metaphysics and Metapragmatics in Genesis 1”, *Biblical Interpretation* 20, no. 3 (2012): 205-225, and “In the Beginning was the Word: Paradigms of Language and Normativity in Law, Philosophy, and Theology”, *Moutbatten Journal of Legal Studies* 5 (2001): 5-33.

¹²³ Yovel, “Creation”, 206.

¹²⁴ Yovel, “Beginning”, 28.

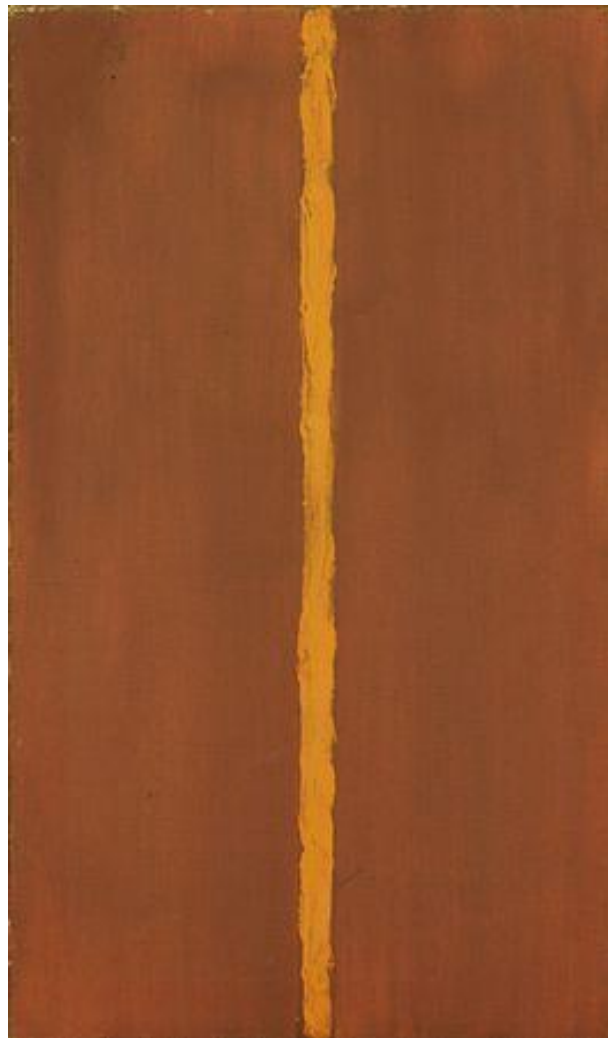
¹²⁵ Yovel, “Creation”, 207; 215.

¹²⁶ Yovel, “Creation”, 218.

¹²⁷ Yovel, “Creation”, 207.

phrases like ‘God could not’ and ‘the only way’ is still problematic. It generates the image of a Creator who is both incapacitated and constricted – a direct contrast to the vision of power which is suggested in Genesis. Consequently, Yovel’s writings demonstrate the pitfalls one faces when trying to apply reason to a God who cannot be bound by such a thing. It is however important to note that this inexplicability does not have to be unwelcome, at least when considered in the context of *Peri Hypsous*. Indeed, that which is baffling is a source of awe, not frustration; to be kept in the dark, so to say, is evidence that one ‘ha[s] lighted on the true Sublime’.¹²⁸

In view of this, Newman’s *Onement I* (1948) (Fig. 7) can be interpreted as symbolic of Gen. 1:3.



¹²⁸ Pseudo-Longinus, *Sublime*, 12.

Fig. 7: Barnett Newman, *Onement I*, 1948, oil on canvas, 69.2 x 41.2 cm. New York, MoMA.

Although Newman had experimented between 1946-7 with his now famed 'zip' (a band which draws a division through the canvas), *Onement I* self admittedly marked a series of firsts for the artist.¹²⁹ He maintained that 'for the first time with this painting the painting had a life of its own, in a way that I don't think the others did'.¹³⁰ A 1970 interview with Emile de Antonio once more framed *Onement I* as a kind of artistic rebirth: 'That stroke made the thing come to life for me'.¹³¹ These statements demonstrate that Newman himself considered the artwork to be possessive of a unique vitality which he had not encountered before – there was a shift from nothing to something. This shows parallels with the instantaneousness of the creative act. Even more aptly, after producing *Onement I* Newman 'ceased to make art for nine months', spending his time 'trying to understand' just what he had created.¹³² This pause calls to mind the aftermath of Genesis 1, when 'God rested from all the work that he had done in creation' (Gen. 2:1).

The title of *Onement I* is arguably equally suggestive of beginnings. On the subject of titles, Newman insisted that 'I do think that the paintings should have their impact in terms of their emotion without the title'.¹³³ Nonetheless, he maintained that his titles do 'correspond to what I think is the feeling...and the meaning of' the work, acting as a kind of 'clue to others'.¹³⁴ With this in mind, various suggestions have been raised regarding the meaning of *Onement I*. Although seemingly never providing an explanation for the work, according to Hess Newman advised that it could refer to 'At-onement, Atonement, the events of Yom Kippur which is a day of remembrance of the dead'.¹³⁵ Firestone is sceptical of this, questioning 'How does a single, irregular stripe on a darker ground convey the idea

¹²⁹ *The Cry* and *Moment*, both from 1946, are two of Newman's earlier works which include the zip motif.

¹³⁰ Newman, "Interview with David Sylvester", in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neil (California: University of California Press, 1992), 256.

¹³¹ Barnett Newman, "Interview with Emile de Antonio, 1970", in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neil (California: University of California Press, 1992), 306.

¹³² Suzanne Penn, "Intuition and Incidental: The Paintings of Barnett Newman", *Studies in Conservation* 49, no. 2 (2004): 142;

Newman, "Sylvester", 255.

¹³³ Newman, "Sylvester", 259.

¹³⁴ Newman, "Sylvester", 258; 259.

¹³⁵ Hess, *Newman*, 32.

of atonement?’¹³⁶ However, when one considers that Yom Kippur is the day when ‘a person repents for the sins of the previous year and thus is metaphorically renewed’, Newman’s zip is more comprehensible.¹³⁷ Indeed, its division of the canvas could symbolise the act of ‘drawing a line in the sand’, marking a separation between the year which has gone and the year which is to come. If one finds this understanding of Yom Kippur to be convincing, then an interpretation of *Onement I* in relation to the Creation narrative is plausible; in fact, as Temkin notes, the Jewish holy day is in itself ‘a fresh start – genesis’.¹³⁸ Rosenblum echoes this relation with Genesis, remarking that Newman’s titles, including *Onement I*, attest to his ‘sublime intention’ of ‘evok[ing] the primaeval movement of creation’, although he does not elucidate how this specific title achieves this.¹³⁹

The composition of *Onement I* is evocative of God’s sublime declaration of “Let there be light”. After laying down the backdrop in a dark cadmium-red oil paint, Newman has added his band down the centre of the canvas.¹⁴⁰ This in itself, as Hess explains, ‘is an act of division, a gesture of separation’, similar to when God ‘separated light from darkness, with a line drawn in the void’; Newman ‘re-enacts God’s primal gesture’.¹⁴¹ Upon closer inspection, it is evident that this zip is not consistent in width or density; towards the bottom it becomes narrower and the paint also appears to thin at different points. These inconsistencies can probably be attributed to Newman’s manipulation of the paint with a palette knife which permits a less-precise application of product.¹⁴² Yet, such variations are most suitable for conveying the sheer intensity of God’s creative light. Indeed, they create the impression of a powerful surge of light which cannot be contained in a neat band – it is too excessive. Instead, it pulsates through the canvas with such force that its edges have become frayed. Resultantly, it is unclear why Rosenberg approached such an interpretation with caution, remarking that ‘it may be an exaggeration to say that in [paintings such as]

¹³⁶ Firestone, “*Onement I*”, 46.

¹³⁷ Temkin, *Newman*, 158.

¹³⁸ Temkin, *Newman*, 158.

¹³⁹ Rosenblum, “Abstract”, 111.

¹⁴⁰ Firestone, “*Onement I*”, 48.

¹⁴¹ Hess, *Newman*, 34.

¹⁴² Firestone, “*Onement I*”, 48.

these the shafts quiver with the passage of vigour'.¹⁴³ Hess evidently felt more convinced by the sense of energy in *Onement I*, describing it as 'vibrat[ing] with light'.¹⁴⁴

As above mentioned, this creative light is specifically engendered through an announcement – 'God said'. Accordingly, Leja compares those of Newman's zips which are more irregularly edged like the one in *Onement I* to 'resonating vocal cords' that 'communicate law and authority'.¹⁴⁵ This image is most suitable; the trembling band is indeed reminiscent of the oscillations, albeit on a more subtle scale, of traditional sound waves.¹⁴⁶ The consideration of *Onement I* through a specifically Jewish lens is hence strengthened when one considers that Leja focusses specifically on those voices which possess 'law and authority'.¹⁴⁷ If one recalls, for Pseudo-Longinus the most sublime existent is not simply 'God' but 'the lawgiver of the Jews'.¹⁴⁸ It is He who brought forth Creation through an incomparably powerful utterance.

The instantaneous manner in which light is spoken into existence can likewise be insinuated by the artistic method of *Onement I*. Newman's zip were generally created 'by putting tape down over a colour and leaving it there until the painting as a whole was finished, removing it at the end'.¹⁴⁹ The style in which Newman applied the paint after affixing said tape (precise or haphazard) and the tools that he used to execute this (brush or palette knife) dictated the quality of the zip's edges. For example, whilst those in *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* are sharp and smooth, *Onement I*'s are more irregular. It is unsurprising that Newman's peeling away of the tape upon completion of an artwork is regarded as redolent of God's announcement of "'Let there be light" – and there was'. Although the latter is undoubtedly of a much more epic proportion, both can be described as 'ta-da!' moments which are revelatory of a kind of masterpiece. This analogy of the artist as Creator is one which is notably emphasised by Hess. He writes that 'the artist like a true creator is

¹⁴³ Harold Rosenberg, "Barnett Newman: 'A Man of Controversy and Spiritual Grandeur'", *Vogue* 141, no. 3 (1963): 166.

¹⁴⁴ Hess, *Newman*, 34.

¹⁴⁵ Leja, "Tango", 576.

¹⁴⁶ Leja, "Tango", 576.

¹⁴⁷ Leja, "Tango", 576.

¹⁴⁸ Pseudo-Longinus, *Sublime*, 18.

¹⁴⁹ Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, "Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime, 1999", in *The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Simon Morley (London: Whitechapel Gallery Ventures Ltd, 2010), 137.

delving into chaos...tr[ying] to wrest truth from the void' – 'the artist is *the* Creator'.¹⁵⁰

Whilst such a comparison is undoubtedly appealing, any claim that suggests that God's acts are directly imitable is jeopardised when one recalls the fundamental assertion of *Peri Hypsous*: sublimity is incomparable. Moreover, with regards to *Onement I*, Newman never actually took off the tape which he laid down the centre of the canvas; instead, he painted on top of it, leaving it 'exposed'.¹⁵¹ Consequently, it is not Newman's confiscation of *Onement I*'s tape which relates the work to the rapidity of light in Gen. 1:3; it is, arguably, his very means of applying the paint in the first place.

For instance, when producing a painting one might imagine making preliminary markings on the canvas, mixing manufactured colours to achieve the optimal shade, and altering the opacity of this shade by using a thinner or thickener. However, as Penn details, in the case of *Onement I* Newman worked much more 'spontaneously'.¹⁵² The colour of the zip was applied 'apparently straight out of the tube' meaning that 'concept and execution ha[d] to work together at the exact and same moment'.¹⁵³ Although on a fractional scale, the swiftness with which Newman fashioned this band brings to mind the first light bursting forth upon God's command. The relation between *Onement I* and a degree of quickness is furthered by Hess who believes the zip looks 'instantaneous, like lightning'.¹⁵⁴ Again, this language further supports the argument for the painting to be considered in the vein of sublimity as Pseudo-Longinus talks of Gen. 1:3 as being as hasty as a 'lightning-flash'.¹⁵⁵

The colours in *Onement I* further relate it to Gen. 1:3. The eye is first drawn to the zip which glows in the centre of the canvas, while the dimmer surrounding segments are secondary in noticeability. Such a distinction is reminiscent of the brilliant light slicing through the primal darkness – an image cited by Pseudo-Longinus as sublime because of, among other things, the element of contrast which it is embedded into it. Despite this differentiation the canvas remains, as Shiff points out, wholly 'warm', incorporating 'no cool colours to harmonise' it.¹⁵⁶ This sense of imbalance is most apposite for communicating the potency and

¹⁵⁰ Hess, *Newman*, 24; 17.

¹⁵¹ Hess, *Newman*, 36.

¹⁵² Penn, "Intuition", 142.

¹⁵³ Penn, "Intuition", 142.

¹⁵⁴ Hess, *Newman*, 34.

¹⁵⁵ Pseudo-Longinus, *Sublime*, 3.

¹⁵⁶ Shiff, "Introduction", xx.

pervasiveness of the first light. It gives the impression of it seeping boundlessly, permitting nothing to evade its illuminating capacity – there is no room for coolness. Moreover, Rich observes that these colours ‘see[m] to elude containment.’¹⁵⁷ Indeed, is *Onement I*’s zip golden, ochre, pale yellow, or mustard? Likewise, are the neighbouring fields umber, mahogany, or as Rich describes them, ‘muddy’?¹⁵⁸ The inability to name these colours further strengthens the case for the painting to be considered as implicative of sublimity; to categorise the sublime is, to use the words of *Peri Hypsous*, ‘a hard matter’.

In addition, the flatness of *Onement I* can be argued to contribute to its association with the Hebraic Creation narrative. Although its zip is a singular strip it has two vertical edges – one to the left and one to the right. Yaffe explains that usually when more than one line features in an artwork ‘a degree of three-dimensionality is introduced: one thing is in front, another is behind’.¹⁵⁹ However, this is not the case with *Onement I*; Newman has maintained the “integrity” of the surface, preventing ‘it look[ing] like it has depth’.¹⁶⁰ From a purely artistic viewpoint this deserves praise, as Yaffe stresses that ‘such an effect is more difficult than it appears’; this hence challenges any claim which perceives abstract art to be straightforward or infantile.¹⁶¹ Theologically speaking, this flatness can be interpreted as symbolic of the very nature of *bereshit*. This holds that nothing can be known prior to Gen. 1:1 (‘In the beginning’); is impossible to delve any deeper, what one is presented with is all one can know. The lack of depth in *Onement I* thus helps to convey this; one cannot delve beyond the two-dimensionality of Newman’s canvas.

Furthermore, the way in which *Onement I* establishes an impression of infinity ties it even closer to sublimity. In comparison to the rest of Newman’s catalogue, *Onement I* is admittedly small measuring 69.2 x 41.2 cm.¹⁶² Consequently, through a Burkean lens the painting finds itself in a similar position to the one which *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* was in with regards to its brightness. If ‘greatness of dimension’ is an essential component of sublimity, does the established argument for *Onement I* to be considered as

¹⁵⁷ Rich, “Bridging”, 31.

¹⁵⁸ Rich, “Bridging”, 30.

¹⁵⁹ Yaffe, ““Voice of Fire””, 886.

¹⁶⁰ Yaffe, ““Voice of Fire””, 886.

¹⁶¹ Yaffe, ““Voice of Fire””, 886.

¹⁶² Hess, *Newman*, 36.

such disintegrate?¹⁶³ Again, this demonstrates the shortcomings of attempting to carve up the sublime into definite categories – it is of a much more vague nature than this.

Moreover, even though *Onement I* does not possess great dimensions it does convey a sense of largeness in an alternative way. Its bisecting zip touches the upper and lower sides of the canvas – there are no gaps. Resultantly, this establishes a sense of unrelenting continuity; one can imagine the zip puncturing beyond the work's parameters, perpetually extending above and below. This effect is amplified by the absence of a frame on *Onement I*. A letter from 1954 suggests that this was a deliberate choice, for Newman asserted that he did not consider the frame to be a 'simple matter of display and decorative technique'.¹⁶⁴ The purposefulness of this decision is strengthened by the fact that, as Hess points out, on rare occasions Newman did incorporate a framing device into his works; *The Wild* from 1950 serves as an example of this (Fig. 8).¹⁶⁵ Thus, despite *Onement I*'s small scale, it engenders a sense of expansiveness in an indirect manner. This, in turn, emphasises the boundlessness and grandeur of the Creator and His creative process.

¹⁶³ Burke, *Enquiry*, 72.

¹⁶⁴ Newman, 'Letter to the Editor, *The New York Times Magazine*, 1954', in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neil (California: University of California Press, 1992), 41.

¹⁶⁵ Hess, *Newman*, 46.



Fig. 8: Barnett Newman, *The Wild*, 1950, oil on canvas, 242 x 4.1 cm. New York, MoMA.

Chapter Four – The Hegelian Sublime and Kabbalah

Pseudo-Longinus' positioning of the Jewish God as the apex of sublimity was echoed by Hegel in the nineteenth century. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, he states that 'Judaism is the religion of sublimity [*Erhabenheit*] because of its high, exalted conception of the one God'; before anything else he praises its monotheism.¹⁶⁶ Hegel reasserts several of the points detailed in *Peri Hypsous*. For example, he cites Gen. 1:3 as 'one of the most sublime passages' because it 'tells us how he [God] works'.¹⁶⁷ Similarly, he stresses the interconnectedness of His speech and the primal light: 'Yet his breath [of God] is here light as well, the world of light, the infinite outpouring of light, so that light here becomes merely a word'.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, *Lectures* supports the recognised relation between sublimity and power; in fact, for Hegel, it stands as 'the only representation of power'.¹⁶⁹ Lastly, Hegel maintains that the fear which is associated with the powerfulness of the Jewish God is not pure terror: 'it is not the bad kind of fear that is afraid of something, but the fear that lets everything go, gives everything up'.¹⁷⁰ This coheres with Pseudo-Longinus' claim that the sublime should be both frightening and retain an element of pleasure – one should feel 'lifted up' with 'generous exultation'.¹⁷¹

In *Lectures*, Hegel expands on the nature of the Jewish God's creative act. He proposes that prior to Creation, the One was 'merely reflection-into-self' – complete 'undifferentiat[ion] in which 'all distinction disappears'.¹⁷² Following this came the One's 'particularization' or 'self-determination'.¹⁷³ This was not, as Hegel points out, 'a matter of God being particularized internally, for then God would be known as spirit'.¹⁷⁴ Instead, 'this particularization is initially the divine process of determining in general, and that is what we call *creation*'.¹⁷⁵ Accordingly, Hegel clarifies the status which said Creation holds: it 'does not consist in a going forth of the particular from any sort of One, as in the case of Brahman' but is instead

¹⁶⁶ Hegel, *Lectures*, 423.

¹⁶⁷ Hegel, *Lectures*, 433.

¹⁶⁸ Hegel, *Lectures*, 433.

¹⁶⁹ Hegel, *Lectures*, 434.

¹⁷⁰ Hegel, *Lectures*, 443.

¹⁷¹ Pseudo-Longinus, *Sublime*, 12.

¹⁷² Hegel, *Lectures*, 424.

¹⁷³ Hegel, *Lectures*, 426.

¹⁷⁴ Hegel, *Lectures*, 426.

¹⁷⁵ Hegel, *Lectures*, 426.

‘independent’.¹⁷⁶ Still, in keeping with the paradoxical nature of the sublime, it is equally maintained that ‘everything that has gone forth continues to have the character of being a positioned *creature*. Hence all things are stamped with the mark that shows they are *not* truly independent’.¹⁷⁷ Nonetheless, Hegel is keen to assert that the contingent character of Creation does not make it worthless in any way. Rather, in being ‘a moment of the divine, the being of the finite thing must be characterized [as a work] of *goodness*’.¹⁷⁸

Three aspects of the Hegelian sublime – differentiation within the One, the simultaneous creation of the world, and the non-autonomous status of said world – all feature in the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (Book of Splendour). This is the ‘central book of Kabbalah’ which was circulated in Spain from 1280 onwards.¹⁷⁹ Mostly written in Aramaic, it is a ‘commentary...on all portions of the five books of the Pentateuch, as if they were ancient midrashic works’.¹⁸⁰ Although two other Kabbalistic texts existed prior to it – the *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation) and the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Book of Brightness) – the *Zohar* gained a foundational status.¹⁸¹ This is because, as Scholem explains, it is wholly theosophic. Not only does this mean that it ‘purports to perceive and to describe the mysterious workings of the Divinity’; it also believes that ‘it [is] possible to become absorbed in its contemplation’.¹⁸² This stands in contrast to the *Yetzirah*, for example, which is more of a ‘scientific treatise’.¹⁸³ Despite the *Zohar* being more of ‘a collection of...writings’ than a cohesive book, Scholem assures that ‘we may now say with a fair amount of philological certainty that Moses de Leon must indeed be considered the actual author of [it]’.¹⁸⁴

In a commentary on the early chapters of Genesis, the *Zohar* details that *Ein-Sof* (the Infinite) was originally an ‘unformed...sphere’ – pure substance without subjectivity.¹⁸⁵ Accordingly, in lacking any kind of definition, He can here be described as being in a state of

¹⁷⁶ Hegel, *Lectures*, 426.

¹⁷⁷ Hegel, *Lectures*, 427.

¹⁷⁸ Hegel, *Lectures*, 429.

¹⁷⁹ Boaz Huss, “Translations of the Zohar: Historical Contexts and Ideological Frameworks”, *Correspondences* 4 (2016): 82;

Gershom Scholem, ed., *Zohar, The Book of Splendor: Basic Readings from the Kabbalah* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), xvi.

¹⁸⁰ Dan, *Introduction*, 32.

¹⁸¹ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, rev. ed (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 205.

¹⁸² Scholem, *Trends*, 206.

¹⁸³ Dan, *Introduction*, 17.

¹⁸⁴ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, x; xviii.

¹⁸⁵ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

chaos analogous to *tohu va-bohu*: 'when the earth was a formless void' (Gen. 1:2). Then, inexplicably, 'the will of the King began to take effect'; de Leon describes it to be a 'dark flame' which emerged 'from the most hidden recess...of *eyn-sof*'.¹⁸⁶ Such an image marks the first act of self-recognition within the Godhead. Subsequently, this flame which was 'neither white nor black, neither red nor green, of no color whatever' began to press towards *Ein-Sof*'s own boundary, continuing to 'assume size and dimension'.¹⁸⁷ At the same time, each impulse towards self-knowledge was coupled with the desire to remain enclosed within Himself; as de Leon details, 'the well broke through and yet did not break through the ether {of the sphere}'.¹⁸⁸ Resultantly, *Ein-Sof* can be described as being in a contradictory state, of encompassing a divided will which is torn between two ultimatums. Eventually, the dark flame, the urge for self-recognition ruptures through the boundary, 'spr[inging] forth a well out of which colours issued and spread upon everything beneath'.¹⁸⁹ As in the Hegelian sublime, differentiation has occurred and the world has simultaneously being engendered. Importantly, the *Zohar* holds that 'beyond this point nothing can be known'.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, 'it is called *reshit*, beginning' – *Ein Sof* largely remains a mystery.¹⁹¹

Nevertheless, the *Zohar* does provide an account of the unfolding of Creation. It is understood that at the centre of *Ein-Sof* 'is the innermost light, of a translucence, subtilty, and purity beyond comprehension'.¹⁹² After this light punctured His own sphere and refracted into 'radiant colors', *Ein-Sof* concentrated it into a series of vessels – the *sefirot*.¹⁹³ These are the 'ten aspects of his Being' which as a group 'constitute the mystical Tree of God'.¹⁹⁴ The *sefirot* are organised into three tiers, the highest ones being closest to *Ein-Sof* and the lowest ones being the furthest away from Him. Consequently, the *Zohar* explains that the uppermost *sefirah* is *Kether* (crown or source) – 'a never-to-be-exhausted-fountain

¹⁸⁶ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

¹⁸⁷ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

¹⁸⁸ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

¹⁸⁹ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

¹⁹⁰ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

¹⁹¹ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

¹⁹² Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 4.

¹⁹³ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

¹⁹⁴ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 53;

Scholem, *Trends*, 214;

Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 27.

of light'.¹⁹⁵ This beams into the next two vessels which are situated below it, *Binah* (intelligence) to the left and *Hokmah* (wisdom) to the right. Next is the central tier which is comprised of *Din* (judgement), *Tiferet* (beauty), and *Hesed* (love) accordingly. Underneath these is the lower level which is comprised of *Hod* (majesty) to the left, *Yesod* (foundation) in the middle, and *Nezah* (victory) to the right. Lastly, *Ein-Sof's* light flows into the final sefirah, *Malkuth*, which is the material kingdom. As in the Hegelian framework, the *Zohar* presents Creation as contingent upon *Ein-Sof*. Indeed, if 'the Creator who made these tubes should choose to break them, then would the waters return to their source, and only broken vessels would remain, dry, without water' – *Malkuth* would cease to exist.¹⁹⁶ Such *creatio continuata* is revelatory of the influence of the Neoplatonic scheme of emanation on *Zoharic* Kabbalah. This doctrine holds that light flows ceaselessly from the Godhead, the *superessentia*, down to the created world. However, while Neoplatonism considers a contingent Creation to be paltry, this is unproblematic for de Leon and hence, as already stated, Hegel.

As there is thus scope for a unification between the *Zoharic* narrative and the sublime discourse, it stands to reason that the theological doctrine can be discussed in relation to art, specifically abstraction. Scholem himself even acknowledges that Kabbalah is a tradition which is full of 'creative imagery', citing the *Zohar* as being a document of 'sustained chiaroscuro'.¹⁹⁷ Therefore, the expansive, reductive character of abstract art and its subsequent insinuation of the Infinite can likewise be understood as symbolic of *Ein-Sof's* splendour and creative capabilities. Although no prior connection between this artistic style and Kabbalah is arguably required for it to be interpreted through such a lens, some of Scholem's book covers do appear to establish one. Three of his paperback editions, all of which grapple with Kabbalah, showcase abstract designs. First, the 1995 version of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Fig. 9) features the abstract expressionist painting *Excalibur #2* by Adolph Gottlieb (1903-1974). Second, the 1995 version of *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* displays (Fig. 10) the painting *Black Head* by Susan Rothenberg (1945-2020) which likewise boasts an abstract flair. Lastly, the 1997 version of

¹⁹⁵ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 53.

¹⁹⁶ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 53.

¹⁹⁷ Scholem, *Zohar*, xxiii; xx.

On The Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah (Fig. 11) includes the abstract painting *Message 1* by Grisha Bruskin (1945-).

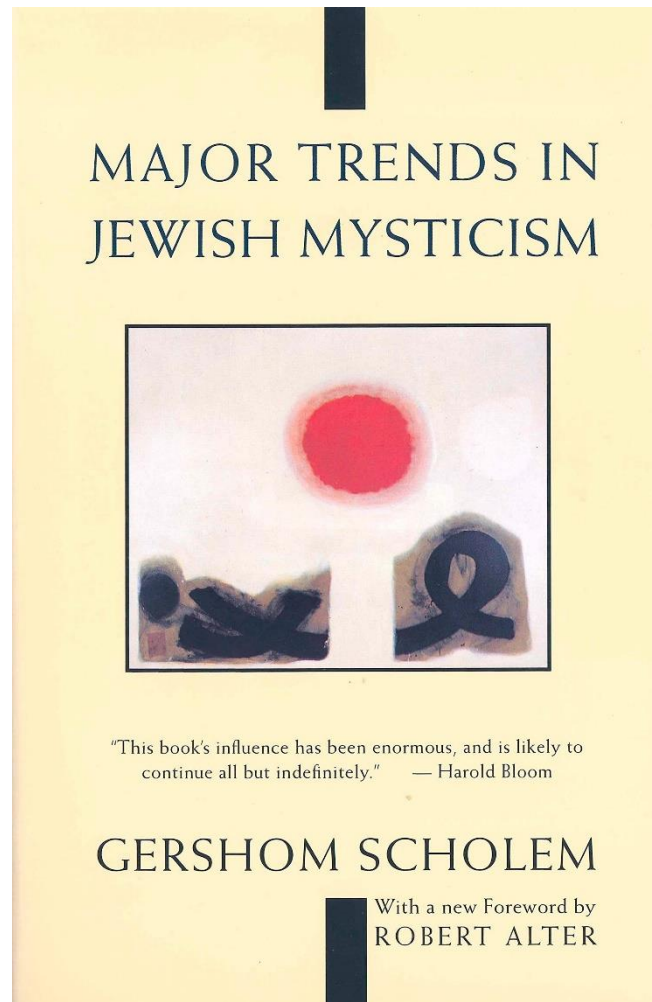


Fig. 9: Cover of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* by Gershom Scholem, 1995 edition published by Schocken Books.

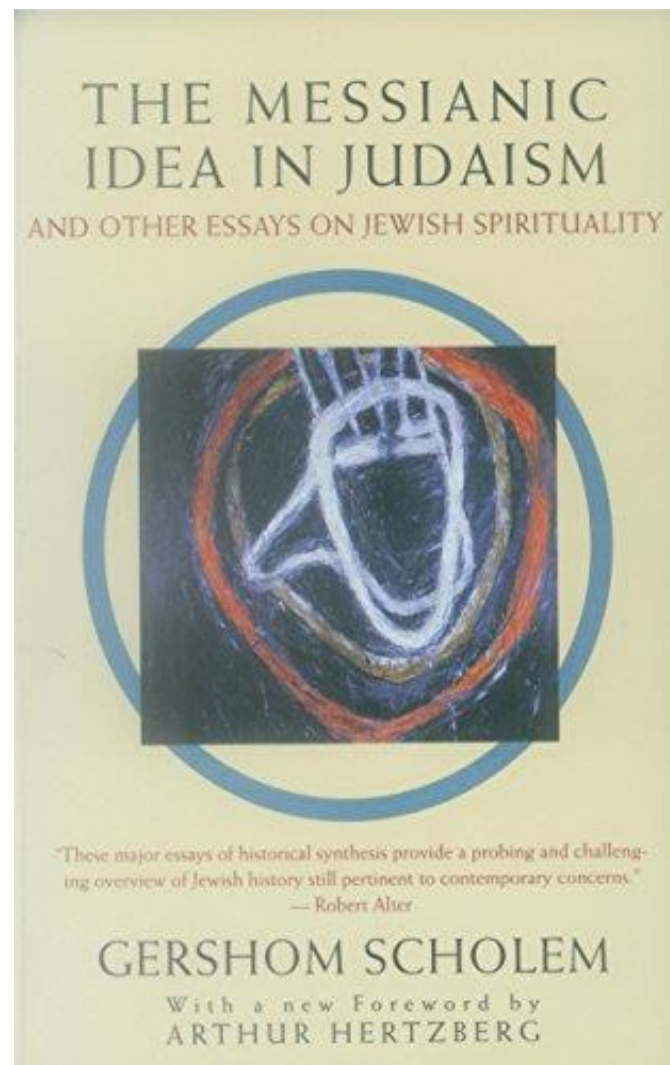


Fig. 10: Cover of *The Messianic Idea and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* by Gershom Scholem, 1995 edition published with Schocken Books.

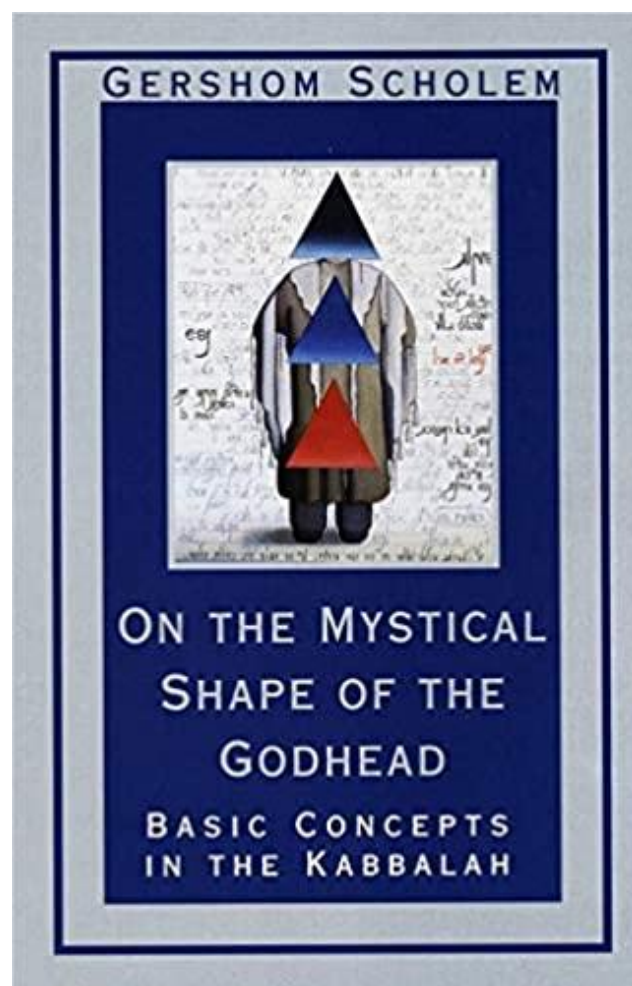


Fig. 11: Cover of *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basics Concepts in the Kabbalah* by Gershom Scholem, 1997 edition published by Schocken Books.

This observation does not seek to suggest that Scholem himself had anything to do with these designs, least of all because he passed in 1982 before the release of any of the editions in question; they are most likely the result of publishing preferences and marketing strategies. Nevertheless, the decision to use specifically abstract images out of all the other artistic possibilities nonetheless publicly presents the Kabbalistic *Ein-Sof*, and by association its Creation account, as defiant of figurative or direct representation, as something which supersedes these bounds.

Chapter Five – The Zoharic Creation Account

The segment of the *Zoharic* Creation narrative which has been relayed can be separated into roughly three parts: *Ein-Sof* as undifferentiated substance, the division of His will, and the bursting forth of His beam of light from which the *sefirot* are produced. This chapter will home in on three abstract artworks – The Rothko Chapel (1971), Rothko's *Number 207 (Red over Dark Blue on Dark Grey)*, 1961), and Newman's *Onement I* (1948). Staying true to the discourse of the sublime, it will argue that each one of these is suggestive of, but does not directly illustrate, one of the three aforementioned stages of *Ein-Sof*'s differentiation.

The earliest *Zoharic* conception of *Ein-Sof* as 'unformed' will first be explored.¹⁹⁸ As well as the crossover with Hegel's conception of the sublime God of Judaism, the case for *Ein-Sof* to be considered sublime is furthered by the language of the *Zohar*. If one recalls, the Biblical Creator is the most sublime existent for Pseudo-Longinus because He is beyond comprehension. Fittingly, *Ein-Sof* is presented in the *Zohar* in an analogous fashion. He is presented as having no 'shape', 'attributes', or 'similitude', as 'no vessel exists to contain him'.¹⁹⁹ Indeed, there are no 'means [available] to apprehend' *Ein Sof*, nor is His power anything which one 'could embody into a finite conception'.²⁰⁰ Resultantly, Bloom's claim that any 'images of [*Ein-Sof*] are merely hyperboles' is hereby proved wholly accurate.²⁰¹ The argument for *Ein-Sof* as sublime is furthered by the very definition, or lack of, of the name itself. Its most frequent translations are 'the Infinite' or 'no end' meaning that, as Dan asserts, 'it is a negative phrase'.²⁰² This is because *Ein-Sof* is, understandably, 'beyond language'.²⁰³

In light of this, the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas (Fig. 12) can be interpreted as being symbolic of this initial portrayal of *Ein-Sof* in the *Zohar*.

¹⁹⁸ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

¹⁹⁹ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 51; 52.

²⁰⁰ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 52.

²⁰¹ Bloom, *Criticism*, 25.

²⁰² Dan, *Introduction*, 41; 42.

²⁰³ Dan, *Introduction*, 42.



Fig. 12: The north, north east, and north west wall canvases by Mark Rothko in the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas.

The site was commissioned by John (née Jean) and Dominique de Ménéil, both of whom were art collectors, and its architecture and interior was collaboratively designed by Rothko. The Chapel is home to fourteen of Rothko's masterpieces; the couple envisioned these would 'inspire the kind of meditation which was elicited less and less in the twentieth century by conventional religious imagery and rites', functioning in a 'quasi-religious way'.²⁰⁴ Like *Untitled*, Rothko created the canvases in the 1960s, although they do differ from his aforementioned *Black and Grey* series.²⁰⁵ He has banished any areas of lightness, exploiting only dark tones. The Chapel opened in February 1971, a year after the artist's passing. Nonetheless, prior to this Anfam details that 'when questioned about the content of the

²⁰⁴ Rosenblum, *Northern*, 215.

²⁰⁵ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 38.

Chapel paintings, Rothko replied, ‘the infinite eternity of death’.²⁰⁶ Although this analysis will propose an alternate reading of the site, the artist’s own intention is hereby acknowledged.

Before turning to Kabbalah, it is worth examining the already established religious associations of the Rothko Chapel. The de M  nil’s were openly ‘devout Catholics’ and this is reflected in the very decision to label the site as a Chapel – one immediately associates it with Christianity.²⁰⁷ Considering this, there are a significant number of other features, both of and within the Chapel, which validate a Christian reading of it. For example, Dominique de M  nil revealed that the octagonal shape of the building ‘was originally meant for a Catholic chapel’ (Fig. 13).²⁰⁸

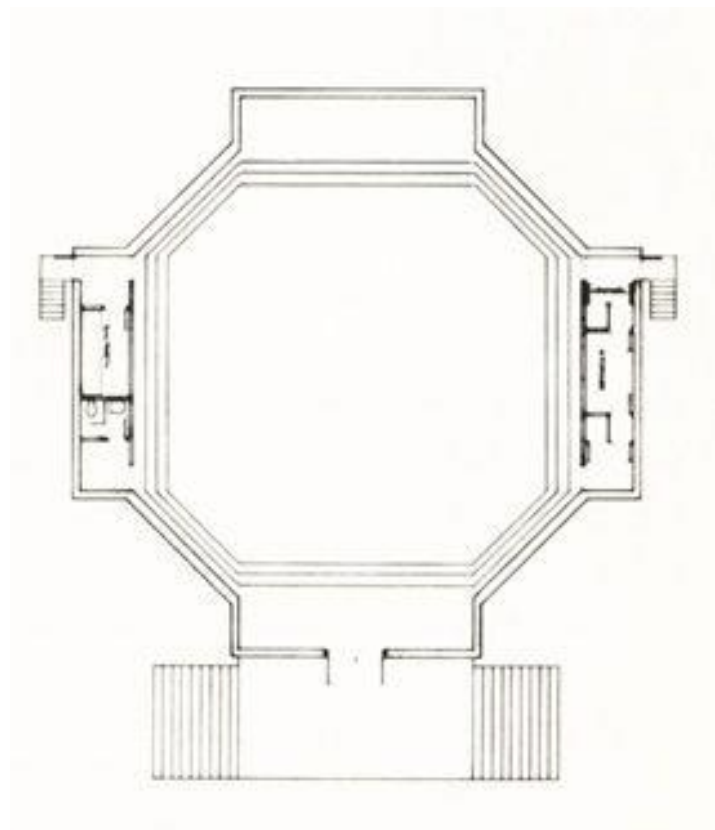


Fig. 13: Birdseye view of the architectural plan for the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas.

²⁰⁶ David Anfam, ‘The World in a Frame’, in *Rothko: The Late Series*, ed. Achim Borchardt-Hume (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 53.

²⁰⁷ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 122.

²⁰⁸ Dominique de M  nil, ‘The Rothko Chapel’, *Art Journal* 30, no. 3 (1971): 249.

She maintained that this ‘pleased Rothko, who had a special liking for the Torcello baptistry and church’ in Venice which is of a similar shape.²⁰⁹ An examination of the structures of some of Rothko’s canvases within the Chapel are equally demonstrative of this interest in Christian designs. Rosenblum explains that ‘on three of the chapel’s eight walls – the central, apse-like wall, and the facing side walls – Rothko provided variations on the triptych shape, with the central panel alternately raised or level with the side panels’.²¹⁰ This artistic decision is significant as triptych paintings are traditionally located behind the altar in Christian churches. Moreover, the number of Rothko canvases in the Chapel – fourteen – is innately reminiscent of the Stations of the Cross which are frequently positioned around the walls in many churches.

Despite the adoption of Christian features in the Rothko Chapel, there is scope for interpreting it outside of a Christian context. To begin with, the de M  nil’s aimed for the site ‘to convey some kind of universal religious experience without subscribing to a specific faith’, ‘a place where frank conversation might lead to the search for common bonds’.²¹¹ This inclusiveness was reflected by the attendees of the Chapel’s 1971 dedication ceremony; ‘the chairman of the Central Conference of Rabbis, an imam...Protestant bishops, a bishop from the Greek Orthodox Church, and, as a personal ambassador of the Pope, a Roman Catholic cardinal’ were all present.²¹² Additionally, although the octagonal floorplan of the Chapel was originally designed for a Catholic church, Christopher Rothko astutely notes that ‘it does not orient us towards Jerusalem or Mecca or any other seat of learning’.²¹³ This bolsters the claim for the site to be considered through other lenses alongside a Christian one. In a similar vein, with regards to the artworks themselves, Stoker argues against viewing them as symbolic of the Stations. He is correct in his observation that ‘if we look at how the paintings cohere, we do not see any linear development as is the case with the stations of the cross. There is no beginning and no end. The ‘story’ is missing.’²¹⁴ Whilst this

²⁰⁹ de M  nil, “Chapel”, 249.

²¹⁰ Rosenblum, *Northern*, 218.

²¹¹ Rosenblum, *Northern*, 216;

Andrew W. Achenbaum, “The Spiritual Landscapes of Dominique de M  nil”, *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging* 21, no. 3 (2009): 152.

²¹² Rosenblum, *Northern*, 216.

²¹³ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 130.

²¹⁴ Wessel Stoker, “The Rothko Chapel and the ‘Urgency of the Transcendent Experience’”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 64, no. 2 (2008): 99.

can be critiqued up to a point, as abstract art can exploit minimalism to its absolute extremes, it nonetheless demonstrates that not everyone is convinced by an exclusively Christian reading of the Chapel.

A greater sense of consensus is found when one considers the Rothko Chapel in relation to the sublime. Stoker argues that the ‘fear and fascination’ which the large-scale artworks engender in the building is evocative of the ‘transcend[en]t’, ‘mak[ing] the viewer aware of his smallness’.²¹⁵ This coheres with the general effect of abstract sublime artworks, as has been previously discussed. Nonetheless, he is likewise keen to stress that this sense of sublimity is ‘not specified further in terms of a specific religious tradition’ by the artworks or the architecture of the Chapel; rather, it is ‘open’.²¹⁶ This is well grounded when one recalls that the de M  nil’s wanted the site to be ‘interreligious’, and the paintings themselves are ultimately void of any explicit iconography.²¹⁷ Resultantly, Stoker is reasonable in his theory that ‘the viewer will experience the chapel paintings in light of his own tradition’.²¹⁸

Additionally, the artworks’ suggestion of an undetermined Divinity is also touched upon by Rosenblum. He states that ‘the very lack of overt religious content here [in the Chapel]’ is ‘all the more potent in the evocation of the transcendental’ – images of ‘nothing’ facilitate the possibility of everything.²¹⁹ Similarly, Oduye uses the term ‘sublime’ to describe the canvases in the Chapel but does not relate it to a specific theology.²²⁰ Thus, there is no question between Stoker, Rosenblum, and Oduye that the Rothko Chapel is productive of sublimity. Whilst none of them make any reference to the *Zoharic Ein Sof*, as a case has already been made for Him to be considered as sublime this demonstrates that there is scope for the site to be understood through a Kabbalistic lens.

To start, the ‘monumental’ sizes of the Rothko canvases which cover the walls in the Chapel can be said to be suggestive of *Ein-Sof*’s immense power. ‘The triptych in the [north] apse is the largest (180 × 297 in)’ – it is nearly twenty-five feet wide (Fig. 14).²²¹

²¹⁵ Stoker, “‘Urgency’”, 96.

²¹⁶ Stoker, “‘Urgency’”, 97; 100.

²¹⁷ Stoker, “‘Urgency’”, 100.

²¹⁸ Stoker, “‘Urgency’”, 100.

²¹⁹ Rosenblum, *Northern*, 218.

²²⁰ Oduye, *Interior*, 27.

²²¹ Stoker, “‘Urgency’”, 93.



Fig. 14: Close up of Mark Rothko's north wall triptych in the Rothko Chapel.

This is followed by the other two 'triptychs on the [east and west] side walls which are $134 \frac{7}{8} \times 245 \frac{3}{4}$ inches.²²² Next are the four works on the northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast walls which are $177 \frac{1}{2} \times 135$ inches, exceeding a width of eleven feet.²²³ Lastly, the smallest painting in the Chapel – which is by no means small – is on the south wall. It measures 180×105 inches and is situated between the two entrances.²²⁴ Consequently, as Christopher Rothko states, aside from this south wall which 'grant[s] breathing space around its canvas', all the paintings 'fit snugly to the surrounding proportions of their supporting walls'.²²⁵ Such spacing, or lack of, amplifies the largeness of the artworks. This sense of immensity is furthered by the absence of frames on the Chapel's canvases. Instead,

²²² Stoker, "'Urgency'", 93.

²²³ Stoker, "'Urgency'", 93.

²²⁴ Stoker, "'Urgency'", 93.

²²⁵ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 121.

Rothko has chosen to paint around the edges of the works, creating the impression that the paint is seeping beyond its strictures. A degree of parallelism can hence be drawn between these stylistic exploits and the *Zoharic* sentiment that ‘no vessel exists to contain him [*Ein-Sof*].’²²⁶ Although once more on a vastly different scale, both *Ein-Sof* and the artworks present as unlimited. Still, it is not just the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the paintings which contribute to their magnitude. They are also constructed upon ‘deep stretchers, which push them out proudly from the wall’.²²⁷ This furthers the impression that they are ever-expanding, this time not outwards but forwards instead. As is the tradition when confronted with images which edge towards the sublime, visitors of the Chapel thus talk of feeling small when encountering the canvases, like a ‘speck in an immeasurable cosmic space’ or a ‘tiny dust particle’.²²⁸

As well as insinuating *Ein-Sof*’s unboundedness, Rothko’s Chapel canvases can also be argued to signify His initial formlessness. All fourteen of Rothko’s panels are bare of designs, instead being reduced to pure colour fields. The only way in which these colour fields have been moulded into rectangular structures is by the very canvases themselves and, as aforesaid, the paint gives the impression that it is doing everything in its capability to defy this structuring. As with *Untitled*, yet to an even greater extent here, such a diminution in artistic particulars has led to the Chapel’s artworks being described on numerous occasions as ‘void like’ or ‘empt[y]’ – Anfam asserts that ‘there is little to see’ in the paintings.²²⁹ Such an observation is heightened by a select few who go as far to compare these canvases to nothingness. Rosenblum is one such person who adopts the language of ‘nothing’, as does Christopher Rothko.²³⁰ Nevertheless, both writers are united in their claim that this nothingness is of the paradoxical nature. Rosenblum summarises the works as being ‘compelling presences that pose an ultimate choice between everything and nothing’.²³¹

²²⁶ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 53.

²²⁷ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 122.

²²⁸ Stoker, “‘Urgency’”, 93.

Rothko, *Inside Out*, 39.

²²⁹ Oduye, *Interior*, 54;

Ruth Christenten, “Mark Rothko: Art as an Experience. The Significance of Interaction between Painting and Viewer in the Rothko Chapel”, *RIHA Journal* 183 (2017): para. 40;

Anfam, “Frame”, 52.

²³⁰ Rosenblum, *Northern*, 218;

Rothko, *Inside Out*, 120.

²³¹ Rosenblum, *Northern*, 218.

Likewise, Christopher Rothko asserts that ‘the chapel murals...are silence and a full-voiced shout’.²³² The very fact that works of such monumental minimalism are suggestive of something Absolute is a most fitting emblem for the otherworldly *Ein-Sof*, who cannot be ‘embod[ied] into a finite conception’.²³³ Indeed, as Franke notes, via the ‘elimination of particular representation’ the unrepresentable is evoked.²³⁴ This relation to paradox simultaneously strengthens the argument for *Ein-Sof* to be considered sublime, as the conception is of an inherently contradictory character.

Additionally, the understanding of the undifferentiated *Ein-Sof* as analogous to *tohu-va-bohu*, ‘when the earth was a formless void’ (Gen. 1:2), is also conveyed by Rothko’s Chapel canvases. The *Zohar* describes *tohu* (chaos) as a kind of ‘slime’ or ‘refuse’ which has ‘no colour’.²³⁵ On the other hand, *bohu* is translated as ‘formlessness’ which intermittently acquires ‘shape and form’, like ‘stones’ which ‘sometimes emerg[e] from the chasm [*tohu*] in which they are sunk’.²³⁶ This image of a disordered substance from which shapes gradually materialise and dissipate is exemplified by Rothko’s use of colour. When initially confronted with the paintings, they appear homogeneously black and flat – Borchardt-Hume uses the comparison of a ‘blank cinema screen’.²³⁷ Nonetheless, once the eye adjusts a multitude of hues begin to reveal themselves in murky clusters. Indeed, the works are ‘saturated’ with ‘chocolate and maroon[s]’, ‘plums’, ‘burgundies’, and ‘near black[s]’.²³⁸ Accordingly, Christopher Rothko is correct in his warning that ‘one should not make the mistake of assuming his [Rothko’s] works are static; rather, they ‘fluctuate between stillness and movement, proximity and distance’.²³⁹ This argument for a subtle degree of discernible

²³² Rothko, *Inside Out*, 120.

²³³ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 52.

²³⁴ William Franke, “Apophatic Paths: Modern and Contemporary Poetics and Aesthetics of Nothing”, *Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 17, no. 3 (2012): 13.

²³⁵ Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, trans., *The Zohar, with an Introduction by J. Abelson*, Vol. I (London: Soncino Press, 1949), 66; 67.

²³⁶ Sperling, trans., *Zohar*, 66; 67.

²³⁷ Borchardt-Hume, “Shadows”, 24.

²³⁸ Werner Haftmann, “Introduction”, trans. Margery Schärer, in *Mark Rothko: Kunsthau Zürich, March 21 to May 9 1971*, ed. Felix Andreas Baumann (Zürich: Kunsthau Zürich; New York: Marlborough Gallery; Boston: Boston Book & Art, 1971), x; Phyllis Tuchman, “Rothko Rising”, review of *Mark Rothko* by Jeff Weiss and *Mark Rothko: The Works on Canvas* by David Anfam, *Art Journal* 58, no. 1 (1999): 111; Rothko, *Inside Out*, 126; Borchardt-Hume, “Shadows”, 24.

²³⁹ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 8;

motion on the canvases is additionally fostered by Rothko's fusion of materials. It is well known that the artist consistently experimented throughout his career, combining 'synthetic substances such as oil-modified alkyd and acrylic resins' with more 'traditional materials, including egg, glue and dammar resin', rarely applying 'protective varnishes'.²⁴⁰

Consequently, Hölling explains that his paintings generally have a 'poor durability', showing signs of 'fading and discoloration'.²⁴¹ This changeability fortifies the interpretation of the Chapel's canvases as analogous to *Ein-Sof's* state of *tohu va-bohu* which, as emphasised, is not stable.

Furthermore, the appearance of the canvases as violet toned in some lights is particularly appropriate for engendering sublimity. This is because it is the colour of transcendence, as demonstrated by its showcasing on the zucchetos and fascias of Catholic bishops. This may well have appealed to the de Ménil's due to their affiliation with Catholicism. Evermore fittingly, 'violet' is referenced in Rimbaud's nineteenth century poem *Voyelles* which discusses the theme of Creation in relation to different letters and colours.²⁴² In being a key text of the modernist period, one can speculate whether Rothko would have been aware of this symbolism and hence deliberately employed it as a result.

Moreover, the very design of the Chapel can be argued to communicate the formidability of *Ein-Sof*. For Rothko, the space in which the paintings would be hung was of equal importance to the contents of the paintings themselves. This is evidenced by the fact that prior to their installation he 'rented a large studio on East 69th Street in Manhattan and had a full-scale model of a segment of the chapel' erected.²⁴³ This allowed him to experiment with how the works would relate to the walls around them. Likewise, Rothko exercised full control over the lighting of the building. He 'categorically refused to accept the idea of surmounting the chapel with a truncated pyramid that would diffuse light onto the walls inside the chapel', alternatively insisting on 'a skylight similar to the one he had in his

Morgan Thomas, "Rothko and the Cinematic Tradition", in *Rothko: The Late Series*, ed. Achim Borchardt-Hume (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 62.

²⁴⁰ Qiu, "Method", 447.

²⁴¹ Hanna B Hölling, "Lost to Museums? Changing Media, Their Worlds, Their Performance", *Museum History Journal* 10, no. 1 (2017): 98.

²⁴² Arthur Rimbaud, "Voyelles", trans. John Kinsella, *New England Review* 25, no.3 (2004): 19.

²⁴³ de Ménil, "Chapel", 251.

studio'.²⁴⁴ Accordingly, no windows have been installed into the chapel walls; instead, it is 'dim[ly]' lit.²⁴⁵ This quality, combined with the enormity of the artworks, has resulted in a number of visitors experiencing discomfort when visiting the Chapel. Oduye describes the sensation of feeling 'trapped' and Cain relays that 'I did not like what I was feeling. I was not receiving the sense of being...lifted'.²⁴⁶ This sense of being wholly overwhelmed by something which is much larger than oneself is a classic trope of the sublime, and hence can be said to be suggestive of the daunting *Ein-Sof*.

Ein-Sof likewise coheres with the tradition of the sublime by being both infinite and incomprehensible; as aforementioned, He has 'no end' and there are no 'means [available] to apprehend' Him.²⁴⁷ Both of these conceptions are also denoted by the architectural arrangement of the Rothko Chapel. As established, the building is octagonal – a form which is composed of a singular incessant line. So, as there are canvases on all eight of the walls, a 'wraparound' sensation is invoked.²⁴⁸ Indeed, the artworks can be described as cyclical as opposed to fleeting; the viewer is offered no reprise as whichever way one turns, another canvas presents itself. This ceaseless layout hence echoes the eternal nature of *Ein-Sof*. Similarly, the sustained placement of the paintings embodies *Ein-Sof's* ultimate esotericism. As Cernuschi points out, 'try as we might, we can never take in the entire chapel in a single glance'.²⁴⁹ This is because the 'the apse triptych and the entrance-wall panel' are 'at a 180° angle from each other' and thus 'can never be seen together'.²⁵⁰ In exposing the limits of our human capabilities, the failure to grasp all the canvases offers a fractional parallel for the impenetrability of the *Zoharic* Godhead.

²⁴⁴ Christensen, "Experience", 47;
de Ménil, "Chapel", 249.

²⁴⁵ Oduye, *Interior*, 25.

²⁴⁶ Oduye, *Interior*, 56;

William E. Cain, "Learning Not to Look: A Visit to the Rothko Chapel", *Southwest Review* 94, no. 2 (2009): 176.

²⁴⁷ Dan, *Introduction*, 41;

Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 52.

²⁴⁸ Sheldon Nodelman, *The Rothko Chapel Paintings: Origins, Structure, Meaning* (Houston and Austin Texas: University of Texas Press, 1997), 163.

²⁴⁹ Claude Cernuschi, "The Mark Rothko Chapel in Houston: the Structure of Meaning or the Meaning of Structure?" *Religion and the Arts* 3, no. 3-4 (1999): 462.

²⁵⁰ Cernuschi, "Structure", 462.

Observations such as these additionally exemplify the interconnectedness of the Chapel's structure and the paintings which it houses – they are an 'integral whole'.²⁵¹ Indeed, the globular configuration of the building amplifies the impact of the canvases whilst they likewise, in all their grandeur and gloominess, heighten the inclosing nature of this globularity. With this relation between interiors and exteriors in mind, it can be suggested that the sculpture in the Chapel grounds – *Broken Obelisk* (Fig. 15) by Newman – anticipates what is to come in the *Zoharic* Creation narrative.



Fig. 15: Barnett Newman, *Broken Obelisk*, 1963-67, Cor-ten steel, 26ft x 10 ½ ft. Texas, the Rothko Chapel.

Crafted from steel and measuring twenty-six feet tall and ten and a half feet wide, it has a pyramid shaped base which expels a vertical beam.²⁵² Despite the pyramid's frequent association with death in Ancient Egyptian culture, Hess argues that the work is in fact an 'affirmation': 'if it says anything, it says "Be!"'.²⁵³ Such an analysis is not unjustified, as

²⁵¹ Cernuschi, "Structure", 458.

²⁵² Hess, *Newman*, 73.

²⁵³ Hess, *Newman*, 72.

despite the corrugated upper edge of the beam which makes it appear broken, the sculpture is an absolute vision of resoluteness. It stands solid, the vertical portion thrusting upwards towards the sky. Accordingly, if the Chapel is understood to be symbolic of the undifferentiated *Ein-Sof* prior to Creation, then *Broken Obelisk* can be interpreted as the 'tube' of light which burst forth when He differentiated, engendering the *sefirot* and thus the world (*Malkuth*).²⁵⁴ The reference to 'broken' in the title might then better be understood in this context as a *breaking* – the breaking of *Ein-Sof's* boundary at the moment of differentiation. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that there is a substantial physical distance between the statue's placement and the Chapel itself. *Broken Obelisk* can thus be understood as a symbol which foreshadows what lies ahead for *Ein-Sof* in the *Zohar*; for now, the two parts of the narrative remain isolated.

From *Ein-Sof's* state of undifferentiation comes the second stage in the narrative. This is when His two conflicting wills develop: the desire for self-knowledge and the desire to remain enclosed. Rothko's *Number 207 (Red over Dark Blue on Dark Grey)* which was completed in 1961 can be read as emblematic of this (Fig. 16).

²⁵⁴ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 53.



Fig. 16: Martha Rothko, *Number 207 (Red over Dark Blue on Dark Grey)*, 1961, oil on canvas, 265.6 x 206.1cm. California, Berkeley Art Museum.

The work, which measures 92 3/4 x 81 1/8 inches, shows a red mass of colour in the upper segment with a smaller mass of blue below it. Both sections are atop a grey backdrop which appears like a border around the edge of the masses. In being a typical example of Rothko's sectional canvases, the two soft edged colour fields in the painting are separated by the grey backdrop. Subsequently, Rosenblum considers this to be evocative of 'the primordial separation of earth or sea from cloud and sky'.²⁵⁵ This without a doubt a valid reading of Rothko's composition, echoing a similar sentiment to that suggested in the earlier analysis of *Untitled* which features a parallel partition. Nonetheless, there are also grounds to interpret *Number 207* through a Kabbalistic lens. Indeed, in the afterword of *About Rothko*, Ashton makes this remark: 'how often in his [Rothko's] later works there are flares of burning light, sparks that glow uncannily. . . These are more like the sparks in the original

²⁵⁵ Rosenblum, *Northern*, 214.

Book of the Zohar'.²⁵⁶ Whilst this suggestion of illumination will be explored, there are arguably a whole range of compositional features which tie *Number 207* with *Zoharic* imagery, specifically *Ein-Sof's* divided will.

The *Zohar* thus explains that 'from the most hidden recess' of *Ein-Sof's* undifferentiation emerges a 'dark flame' – the urge towards self-recognition.²⁵⁷ This is a gradual development which de Leon likens to 'a fog forming in the unformed'.²⁵⁸ Concurrently, His will to remain confined likewise gradually transpires, putting Him in a conflicted state. This concept of the two wills steadily rising out of the depths of *Ein-Sof* is signalled in *Number 207* by the blurriness of the two fields of colour. Rothko has used thinned pigments which have a degree of transparency to them, meaning that glimpses of the grey backdrop are visible through the feathered edges of the red and blue. Christopher Rothko explains that this was probably achieved through 'seeping, sinking, staining – slow processes that produce cumulative and enduring, rather than sudden, effects.'²⁵⁹ Consequently, these 'rounded' forms which 'are not fully defined' appear to be hesitantly rising out of the murky background, just like *Ein-Sof's* two desires forming in His chaos.²⁶⁰ The conception of *Ein-Sof's* advent, and hence the movement within Him, is furthered in *Number 207* by much of the literature on Rothko's sectionals. Chilvers describes their areas of colour as 'pulsating', Rosenblum states that they are 'living', and Ashton sees them as 'respiring'.²⁶¹ Consequently, the vibrating quality of the red and blue in the artwork can be argued to communicate *Ein-Sof's* increasing activity – He is no longer dormant. The textured brushstrokes which are visible in the two colour fields in *Number 207* likewise feed into this sense of awakening; *Ein-Sof* is no longer static.

Other elements in *Number 207* can be interpreted in light of *Ein-Sof's* conflict. If it is taken that the emerging forms are emblematic of His two impulses, then the disparity between the colours of these forms further exemplifies the extremity of their polarisation. Indeed,

²⁵⁶ Ashton, *About*, 197.

²⁵⁷ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

²⁵⁸ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

²⁵⁹ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 204.

²⁶⁰ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 56.

²⁶¹ Chilvers, ed., *Art and Artists*, 460;

Robert Rosenblum, "Rothko and Tradition", in *On Modern American Art: Selected Essays*, ed. James Leggio and Barbara Burn (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 111;
Ashton, *About*, 195.

red and blue are situated at opposing ends of the colour spectrum; whilst the former is commonly associated with heat the latter is frequently described as a cool tone. This is a most fitting arrangement for conveying *Ein-Sof's* inclinations towards puncturing and preserving His own boundary, which stand in direct opposition to one another. Moreover, an observation made by van de Vall in an analysis of another of Rothko's sectional works, *Blue, Green, and Brown* (1951), can also be considered useful in envisioning *Ein-Sof's* struggle. She notes the way in which there are a series of 'pressures and tensions' between the different colour fields in the artwork.²⁶² Indeed, 'the rectangular forms in the lower part of the painting tend to broaden themselves horizontally, pushing against the left and the right hand edges of the canvas'.²⁶³ Likewise, she argues that 'one's gaze is pulled apart' by the shapes in the upper segment of the work which draw 'upwards' and those in the lower division which push 'downwards'.²⁶⁴ Christopher Rothko offers a similar opinion in reference to the sectionals in a more general sense, maintaining that 'one can sense the electricity, the seemingly magnetic attraction and repulsion of the rectangles'.²⁶⁵ This is definitely the case with regards to *Number 207*. The red area appears to be expanding vertically, pressing upwards towards the top of the frame. Conversely, the blue appears to be enlarging horizontally, pushing against the sides of the frame. Both of these observations cohere with de Leon's description of *Ein-Sof's* inner flames 'assum[ing] size and dimension'.²⁶⁶ Still, at this point the narrative stresses that the Godhead has not yet 'br[o]ke through the ether {of the sphere}'.²⁶⁷ This sense of containment is conveyed by the fact that neither the red nor blue has manage to breach the inclosing charcoal boundary.

As abovementioned, *Ein-Sof's* impulse towards self-knowledge is described by de Leon as a 'dark flame' which is 'of no colour whatsoever'.²⁶⁸ Although contradictory, as to label something dark is to denote that it has a colour, the image of a flame is inherently tied to light; one can imagine a soft glimmer emerging 'from the most hidden recess' of *Ein-Sof*.²⁶⁹

²⁶² Renée van de Vall, "Silent Visions: Lyotard on the Sublime", in *The Contemporary Sublime: Sensibilities of Transcendence and Shock*, ed. Paul Crowther (London: Academy Group Ltd, 1995), 73.

²⁶³ van de Vall, "Silent", 73.

²⁶⁴ van de Vall, "Silent", 73.

²⁶⁵ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 115.

²⁶⁶ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

²⁶⁷ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

²⁶⁸ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

²⁶⁹ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

Likewise, if one recalls, de Leon conceptualises *Ein-Sof's* 'supernal point' as 'the innermost light, of a translucence, subtilty, and purity beyond comprehension'.²⁷⁰ Consequently, on more than one occasion in the *Zohar*, *Ein-Sof* and His process of differentiation are relayed through the language of illumination, an illumination which is beyond visualisation and understanding – classic toposes of the sublime. This notion of an innermost brightness is insinuated in *Number 207* by Rothko's methods. His application of 'thin layers' of paint 'allow[s] the colour beneath to radiate as [if] from an inner light source'.²⁷¹ This is most noticeable in the blue segment of the work where thinner washes that appear almost white are contrasted with denser areas of navy. Rosenblum agrees with this association between Rothko's sectionals and light, describing them as 'luminous' and 'glowing'.²⁷² In fact, due to this stylistic component, Rosenblum goes as far as to argue that Rothko can be seen as an 'heir' to the Luminist movement.²⁷³ Propelled by the sublime landscapes of the Hudson River School, Luminism refers to 'the fascination with atmospheric perspective and effects of light, especially on water'.²⁷⁴ Thus, he affirms that 'we may see Rothko's art as resurrecting, in an abstract mode, the Luminist tradition'.²⁷⁵ This further bolsters the grounds for interpreting Rothko's sectionals (such as *Number 207*) in relation to the *Zohar's* language of light and, by consequence, *Ein-Sof's* struggling flames.

Despite the disclosure of *Ein-Sof's* divided will in the *Zohar*, it is nonetheless important to note that His progression towards differentiation is 'hidden in the mysterious hiddenness of Himself'.²⁷⁶ This notion of concealment is similarly pervasive in the literature on Rothko's sectionals. The artist himself described the hazy masses of colour in his compositions as 'facades' – 'sometimes I open one door or one window or two doors and two windows'.²⁷⁷ This comparison with an exterior that has doors and windows suggests that behind the areas of colour is an interior that the viewer is not permitted to see; a sense of mystery thus prevails. Rothko's son echoes this sentiment: 'the windows have been closed off, bricked up

²⁷⁰ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3;

Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 4.

²⁷¹ Thomas Krens, "Acknowledgements", in *On the Sublime: Mark Rothko, Yves Klein, James Turrell*, ed. Tracey Bashkoff (Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim, 2001), 11.

²⁷² Rosenblum, "Abstract", 115.

²⁷³ Rosenblum, "Tradition", 115.

²⁷⁴ Lucie-Smith, *Art Terms*, 114.

²⁷⁵ Rosenblum, "Tradition", 115.

²⁷⁶ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

²⁷⁷ Rothko, "Pratt Institute", 126.

with the most sensuous of colours'.²⁷⁸ A degree of secrecy is likewise suggested by Rosenblum who describes Rothko's compositions as 'luminous veils of colour'.²⁷⁹ These veils, he states, 'seem to conceal a total, remote presence that we can only intuit and never full grasp'.²⁸⁰ Similar to Rosenblum, Haftmann draws a parallel between Rothko's vague forms and 'curtains'.²⁸¹ He states: 'Now these drifting, interwoven and changing curtains evoked the old Jewish metaphors of a hidden God (who had forbidden an effigy to be made of Him), of conceptions of hanging in the biblical tabernacle, of the temple curtains in front of the Holy of Holies (which was only present as a void), of tent-walls of the Mosaic tent'.²⁸²

In light of the point being explored here – the division of *Ein-Sof's* will prior to Creation – Haftmann's analogy of a curtain is most apt. Indeed, if one envisions the eruption of *Ein-Sof's* creative light to be the commencement of the ultimate cosmic performance, the masses of obscuring colour in Rothko's *Number 207* signal that the curtain has not yet been lifted on His stage – He has not yet broken through His 'sphere'.²⁸³ The viewer – the surrogate audience – is thus held in a state of curious suspense, awaiting to see what lies beyond this screen and how *Ein-Sof's* spectacle will unfold. Whichever analogy one prefers, doors, windows, veils, and curtains all have one thing in common: they obscure something behind them. Consequently, this strengthens the relationship between Rothko's *Number 207* and the notion of the sublime, and in turn that between the *Zohar* and the sublime. This is because one of the key tenets of *Peri Hypsous* is that sublimity is located in that which is 'pregnant with suggestion'.²⁸⁴ As demonstrated, the composition of *Number 207* successfully evokes this sense of *Ein-Sof's* hiddenness whilst simultaneously conveying the process of His gradual emergence towards subjectivity.

In the end, *Ein-Sof's* impulse towards self-knowledge triumphs, 'breaking through' His own boundary.²⁸⁵ He has now gained subjectivity, engendering the ten *sefirot*. The *sefirot* extend from 'the primal light which God made' when He announced "Let there be light" (Gen.

²⁷⁸ Rothko, *Inside Out*, 9.

²⁷⁹ Rosenblum, "Tradition", 109.

²⁸⁰ Rosenblum, "Abstract", 110.

²⁸¹ Haftmann, "Introduction", x.

²⁸² Haftmann, "Introduction", x.

²⁸³ Scholem, *Zohar*, 3.

²⁸⁴ Pseudo-Longinus, *Sublime*, 12.

²⁸⁵ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

1:3).²⁸⁶ Considering the *Zohar*'s reinterpretation of what Pseudo-Longinus cites as the most sublime passage, Newman's *Onement I* can likewise be analysed in relation to this narrative.

To contextualise, mystical readings of *Onement I* have been established. Utilising Scholem, Hess posits that the 'tapering, vertical, beamlike shape' in *Onement I* could have been a reference to 'a passage from a hymn to "Zoharariel, Adonai, God of Israel," in the "Greater Hekhaloth"'.²⁸⁷ The Books of *Hekhaloth* (Books of Palaces) are 'collections of Midrashic material concerning the heavenly halls'.²⁸⁸ They include 'descriptions of the ascent to Heaven to behold the divine chariot (*merkavah*), heavenly places (*hekhalot*) and the throne of glory' which are, as Scholem stresses, 'simply praise of God'.²⁸⁹ Hess cites the line 'With a gleam of His ray he encompasses the sky and His splendour radiates from the heights' as being specifically evocative of Newman's zip-like composition.²⁹⁰ Yet, this interpretation is in no way related to the *Zoharic* Creation narrative. As Baigell points out, 'the hymn, "Zoharariel" describes God on his throne surrounded by attendants, not God in the act of creation'.²⁹¹ Instead, Hess links the painting to Kabbalism through its title. As stated earlier, he proposes that *Onement I* could refer to the Day of Atonement in Judaism 'which is a day of remembrance for the dead'.²⁹² Thus, he points out that for Kabbalists, Yom Kippur 'was the ideal moment for meditation on the Messianic secret, on rebirth, new life – in a word, Creation'.²⁹³ This observation strengthens the appropriateness of interpreting *Onement I* in light of the *Zoharic* Creation narrative. Consequently, here *Onement I* will be examined specifically in relation to *Ein-Sof*'s engenderment of the *sefirot*.

The light which moves from *Ein-Sof*'s 'supernal point' around the *sefirot* is depicted in the *Zohar* in terms of water.²⁹⁴ It is described as a 'current' which moves through 'channels' or 'tubes' which have been fashioned by *Ein-Sof* to contain it.²⁹⁵ The projection of this light is

²⁸⁶ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 5.

²⁸⁷ Hess, *Newman*, 32.

Scholem, *Trends*, 59.

²⁸⁸ Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *A Concise Encyclopaedia of Judaism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998), 91.

²⁸⁹ Cohn-Sherbok, *Encyclopaedia*, 91;

Scholem, *Major*, 59.

²⁹⁰ Hess, *Newman*, 32;

Scholem, *Trends*, 59.

²⁹¹ Baigell, "Stripe", 41.

²⁹² Hess, *Newman*, 32.

²⁹³ Hess, *Newman*, 32.

²⁹⁴ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

²⁹⁵ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 52.

not momentary but instead consistently ‘pulsates back and forth’ throughout the whole Tree of Life in a ‘secret rhythm’; Creation is wholly dependent on its Creator.²⁹⁶

Consequently, the zip in Newman’s *Onement I* can be viewed as emblematic of one of these channels of light. Its golden tone slices through the darker surrounding colour, suggesting the presence of light. Additionally, in comparison to Newman’s *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* whereby the zip edges are almost artificially smooth, *Onement I*’s are notoriously rugged. This effect is probably the result of Newman applying the paint in shorter strokes. Resultantly, as Firestone observes, ‘the uneven inflections...convey movement in two directions’.²⁹⁷ This comment supports the interpretation of *Onement I*’s zip as illustrative of the light which sustains the *sefirot*, as it flows back and forth around the structure. Moreover, as abovementioned, the *Zohar* assures that *Ein-Sof*’s light moves in a periodic manner. The frayed edges of Newman’s zip in *Onement I* likewise convey this sense of fluctuation and fluidity, just like a stream of traveling water. Firestone also draws parallels between the two-way impression of Newman’s zip and the functional purpose of understanding the secrets of Creation for Kabbalists. Referencing Scholem, he quotes that ‘the consensus of Kabbalistic opinion regards the mystical way to God as a reversal of the procession by which we have emanated from God. To know the stages of the creative process is also to know the stages of one’s own return to the root of all existence’.²⁹⁸ Accordingly, to get closer to *Ein-Sof* who is ‘up there’, one must attempt to understand what is ‘down here’; as the title of Firestone’s article reads, ‘the way up and down is one and the same’.²⁹⁹

In addition, Hess suggests that the vertical zip in *Onement I* could be symbolic of ‘man – the only animal who walks upright, Adam, virile, erect’.³⁰⁰ This makes sense to him because of the colours in the work: ‘the red-orange stripe on its red-brown field’.³⁰¹ Indeed, from the Kabbalistic interpretation of Genesis Hess deduces that ‘red-brown is the colour of the earth; Adam is the man created by God; the Hebrew word for earth is *Adamah*; and “Adam

²⁹⁶Scholem, *Trends*, 208;

Gershom Scholem, *On The Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 39.

²⁹⁷ Firestone, “*Onement I*”, 46.

²⁹⁸ Firestone, “*Onement I*”, 48;

Scholem, *Trends*, 20.

²⁹⁹ Firestone, “*Onement I*”, 44.

³⁰⁰ Hess, *Newman*, 34.

³⁰¹ Hess, *Newman*, 34.

was made from the matter of earth, literally from the clay”³⁰² Leja acknowledges that Newman’s zips have frequently been interpreted in such a way: ‘masculinity is situated in the “phallic” vertical bands of his paintings, the so-called zips – this term itself evokes not only speed and direction but also mundane openings onto male organs’.³⁰³ However, Hess’ suggestion of Adam actually strengthens the interpretation of *Onement I* in line with the *sefirot*. This is because *Ein-Sof*’s ‘primal light’ from which the *sefirot* emerge is understood in the *Zohar* to be Primordial Man – *Adam Kadmon*.³⁰⁴ As Scholem explains, *Adam Kadmon* is the way in which *Ein-Sof* – who is without ‘shape and form’ – first receives ‘shape and form’.³⁰⁵ Consequently, as Dan points out, *Adam Kadmon* demonstrates the employment of ‘anthropomorphic’ imagery in the *Zohar*.³⁰⁶ The three uppermost *sefirah* (*Kether*, *Binah*, and *Hokmah*) are understood to be *Adam Kadmon*’s crown and eyes. Moving down, *Din* and *Hesed* are identified as His arms, and *Tiferet* as His torso. Continuing further, *Hod* and *Nezah* are His legs, whilst *Yesod* is interpreted as His phallus. Lastly, the tenth *sefirah*, *Malkuth*, ‘represents a separate body, that of the female divine power’ – the *Shekhinah*.³⁰⁷ The continuous nature of Creation is hence presented as a sexual or orgasmic act between *Yesod* and *Shekhinah* in the *Zohar*.

To understand how *Onement I* can be viewed in relation to the structure of *Adam Kadmon* one must return again to the *Zoharic* imagery of water. The highest *sefirah*, *Kether* or *Adam Kadmon*’s crown, is described as the ‘source’ of light.³⁰⁸ Accordingly, *Adam Kadmon*’s two eyes are envisioned as a ‘current’ and a ‘sea’ or ‘basin’ into which *Kether*’s light congregates.³⁰⁹ The basin ‘is [then] divided up into seven channels’ which ‘together...make the number ten’ – the ten *sefirot*.³¹⁰ Newman’s zip in *Onement I* can thus be understood as these channels of light which flow from *Adam Kadmon*’s basin – the third *sefirah*. Although in relation to a later version of Kabbalah, Lurianic Kabbalah, Baigell is in agreement that ‘the single stripe (frontispiece) may be understood as representing the first ray of light and the

³⁰² Hess, *Newman*, 34.

³⁰³ Leja, “Tango”, 556.

³⁰⁴ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 4.

³⁰⁵ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 51.

³⁰⁶ Dan, *Introduction*, 35.

³⁰⁷ Dan, *Introduction*, 45.

³⁰⁸ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 53.

³⁰⁹ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 53.

³¹⁰ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 53.

first man' – *Adam Kadmon*.³¹¹ It may appear that multiple versions of *Ein-Sof's* differentiation and subsequent engenderment of the world thus exist in the *Zohar* – the earlier mentioned 'well out of which colours issued', the *sefirot* as the Tree of Life, and the *sefirot* as *Adam Kadmon* – and one would be correct in thinking this.³¹² Yet, it must be kept in mind that the text is composed of 'hundreds of homilies and little stories' which are infamously contradictory.³¹³ Bloom supports this, stating that 'a contemporary reader encountering the *Zohar* will have trouble finding in it a clear statement about the structure and function of the *Sefirot*'.³¹⁴ Nonetheless, all the envisioning's of *Ein-Sof's* differentiation are underpinned by de Leon's assertion that 'beyond this point [whereby He breaks through His own boundary] nothing can be known. Therefore it is called *reshit*, beginning'.³¹⁵ Indeed, it is possible to surmise about the unfolding of the *sefirot* and the dissemination of *Ein-Sof's* light around them, but no more can be known about *Ein-Sof* prior to this apart from what is written. This impression of a barrier between the knowable and the unknowable is likewise communicated by *Onement I*. The fields of colour on either side of the zip are wholly opaque; one cannot see through them or beyond them. Newman's surface is impenetrable, akin to the ultimate mystery of *Ein-Sof*.

³¹¹ Baigell, "Stripe", 34.

³¹² Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

³¹³ Bloom, *Criticism*, 35.

³¹⁴ Bloom, *Criticism*, 34.

³¹⁵ Scholem, ed., *Zohar*, 3.

Conclusion

This overarching purpose of this study was to demonstrate that the artworks of Rothko and Newman could be interpreted through Longinian and Kabbalistic lenses. In doing this, it was the hope that one would attain alternative readings of their artworks which were more theologically orientated. At the same time, it intended to utilise their compositions as visual aids to allow the intricacies of the sublime and Kabbalah to be more easily understood. Through evaluating several of Rothko's and Newman's artworks, it is not only clear that both artists' works can indeed be interpreted through Longinian and Kabbalistic lenses, but that this can be done repeatedly and consistently. This is bolstered by the fact that the artworks selected for analysis are from varying decades of the artists' careers.

The study's first objective was to assert the often-overlooked Jewish roots of the sublime. Owing to the assessment of *Peri Hypsous*, it is clear that Pseudo-Longinus framed the notion in a Jewish context, specifying the most sublime existent to be 'the Lawgiver of the Jews'. He grounded this superiority in Gen. 1:3 and Gen 1:9, thus intrinsically linking the sublime with the ideas of light and darkness, incomparable power, and mystery. At the same time, he stressed that sublimity could never be fully comprehended because of the Creator's otherness; it can be evoked, insinuated, implied, and alluded to both linguistically and visually, but never replicated. The sublime was then taken up in a Christian context during Romanticism, gaining popularity via Burke's *Enquiry*. Although some of Pseudo-Longinus' fundamentals do remain in Burke's treatise such as the praise of contrast in evoking the sublime (*chiaroscuro*), the notion ultimately gravitates away from its original framework. Burke no longer homes in on the Creator's engenderment of the world; instead, he presents the Deity as a figure of goodness whose awe is reflected in majestic natural scenes. Additionally, despite the exploitation of this understanding of the sublime in landscape artwork during Romanticism, Burke found visual expressions of the notion to be ineffective. For him, the literalness of pictures made them incapable of communicating the otherworldly nature of the sublime. This conclusion which Burke draws ultimately possess a degree of paradox, considering that the majority of the qualities which he considers to be suggestive of sublimity relate to the realm of images – shape, colour, size, and the like.

Rosenblum's understanding of the abstract sublime in the 1960s reconnected sublimity with its Jewish origins, whether this was his intention or not. He argued that the expansive,

reductive canvases of Rothko and Newman were redolent of the initial verses of Genesis – the very passages where Pseudo-Longinus originated the concept. To demonstrate the validity of Rosenblum’s claim, Newman’s *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* was analysed. Its monumental dimensions, lack of focal point, and exploitation of primary colours were all found to be suggestive of the Creator’s overwhelming power, mystery, and engenderment of the world in one way or another. Rothko’s *Untitled* (1969) further supported Rosenblum’s proposal. Its bipartite composition is evocative of the primal imagery in Genesis, and the starkness of its division acts as a convincing symbol of the Creator’s authority over the elements. Furthermore, Newman’s *Onement I* was interpreted in relation to the means through which the Creator brought forth the world: via a declaration of “Let there be light”. The glowing zip which separates the canvas can be understood as being communicative of the luminous and rapid manner with which this was enacted. All three of these works thus demonstrate that Rothko’s and Newman’s works can be interpreted as alluding to the Longinian sublime – the second aim of this study. Whilst they are all similar in their minimalism, there is just enough variance between their compositions to challenge Burke’s insistence that the sublime can be contained within a limited compilation of qualities.

Successively, the third goal was to evidence that the sublime and Kabbalah can be united. Hegel’s interpretation of the sublime God of Judaism is the first way in which this is achieved. His vision echoes the *Zoharic* conception of *Ein-Sof* who first exists as pure substance, then attains self-knowledge and engenders the world. The consistent descriptions of *Ein-Sof* in Kabbalistic scholarship as possessing unparalleled power, exceeding any attempt at containment, and being beyond understanding is a second way in which the school of thought can be linked to that of sublimity. This is because these are all hallmarks of the sublime which have persisted from Pseudo-Longinus’ original treatise, even if term itself is not employed. As a result of these similarities, it stands to reason that the Kabbalistic doctrine can be implied in visual depictions. This bridging is supported by Scholem who highlights the excess of vivid imagery in the Kabbalistic Creation narrative.

This leads into the fulfilment of the fourth aim of the study: to demonstrate that the artworks of Rothko and Newman can be viewed as emblematic of the *Zoharic* Creation narrative. The interreligious function of the Rothko Chapel serves as an instigator for it to be

interpreted away from its Catholic features. Accordingly, the giant canvases which push out from the walls which house them can be said to be indicative of *Ein-Sof's* earliest stage where He is pure, potent substance. The murky surfaces of these canvases in which forms appear to emerge and dissipate is reminiscent of the conception of the early *Ein-Sof* as being in a state of *tohu va-bohu*. All of this is amplified by the serial nature of the paintings in the Chapel; the impossibility of viewing them all at once is a fitting symbolisation of His incomprehensibility. The subsequent emergence of *Ein-Sof's* conflicting wills are likewise indicated by Rothko's *Number 207 (Red over Dark Blue on Dark Grey)*. The sense of struggle between His impulse for self-knowledge and His desire to remain enclosed is communicated not only through the two contrasted fields of colour, but also through the illusion that these fields are pushing against one another. Analogies of these fields of colour with curtains, veils, and facades in Rothko scholarship confirm the air of mystery which *Number 207* can be argued to emit. As well as signifying *Ein-Sof's* supreme unknowability, the obscuring nature of these colour fields links the canvas, and thus the *Zohar*, to one of Pseudo-Longinus' core principles: that sublimity is 'pregnant with suggestion'. Eventually, light erupts from *Ein-Sof* in a stream, circulating around the ten *sefirot* and sustaining their existence. Newman's *Onement I* can again be understood as implying this image. The frayed edges if its glowing zip suggest a rhythmic flow, just like that which pulsates throughout the Tree of Life. The combination of these three artworks illustrates that it is indeed possible to interpret Rothko's and Newman's pieces through a *Zoharic* lens.

Rothko's and Newman's artworks can thus be said to successfully allude to the Longinian sublime and Kabbalah – two spheres which are evidently closer together than they appear to be at first glance. They both arose in a Jewish context and place exceptional emphasis on their respective Creation accounts which are, despite all which has been presented, essentially unfathomable. Accordingly, it is the minimal character of Rothko's and Newman's designs which make them remarkably apt in conveying the overwhelming mysteriousness of the nature of Creation and its Creator. They prove that by depicting less, one can suggest infinitely more.

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