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THE ROLE OF MYTH IN MARK ROTHKO'S AND BARNETT
NEWMAN'S ART

Role mýtu v tvorbě Marka Rothka a Barnetta Newmana

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I declare that the following Bachelor thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned. My thesis was not used for the acquisition of other or the same title.

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ABSTRACT

In my bachelor thesis I will focus on two important protagonists of American modern art, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, within the context of their historical situation. I will examine how their art and their thoughts, as reflected in occasional writings and statements, relate to period of World War II and how they coincide with other artists, poets and thinkers of their time.

In early 1940s they often talked about myth and mythology became one of the main elements of their art. I will try to elucidate this interest and explain the position of myth in modern society. For this purpose I chose to base my research on theoretical work of René Girard and Eric Voegelin.

My work is divided in three sections. In a beginning I will describe Girard's theory of myth and compare it with other opinions on this subject, I will also explain the relation between myths and ideologies of the 20th century. In second part I will outline the situation of those artists, significance of their Jewish origin and their position on American art scene. Two following chapters will be dedicated to analysis of Rothko's and Newman's art and opinions separately and the formal and emotional issues of their art will be discussed at the end. I believe that closer examination of the ideas that underlie their work will lead to fuller understanding of their message.

Keywords: Myth, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, World War II, American art, primitivism, Friedrich Nietzsche, René Girard, Jewish origin, tragedy

ABSTRAKT

Moje bakalářská práce pojednává o tvorbě dvou významných představitelů amerického moderního umění, Marka Rothka a Barnetta Newmana v kontextu jejich historické situace. Poukáži na souvislosti jejich tvorby, prohlášení a vlastních textů se situací druhé světové války a zmíním další umělce, básníky a myslitele, kteří se jim svými názory blížili.

Na počátku 40. let se stala mytologie jedním ze základních prvků jejich umění. Pokusím se tuto skutečnost objasnit a vysvětlit, jak se téma mýtu pojilo se soudobou situací, a to na základě teorie Reného Girarda a Erica Voegelina.

Svoji práci jsem rozdělila do tří sekcí. První část vychází z Girardovy teorie mýtu a srovnání s jinými přístupy, důležité jsou také souvislosti mezi mýty a ideologiemi 20. století. Další kapitola přibližuje situaci, v níž Rothko s Newmanem tvořili, jejich pozici na americké umělecké scéně a roli jejich židovského původu. Dále jsem se zabývala umělci jednotlivě, abych popsala témata, která pro ně byla charakteristická. Na závěr se podrobněji věnuji vizuální stránce a emocionálnímu působení jejich malby.

Mým cílem je nastínit názory a myšlenky, které doprovázely jejich tvorbu a přiblížit se tak poselství, které tato díla zprostředkovávají.

Klíčová slova: Mýtus, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, druhá světová válka, americké umění, primitivismus, Friedrich Nietzsche, René Girard, židovský původ, tragédie

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1. Introduction

I devoted my bachelor thesis to one specific theme that runs through the oeuvre of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. It is a well-known fact, that mythology started to occupy these painters in the beginning of 1940s in relation to outbreak of World War II. Titles of their paintings refer to mythological themes and their statements from this period suggest what kind of ideas stood behind their art. I am going to trace these thoughts throughout their work and discuss how their consideration of myth influenced even the late “classical” and mostly untitled paintings.

Concrete topic of my thesis wasn't clear to me from the beginning and it took me quite some time to clarify it. I originally intended to write about Mark Rothko and his position in context of Abstract Expressionism. This was due to personal interest that aroused after my encounter with his painting in Centre Pompidou. I wondered whether his inclusion among American Abstract Expressionists has an explanatory value or is rather formality and intended to aim my work on this issue. But it all began to seem quite shallow as I proceeded in my studies on this subject. I haven't paid full attention to mythological topics in his work and it took me some time to realize what a key element for his work the myth was. At first I approached this issue as a partial one, as a temporary interest that vanished soon after the war. The idea to compare Rothko with Newman emerged when I decided to pay more attention to crucial role of myth.

I hope that this approach will bring helpful insight not just into work of those painters but also into their notion about the post-war situation in United States. Their attempt to reflect on a position of man in modern society surpasses purely artistic concerns. The state of civilisation and the human condition, spirituality or its lack in the Western world were topics on which they wanted to comment.

That is why I tried to at least partly outline the philosophical context of their work. Myth became something that could bring new hope for their art and new beginning after the terrifying experience of war and at the same time to express the brutality they had to cope with. I will explain how their viewpoint developed with their art and how is this subject reflected in their late abstract paintings.

I have decided not to approach those artists in the traditional context of Abstract Expressionism or the New York school of painting after all. This background might be narrowed down to the group of so-called Myth Makers that existed during the World War II, the “band” which consisted from painters of shared thoughts and interests. Apart from Rothko and Newman, it was Adolf Gottlieb, Clyfford Still and then other artists exhibiting in Betty Parson gallery in the 1940s.¹ Even though this context is historically valid, I find it inadequate since their paths diverged after the war, and Gottlieb and Still pursuit other interests. The only comparison I found really suitable was that of Rothko and Newman. I suppose their paths also parted in the end but the parallels through their entire oeuvre are so obvious that they should be considered.

The core of my work is built around the theme of myth and its reflexion in their paintings and resonance in their statements. I therefore started my assignment by examination of their writings and built my argumentation on sources mentioned by the artists themselves. I will try to explain how Nietzsche stirred their interest in myth and why Shakespeare became closer to Rothko after time. I shall consider the connection between antique tragedy and Northwest Coast Indian rituals as Newman understood it and hopefully get to the meaning and message of their paintings.

To approach myth from the right perspective I have chosen René Girard’s view, his outlook on myth and ritual and his interpretation of Christian Revelation.

¹ Michael LEJA: *Reframing Abstract Expressionism. Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*, Yale University press, 1993, p. 42

2. Myth and Modernity

To commence my thesis, I will consider the problematics of myth and its position in a modern society. I am going to focus on its role in personal philosophy of Rothko and Newman and try to outline the mental context in which their outlook on myth has evolved.

As we know, mythology started to occupy them in the beginning of 1940s. By then the term “myth” suggested various and sometimes even contradicting meanings. It was approached from many perspectives and various fields. The psychoanalytic reading of myth became an important element in surrealist’s painting, Freud was concerned with psychology of individual and saw myths as expressions of unconscious mind. Jung’s collective unconscious and his search for archetypes were maybe more fertile for a study of myth and we can find it’s echo in works of many religionists as well as anthropologists.

Comparative mythology sought to find the motifs running through all myths by juxtaposing narratives from various traditions. This effort could work as a weapon against the racial theories of Nazis and Hitler’s pseudoscientific ideology of chosen race. Anthropologists as Franz Boas or Ruth Benedict, his student, compared myths across cultures and denied the anti-Semitic propaganda, that reasoned the distinctions between races with biological explanations. Those scientists argued that evolution of cultures has nothing to do with race and that we can find similar patterns in many traditions and customs across the globe.² This approach might have been appealing for Rothko and Newman as they used themes from various traditions and times and searched for similarities rather than differences in myths.

It is impossible to outline the full range of opinions and perspectives here and I believe our problem calls for a different strategy. As a main interpreter of myth I have chosen René Girard, partly because his research of myth is based on a close examination of antique tragedy and its comparison with Christian Revelation. It is not far away from Rothko’s approach as he studied Aeschylus and then exchanged him

² LEJA, 1993 (note 1), p. 55-57

for Kierkegaard and Shakespeare. The other quality lies in Girard's ability to see the parallel between the destructive forces in myths and the modern crisis. He examined the role of envy and the herd behaviour in human societies, problems that were very actual at the time of Hitler's revengeful anti-Semitic speeches and of mobs entrained by them.

Finding parallels between modern crisis and the archaic events presented by myths is typical to Rothko and Newman during the war. Their approach was not solitary, in 1938 William Troy, critic for *the Nation*, wrote:

*"At the moment the triumph of the myth, the dead and false myth, almost everywhere in the world, and with it the imminent destruction of all those values which Western Europe had earned through its agony of three centuries, should be enough to persuade us of its reality."*³

I believe that through Girard's theory we can outline the connection between myth and the tragic state of modern world as seen by Troy and others. The social behaviour he finds behind myths might be observed in modern society as well.

2.1. René Girard's Theory

Literary Criticism, Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology are the disciplines associated with René Girard, the former professor of Stanford University among others. Girard was born in 1923 in Avignon and became an important theoretician, trying to answer the basic and most fundamental questions about the role of religion in human life and society. The quality I see in Girard is the complexity that comes from his interdisciplinary approach. His work draws from many perspectives and concentrates on one important theme in human society, that proceeds through the whole history of humankind.

This theme could be described as a link between desire, violence, religion and culture. His thoughts are usually comprehended as one theory or an argumentation,

³ William TROY: A Note on Myth. *Selected essays*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1967, quoted in Andrea PAPPAS: *Mark Rothko and Politics of Jewish Identity*. 1939-1945, University of Southern California, 1997, p. 123

even though they were presented separately and gradually in his many books. The fact is that he talked about his revelations as fibres of one thread and that is one of the reasons why I want to present his theory in its complexity.⁴

Girard is designated as the world's premier thinker about the role of violence in cultural origins in the foreword of one of his books⁵. His theory consists of three parts, the first one deals with the mimetic character of desire and derives from Girard's interpretation of important novels from authors as varied as Cervantes and Dostojevskij. Girard argues that the desire creates a crisis in human society, which is more threatening than natural disasters. Second part of the theory concentrates on a solution of the crisis in the "primitive" or archaic societies, which Girard calls "the scapegoat mechanism", the crisis leads to collective violence with one or more victims. Girard explores and compares various myths and finds the traces of this mechanism in their narrative. The last part deals with the role of the Bible and particularly the Gospels in the process of disclosure of this mechanism.

In this chapter I will discuss each part of his argumentation, which will create the theoretical basis of my work. I would like to show where Girard coincides with other theoreticians of myth, whether they are religionists or psychologists... and where on the contrary he brings a different point of view. I would also like to approach the events of World War II from his perspective. It seems to me that his notion about myth was in many ways close to Rothko's and Newman's and I believe that with his theory I will be able to elucidate some connections and bases of their work that have been neglected till now.

Girard perceived himself as a realist, he tried to understand and decipher the message of literary sources as varied as Greek tragedy and Shakespeare, by comparing them. He looked for the real events behind myths and by that he distanced

⁴ The summarization of Girard's theory might be found in Michael Kirwan's book which is based on literature written by Girard. I used its Czech translation as a starting point for my study of Girard's theory. For this chapter I used his book: Michael KIRWAN: *René Girard. Uvedení do díla*, Centrum pro studium demokracie, 2008

⁵ James G. WILLIAMS: Foreword in René GIRARD: *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001, p. ix

himself from the psychoanalytic or structuralist reading.⁶ Important is the connection between the original events and the rituals sometimes still alive in the aboriginal societies. The high point of his theory is reached by comparing those ancient materials with Biblical text and by marking the radically new perspective of the Christian Revelation.

Rothko and Newman began their journey as well-educated readers of Nietzsche and took over his modernist devotion to myth. They were both interested in Greek tragedy, reading Aeschylus and considering it the best of ancient arts. They also compared this tragedy with the state of modern world, and primarily with the events of World War II. Rothko later exchanged the Greek tragedy for Shakespeare and Newman after researching the still-alive rituals of Native Americans arrived to the theme of Crucifixion in his Stations of the cross.

2.2. Mimetic Desire

First part of Girard's theory was introduced in his book originally entitled the "Mensonge Romantique et Vérité Romanesque" (Romantic Lie & Romanesque Truth). By examining the great novels, he started to recognize how human desire operates in society. He proclaimed that desire is, unlike instinctive need, a social phenomenon and in writing of Shakespeare and others he exposed the inconsistency of desiring person. Girard suggested that the desire is mimetic, people usually imitate others while longing for an object that seems unreachable. This way the object becomes more and more appealing and the struggles to appropriate it escalate into crisis.

The rivalry and envy caused by mimetic desire leads to hostile state in which peace is impossible. We can see the similarity with Hobbes's outlook on state of primitive society without social order. But unlike Hobbes, Girard doesn't believe that the crisis can be solved by a social contract. People struggling with each other, revengeful and envious, are not likely to come to an agreement and compromise for peace. Girard believes, and he finds evidence for it in literary sources, that the crisis leads to violence and we will get to that in second part of his theory.

⁶ As Cynthia HAVEN remarks in her article in Stanford News, "*his concerns were not trendy, but they were always timeless*" in <https://news.stanford.edu/2015/11/04/rene-girard-obit-110415/>, searched on February 5th 2016

For now, I would like to look closer at the problematics of imitation in human society. Obviously the ability to imitate others is necessary for the process of learning, it also connects people aiming for the same goal, but there is a dark side of it. We can recognize it in a manner of masses unifying against their victim, reason goes aside when confronted with the power of a crowd. Jung also never doubted the strength of collective forces and the vulnerability of each man. He never believed in that romantic vision of unique individual detached from society and was convinced that the hateful mob can poison anyone:

“The change of character that is brought about by the uprush of collective forces is amazing... A gentle and reasonable being can be transformed into a maniac or a savage beast.” He also pointed out that: *“psychical dangers are much more dangerous than epidemics or earth-quakes.”*⁷

The metaphor of poison spreading through crowds works quite well, especially when confronted with the image of epidemics or plagues. Girard saw an important connection between those two, he considered those natural disasters, which we find in some myths, possible hidden social crises. They represent the chaotic state which calls for restoration of order.

2.3. The Scapegoat Mechanism

As I mentioned above, Girard didn't agree with Hobbes in his idea of social agreement. He argued that people can't unite in a moment of rivalry struggles, which were the matter on life and death. He suggests that in a moment when the crisis escalates and the society is destabilized, the aggression redirects. People connected by hatred turn against a single victim or an external enemy. The moment of victimization lies in core of Girard's theory, it also runs as a theme through Rothko's 1940s paintings with titles as Sacrifice...

⁷ Carl Gustav JUNG: Psychology and Religion. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938, p. 61, 11

Girard distinguishes two types of victims (the scapegoat), first one is a single person or a minority, someone who belongs to the crowd but in the same time differs. Shakespeare's Caesar is a good example, the victim is chosen on the basis of its difference and is immolated for the sake of the society. Second type is an external enemy, it could be other tribe in "primitive" societies, the "other" is perceived as evil and members of tribe can unify against this outside danger. Shakespeare illustrated this mechanism in his "Henry the IV", when the impending civil crisis leads the sovereign to declare a crusade. The enemy is dehumanized or demonized, perceived as originator of the problems and by that his killing seems just. The act of killing ends the crisis and establishes the social structure and order again.

He explains that in the moment of unanimous condemnation of a victim, people unite. Guilt for the previous crisis is put on this enemy and his immolation is justified. Killing brings peace as it connects the crowd, this peace is experienced as sacred and so is the victim. Girard explains that a new religion might emerge by deification of the victim and that it often happened in the archaic past. The harmonious state brought into society is indispensable for restoration of order. Thus formed religion helps to regulate the violence in a society by creation of common enemy and in this way it avoids the destruction of the community. The moment of immolation brings the beginning of a new cult, it establishes the basic differences – the sacred/the profane, outside/inside of the community and it divides time into the period of crisis and the period of peace. We can find an analogy to this in Eliade's conception of the "mythical time" as he distinguishes the sacred time without a duration from the historical one and suggests that myths actualize this timelessness.⁸ I will later discuss how this idea resonated in Newman's conception of Sublime.

The immolation represents the founding element of religion and social order. Girard refers to Cain as a biblical founder of cities and reminds the killing of Remus in the mythical story about foundation of Rome. (In "The City of God" Augustine describes Cain's murder of Abel as the primal, archetypal crime upon which the earthly city is founded)

⁸ Mircea ELIADE: *Obrazy a symboly*, 1952, *Esej o magicko-náboženských symbolech*, přeložila Barbora Antonová, Computer Press, Brno, 2004

He argues that the social order was established by the founding murder, and then traditionally maintained by several principles. Tabu as prohibition of the objects of desire functions as protection, it helps to avoid the crisis in a society united by shared religion. If the problems outgrow the bearable limit, ritual is used to re-establish order, by repeating the original event, it substitutes for the original collective killing, but is more or less regulated and controlled, it also actualizes “the mythical time” as Eliade understood it. During the ritual, community experiences the “acceptable” level of violence before the peace is restored. Myth is according to Girard a narrative relating to the original event, but in the same time concealing its true nature. It should be mentioned that Girard referred mainly to founding myths which were important to Rothko and Newman, too.

In his book called “Violence and the Sacred”⁹ Girard gets close to Sigmund Freud’s concept of collective murder. When Freud suggests that the tabu prohibiting incest has its origins in rivalry between male members of a tribe, he concentrates upon the envy towards the father figure. Girard’s conception of desire and rivalry is wider, it is not limited on a problem of incest, but basically their approaches coincide. Girard also acknowledges Freud’s analysis of tragedy and the “tragic guilt” that lies on a hero and redeems the chorus. Freud suggested that it was the crowd causing the hero’s suffering in the time of original event and that the tragedy intently deforms this event to exonerate the chorus. Girard also perceives tragedy as a revision of the original event, crooked and blurred, his analysis of tragedy will be important for understanding its role in Rothko’s and Newman’s conception of myth and modernity. Nietzsche distinguished the “Dionysian character” of chorus, even though he celebrated its lively creative impulse, we can, on the other hand, see it as a representation of the unanimous crowd.

If we shall concentrate on the role of myth (the founding myth in particular) in Girard’s theory, we will find it problematic. Myth reminds the original event, which is terrifying and cruel but conceals its true nature. As a ritual, myth connects people

⁹ Orig. *La violence et le sacré*, 1972

with the origin of their religion but it never tells the whole truth. We can approach myth as a kind of sublimation of those events. Girard examined many myths from various cultures and found the traces of collective murders deformed during centuries of oral transmission.¹⁰ The other important point that Girard sees in myths is their perspective. It is never a perspective of a single victim, the narrative comes from the point of view brought by crowd, a collective mass that judges the victim. Their decisions seem rightful as they are proclaimed by the whole community. And at this moment he finds a radically new perspective in the Bible.

2.4. Perspective of Victim

The theme of sacrifice becomes a focal point of Christian Revelation and it is often considered as something that brings Christianity and the mythological narratives together. The whole scheme of accusation, sacrifice and resurrection might be found in rituals of many cultures and this is one of the main reasons, Christianity was understood as just a different form of myth.

In his book called “Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World”¹¹ Girard rejects this attitude so widespread in modern society. Unlike in myths, he argues, it is not the God who requests the sacrifice in New Testament, it is the bloodthirsty crowd and the authorities who cause suffering of Christ. This way Girard understands the biblical text as a critique of the above described mechanism, starting with the story of Abraham, who is stopped in the moment of almost sacrificing his son. God protects the innocent victim and prohibits human sacrifices. Throughout the Bible we find single victims of collective violence whose innocence is exposed (good example is the story of Joseph). The events might be quite similar to those in archaic myths, it is the perspective that changes radically.

In the Bible we find many examples of this exposure, the servant of Yahweh is suffering, being insulted and attacked by the crowd. Even though he is innocent,

¹⁰ Those analyzes of myths may be found in his book entitled *The Scapegoat*, (original *Le Bouc émissaire*, 1982)

¹¹ Orig. *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, 1983

people blame him and shun him. The dialog between the servant, the crowd and the God reminds of the antique tragedy (the dialog between the hero and the chorus). While throughout the Old Testament vengeance is a common theme, here we encounter something radically new. The servant doesn't pray for revenge, on the contrary he confesses to sins he didn't commit to remove them from the crowd. This way people who were blaming him realize their guilt, they understand that he was suffering for their iniquity. The Old Testament servant prefigures Christ in his role of the redeemer.

Girard perceives the Martyrdom and Resurrection of Christ as a core of the New Testament. Christ suffers to redeem us, he is innocent but everyone succumbs to the power of the crowd and condemn him. Resurrection brings forgiveness and reveals the love of God to all people. Holy Ghost is denoted as Paraclete, the advocate of people, possibly understood as a defender of an innocent victim, the central figure of the New Testament.

This scheme of condemnation, killing (ritual death) and resurrection might be found in many rituals. In the archaic myths, Girard finds the traces of the scapegoat mechanism, where the victim is deified to compensate the murder and exonerate the crowd. That is why he calls thus formed sacredness false and confronts it with the Christian God who reveals the innocence of the victim and the sin of hateful crowd and forgives. There is no justification for the crime, just the grace of forgiving God.

Girard finds an analogy to the biblical message in Shakespeare's "Winter tale". The destructive power of jealousy is presented by the character of king Leontes, uncertain and distrustful. In the end of the play, Leontes suffers by remorse watching the sculpture of his wife Hermione, which apparently died from grief after being falsely accused from infidelity. But Hermione is revived and they are reconciled and the scene brings an astonishing relief. Girard explains that person confronted with his own guilt realizes the responsibility for his action and in situation like this only the forgiveness of his victim can save him.

In his study of myths and Christianity Girard came from reading Friedrich Nietzsche's work but broke away from it. In "The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music", 1872 Nietzsche mentions the connection between Dionysian cult and the

formidable but indispensable violence and contradicts it to Christianity, in which the suffering of martyrs leads to the state of holiness. He accuses Christianity from individualism, the individual becomes so important that the victimization becomes impossible. Nietzsche defends the mythological violence and deems the myths much powerful binder of human communities. He even calls for its renewal in modern world.

Nietzsche played an important role for Girard's understanding of the difference between the archaic religions and their myths and Christianity. But he doesn't follow Nietzsche's preferences, on the contrary, Girard warns about the consequences of this Nietzschean attitude towards myth and the acceptance of violence.

It is uncertain to which extent Rothko and Newman adopted Nietzsche's approach to myth, but they were indisputably influenced by him. It is also very complicated to ascertain what was their view of Christianity and if it was any closer to Girard's approach. I will get back to this issue later, while considering each of them separately.

Girard pointed out that in "The Will to Power" Nietzsche exposes similarities and differences among myths and Christianity, while suggesting that the collective violence of Dionysian passion and the Passion of Jesus is the same, it is the interpretation that differs.

*"Dionysos versus the 'Crucified': there you have the antithesis. It is not a difference in regard to their martyrdom – it is a difference in the meaning of it. Life itself, its eternal fruitfulness and recurrence, creates torment, destruction, the will to annihilation. In the other case, suffering – the 'Crucified as the innocent one' – counts as an object to this life, as a formula to its condemnation."*¹²

This glorification of myth and rejection of Christian Revelation brought, according to Girard, the possibility of new lynching. Nietzsche saw, in the compassion with innocent victim, the resentment of miserable and the prejudice in favour of the weak.

2.5. The False Myth of 20th Century

¹² Friedrich NIETZSCHE: *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books, 1967, p. 542-43, quoted in GIRARD 2001 (note 5), p. 172

Nietzsche had a huge influence on many 20th century intellectuals and fanatics as Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi ideologist and the author of “Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts” (The Myth of 20th Century), first published in 1930. In this racist book Rosenberg created a false genealogy of German race rooting in antique Greece and opposed it to Jewish race, which he saw as degenerated. He attacked the concern for weak and ill and proclaimed as the main goal to get rid of those who do not fulfill the “Nordic ideal”.

According to Girard “*the spiritual goal of Hitler’s ideology was to root out of Germany, then all of Europe, the calling that the Christian tradition places upon all of us: the concern for victims.*”¹³ He have seen Nazism as an attempt to return to paganism, which Nietzsche called for. Hitler’s Drittes Reich was about to be built on the corpses of those victims without numbers.

The barbarism of Nazism was often likened to brutality of “primitive” societies after World War II, but this debate has deeper roots. In the wake of World War I the question of “primitive” in modern world developed a discourse which has grown stronger in late 1930s and early 1940s. Michael Leja mentions the rate at which Nazis were portrayed as primitives in this period’s political commentary including expressive caricatures.¹⁴ Leja also reminds the role of anthropologists in this discussions, Ralph Linton was skeptical regarding the state of modern society in his statement from 1945: “*The thoughtful recognize Fascism for what it is, a symptom of a deeper disorder, and are eager to know what this disorder may be and how it can be cured...*”¹⁵

Nazism was perceived as modern primitivism in journals and newspapers of that time, Leja also reminds statements of an influential journalist and radio commentator Dorothy Thompson, written in 1945, after she visited Dachau:

“If only one could say, and dismiss it with that, ‘These people are savages’. They are – but they are a new and terrifying kind of savage... When civilized man, with his science, his technique, his organization, his power, loses his soul, he becomes the most terrible

¹³ Idem 2001 (note 5), p. 171

¹⁴ LEJA, 1993 (note 1), p. 65

¹⁵ Linton: *Present World Condition in Cultural Perspective*, quoted in IDEM 1993, p. 65

monster the world has ever seen... Hitlerism is not a unique, isolated phenomenon, but a terrible example and warning. It is a symbol of universal moral crisis which even in cries for revenge and reprisal emits the animal-like cries of Nazism itself."¹⁶

The overall moral crisis was a topic many times referred to by Newman and Rothko, they talked about the destabilized state of modern world and the civilized man turning into savage. Their effort was to reflect on this situation and even change it with their art. Rothko proclaimed that he wanted to create "*pictorial equivalents for man's new knowledge and consciousness of his inner self.*"¹⁷

Girard comprehended the totalitarian regimes of 20th century in a similar way, he points to unanimous condemnation of victim as a symptom of new, anti-Christian ideology. He mentioned the specific character of political trials and compared it with the conviction of Job in the Bible: "*Through the friends the crowd, as it terrorizes the accused, tries to obtain his mimetic assent to the verdict that condemns him, just as in the totalitarian trials of the twentieth century that regress to the old paganism with its mechanism of unanimous persecution and expulsion in order to resolve contagion turning into violence.*"

The crowd wanted Job to agree with the conviction to seem just and the old pagan conception of God is represented by this unanimous crowd. Job hesitates but then defeats the mimetic contagion as he affirms "As for me, I know that my Defender lives."¹⁸

Nazism wasn't solitary phenomenon of this kind, even though it was without question one of the most terrifying regressions of this type in 20th century. Girard refers universally to modern totalitarian regimes in his critique and compares them with ancient paganism.

¹⁶ Thompson: *Lesson of Dachau*, quoted in IDEM 1993 p. 65-66

¹⁷ Letter. New York Times, 1945, X2 in Anna CHAVE: *Mark Rothko. Subjects in Abstraction*, Yale University Press, 1989, p. 120

¹⁸ GIRARD, 2001 (note 5), p. 117

This problematic was more precisely elaborated by Eric Voegelin, a political philosopher who escaped Nazis in 1938, when he emigrated to USA. Throughout his life he investigated the ideologies of 20th century among others. He exposed their religious character in book called "Die politischen Religionen" (1938, The Political Religions) and later examined the roots of these ideologies in "The New Science of Politics" (1951).

Voegelin states that those "new religions" (totalitarian ideologies) are strictly modern phenomenon and therefore he sees the term "Neopaganism" as incorrect. They wouldn't be possible without the experience of Christianity. Voegelin finds roots of communism and Nazism in the ancient Gnosticism. He explains that the insecurity of Christian faith, that is unbearable for many people, led to rejection of the Christian eschaton, the transcendental fulfillment and to conception of earthly salvation. The eschaton is immanentized and brings the idea of future "heaven on earth" where evil does not exist and people live in peaceful brotherhood. In modern ideologies we find different versions of this paradise that is going to be achieved by social engineering or by destruction of the alleged evil in society (Jews in Nazi society). This paradise shall be inhabited by perfect people – in Marxist view the state of proletariat or the "Übermensch" of Nazis achieved by racial purity.

Voegelin described the excitement (germ. Rausch) of crowd listening to their leader, that was close to religious ecstasy, man loses his identity and connects with the people. He observed how the crowd forms itself under influence of the leading figure. This "Führer" promises the oncoming paradise and finds a solution of the crisis. The frustration of German people turns against alleged enemies through the act of fake "Salvation" realized in Union between the "Führer" and the ferocious crowd. Voegelin describes this process as a constitution of a second reality (dream world), and we see, that here the girardian Mythmechanism works again - not just for the constitution of founding Myth, but as a form of gnosis in opposition to Christian Faith.

As we can see all of those ideas were present even before the beginning of World War II, there were thinkers like Voegelin, who had a remarkable insight. It is uncertain if Rothko and Newman knew about those thoughts, but they were close to them in some of their statements. They made link between myths and modern crisis and compared (especially Rothko) the contemporary brutality to mythical violence.

They have also seen the archaic myths and the “primitive” rituals as somehow connected and they were later criticized for it.¹⁹ It is obvious that the customs of Northwest coast Indians are not the same as antique tragedy, but if we approach both of them from Girard’s perspective, we find similarities that are maybe more important than differences. This is why I believe that we can bring more light into Rothko and Newman’s idea of myths if we support our research with Girard’s theory.

Both of those artists were modernists but they also achieved religious education and I believe that their Jewish origin played a crucial role in their perception of Holocaust and “the modern tragedy”. When myth became their subject they chose Nietzsche as the main interpreter and embraced his attitude. In the next chapter I will look closer to possible reasons of this interest. Their view on myths evolved during time and Christianity became important, too. It is this position between myth and Revelation that makes it hard to understand their message. It is also the obvious distance of the abstract art and their declarations about the subject matter that led to various interpretations. I will try to explore those polarities and bring some light into them.

¹⁹ For example in *The Primitive: Academic and Popular* (p. 57 – 64) and *Psyche and the Cosmos* (p. 72 – 76) in LEJA, 1993 (note 1)

3. Mythmakers

3.1. Gathering the Fragments

Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman were deeply affected by the historical situation in which they lived. Denying this means ignoring many of their own statements revealing their feelings about war and the modern world in general. Some of the critics²⁰ that presented them as detached from the outside world were in trouble when it came to the shift in their work in the early 1940s. They couldn't explain the sudden change that their art underwent. This problem relates mainly to Rothko, since Newman was primarily critic and occasionally curator until 1947.²¹

Why did Rothko and others choose to abandon the understandable figurative painting with social thematics and decided to use more imaginative style? And more importantly why did the myth become the central theme of their art?

One of the possible explanations is the influence of Surrealism, that arrived to United States as the Surrealists were escaping from Nazis. Those European painters certainly played an important role encouraging the American art. Some of the Americans became Surrealists themselves but Newman and Rothko, though affected by it, stayed skeptical enough to fully accept it.

"In New York it is now admitted that Surrealism is dead," wrote Newman around 1943-1945 *"while dying are being kicked, it is well to remember that Surrealism has made a contribution to the esthetic of our time by emphasizing the importance of subject matter for the painter."*²²

The problem of subject matter was mentioned many times, it was crucial for both Rothko and Newman. Despite some common ideas²³, there were important distinctions between Surrealists and those Americans who called themselves

²⁰ The influential critics of 1940s and 1950s Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg pictured them like this in their famous essays, in David ANFAM: Abstract Expressionism, London, 2012, p. 135

²¹ LEJA, 1993 (note 1), p. 41

²² Barnett NEWMAN, „The Plasmic Image“, 1943-45, in Thomas B. HESS: *Barnett Newman*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971, p. 34-37

²³ CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 69, she mentions the role of automatism in some of their painting's of 1940s

Myth Makers. The difference was, according to Rothko, that Surrealists were “*translating the real world to dream, [we] were insisting that symbols were real...*”²⁴ Rothko and Newman both felt that the present situation needed serious subject matter, that would confront its problems.

„*During World War II it became nonsensical to get involved in painting man playing violins or cellos, or flowers.*” Newman said in one of later interviews, “*the old stuff was out. It was no longer meaningful. These things were no longer relevant in a moral crises...*”²⁵

As they wanted to address the contemporary problems, their art had to be significant to the whole society and therefore building on Surrealists grounds would be impossible. The “moral crises” didn’t emerge with the war, Rothko complained about modern society and compared it to the ancient one, which seemed more practical to him. He missed the culture that would be coherent, understandable. The role of an artist in such world was pitiful according to him, the problem was the absence of any firm shared beliefs or spirituality to participate on. They sought to create something, that the modern man desperately lacked and needed and decided to search for in ancient times.

The call for return or starting over and the lamentation over the state of civilization run as a theme through the poetry of many writers, especially those referring to war and the damage it caused to Europe. This topic takes us back to World War I, which was by many people perceived as a catastrophic accident without any meaning, resulting in a loss of faith, not just in religion, but also in political leaders and the civilization itself. The generation of so called war poets of the first war wrote about their experiences and captured its meaningless character.²⁶

One of the most famous and influential was a poem called “*Dulce et decorum est*” from Wilfred Owen, who died in the final week of World War I. The title refers to a

²⁴ Idem 1989, p. 103

²⁵ Barnett Newman, Interview with Emile de Antonio in John Philip O'NEILL: *Selected Writings and Interviews*, New York, 1970, p. 303

²⁶ Downward to Darkness. Progressivism and War (1910-1920). War Poets, In: Internet course *Ideas of the 20th Century* by Daniel BONEVAC, The University of Texas at Austin. In: <https://courses.edx.org/courses/UTAustinX/UT.2.02x/3T2014/courseware/50b43f08ebbc4fc3b5f026c950f06da2/fc8d8e92171c49a982dc36034d676a76/> searched on 15 December 2015

well-known poem from Horace, a Roman author, in which Patria is presented as the highest value for which it is sweet to die. Owen rejects this and condemns the war as a senseless slaughter, his poem ends with a cynical outcry:

*“My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.”²⁷*

He contests the values that he has been taught to honour, because they seem irrelevant in the light of war. The same theme might be found in T. S. Eliot’s poetry, specifically in the “Wasteland”. Eliot’s composition consists from images of war and the reminiscences of the old Europe as it was before. The text is written in English, French, Russian, Italian... as it refers to various literary sources, the jewels of Western literary tradition.

The end of civilisation is reflected here as the fall of those cities that were its centres. *“...Falling towers, Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, London, unreal.”²⁸* This particular scene reflects the horrifying experience of war that devastated what seemed everlasting, but it is also a metaphor for an old world vanishing in chaos, the cities are unreal. As the poem continues, we are confronted with the image of a dead land, ravaged and disconsolate:

*“What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,*

²⁷ Wilfred OWEN: Dulce et Decorum Est, written in 1918. In: <https://courses.edx.org/courses/UTAustinX/UT.2.02x/3T2014/courseware/50b43f08ebbc4fc3b5f026c950f06da2/fc8d8e92171c49a982dc36034d676a76/>, searched on 15 December 2015

²⁸ T. S. ELIOT: The Wasteland, written in 1922. In: <https://courses.edx.org/courses/UTAustinX/UT.2.02x/3T2014/courseware/50b43f08ebbc4fc3b5f026c950f06da2/fcb88b860d834ef8a36107d028c9bb57/>, searched on 15 December 2015

And the dry stone, no sound of water."²⁹

The key phrase of this excerpt and maybe of the whole poem "The heap of broken images" suggests that the fragments that are left from Western civilization can not be put together again. Eliot tries to gather up the pieces knowing that the loss is irreversible. It is exactly this point of view, from which Rothko and Newman approach the cheerless situation of a modern man. Anna Chave commented on this theme in her monograph on Mark Rothko.

*"Rothko painted in a society and period in which the cultural units had long been torn apart and artists were reduced to remodelling with fragments that would not come together as a whole, transparent to the community at large... Rothko increasingly came to feel... that he was condemned to work in a cultural half-light with the fragments of rapture believe systems."*³⁰

There was a strong need for something that would connect people again, something that would create a basis for a new world that was to come. William Butler Yates, Irish poet who won a Nobel prize for literature, would agree with Eliot's view on the state of modern civilization. Although he tried to overlook the situation from a larger perspective. The problem didn't arise with the war, it was there before, the civilization was tired, old, exhausted, according to him.

His famous poem "The Second coming"³¹ starts like this:

*"Turning and turning in the widening gyre,
the falcon cannot hear the falconer.
Things fall apart. The centre cannot hold.
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,
and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned.
The best lack all conviction,*

²⁹ Idem 1922

³⁰ CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 102

³¹ William Butler YATES: The Second Coming, Written in 1919, In:
<https://courses.edx.org/courses/UTAustinX/UT.2.02x/3T2014/courseware/50b43f08ebbc4fc3b5f026c950f06da2/b2febc2adcbc4402a749c6ef3e8baa77/>

while the worst are full of passionate intensity."³²

The centre cannot hold, because Christianity, which was the dominant influence for almost 2000 years can not bring people together, not all of them, not as before. That is how Yates sees it, the voice of falconer would mean the voice of God and the falcon is the modern man, who turned away from him.

The fact is that Christianity connected people through culture, which enabled participation. Yates reminds the singing schools, which were popular in 19th century in his other poem called "Sailing to Byzantium": "*...Nor is there singing school but studying monuments of its own magnificence.*"³³

Singing schools helped people who could not read music. There were teachers who travelled from city to city and taught common people religious songs. For this purpose, they used special books with notes in particular shapes, so it was easier to understand and learn from them. The same effort is represented by stained glass windows of cathedrals, which worked as "Biblia pauperum", the book for illiterate.

Yates is suggesting that Christianity wanted to spread the culture between common people and he does not see "singing schools" around anymore. He also lacks the creative drive, that vivacity our culture used to attain. The creativity and effort that helped to build the cathedrals are gone. Our civilization lost its spirit and the monuments reminding better past are the only thing that is left.

*"Therefore, I have sailed the seas and come to the holy city of Byzantium..."*³⁴ Yates compares the modern condition to the last centuries of Roman empire. The eastern part of the empire, the Byzantine civilization, lasted till the half of 15th century. The holy city of Byzantium represents the world which is detached from the dying civilization of ancient Rome. The poet longs to be part of that vivid culture, of that holy city, when his own civilization is parched.

³² Idem 1919

³³ William Butler YATES: Sailing to Byzantium, written in 1926. In: <https://courses.edx.org/courses/UTAustinX/UT.2.02x/3T2014/courseware/50b43f08ebbc4fc3b5f026c950f06da2/b2febc2adc4402a749c6ef3e8baa77/>

³⁴ Idem 1926

His poems are not all mourning and complaining, because Yates assumes that this state will not last forever, he predicts something new will soon arise and take the place:

*“Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming!”³⁵*

This utopian conception is close to Hegel’s “spiritus mundi”, an unknown force is going to replace Christianity, and Yates supposes it is something that was suppressed by the birth of Christ.³⁶ Here we see once again the modernist urge for new spirituality, that might be approached as the gnostic vision. With rejection of Christianity, it is the paganism that shall redeem modern man.

Even here the connection to Rothko’s and Newman’s viewpoint arises quite clearly, the image of a spiritual centre that no longer works for society is reflected in their statements. And the search for something genuine, something real takes them to ancient times. This intention was possibly inspired by Nietzsche, as according to him *“every culture that has lost myth, has lost, by the same token, its natural, healthy creativity. Only a horizon ringed about with myths can unify a culture...”³⁷*

The theme of dying civilization, the image of fragments left behind and the desire for a new centre create a basis for their life long journey. Would it be possible to re-establish the power that myths had in past? Rothko and Newman have made it their goal, when they turned to mythology in the early 1940s, they did not try to illustrate the myths, they approached them as fragments of the old knowledge, what they were looking for was the “spirit” of the myth so that they could create new myths, that would have the same efficiency.

³⁵ YATES The Second Coming (note 31)

³⁶ The reference to awakening Sphinx in William B. YATES poem *Sailing to Byzantium*, In: <https://courses.edx.org/courses/UTAustinX/UT.2.02x/3T2014/courseware/50b43f08ebbc4fc3b5f026c950f06da2/b2febc2adcbc4402a749c6ef3e8baa77/>

³⁷ Friedrich NIETZSCHE: *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, Translation Francis Gollfing . Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, Anchor, 1956, p.136-137 quoted in CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 79

3.2. Mythmaking in New York

As I mentioned above the fascination with myths was not specific to Rothko and Newman only, there was a group of artists who shared this interest. In 1943 Rothko and Adolf Gottlieb sent a letter to New York Times (composed with assistance of Barnett Newman), in which they proclaimed "*the spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.*" It was their answer to critic Edward Alden Jewell, who expressed his 'befuddlement' at paintings by Gottlieb and Rothko from the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors' exhibition in New York. This well-known letter represents something like their manifesto or a program (now on as "letter to editor").³⁸

Adolf Gottlieb was quite close to Rothko and Newman in the beginning of 1940s. His wife recalled the discussion that he had with Rothko. She described that they were "*extremely programmatic about their artistic direction and deliberately chose to concern themselves with myth so that they could break with what they considered stagnant in European tradition and with the provincial American past.*"³⁹

Important was definitely the problem of subject matter, that was the central concern of Rothko, Newman and probably others, too. It couldn't be something as vague and personal as dreams. In case of this, their break with Surrealism was uncompromising. Myth seemed as the subject just right for the basis they needed.

Anna Chave enumerated the sources that she considered to be the main influence on Rothko: "*...he founded his subject not in the anecdotal fabric of myth – in myth out of Bullfinch – but in myth as espoused by Nietzsche, as dramatized by Aeschylus, as mapped by Sir James George Frazer, as probed by Freud and Jung, and as reanimated or revisualized by the surrealists.*"⁴⁰

³⁸ Adolf Gottlieb, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, Letter to the Editor, New York Times, June 13, 1943 in Charles HARRISON, Paul J. WOOD (Ed.): Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas, Malden, Massachusetts : Blackwell Publisher, 2003, p. 561-563

³⁹ Quoted in CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 78

⁴⁰ Idem 1989, p. 78

Gottlieb suggested this serious reading of their myths in a radio show, Art in New York: *"Anyone who has looked carefully at my portrait of Oedipus, or at Mr Rothko's Leda, will see that this is not mythology out of Bullfinch. The implications have direct applications to life..."*⁴¹

The list of sources is probably quite accurate, Rothko mentioned the importance of Aeschylus and Nietzsche many times, they were definitely formative in his beginnings with myths and I will get back to them later.

Frazer was well-known for his comprehensive work in which he compared myths from various regions and times and by this approach he was close to Rothko and Newman. His main interest was the cycle of life and death and this is also something that Miss Chave considers relevant. Rothko described myths as *"the symbols of man's primitive fears and motivations, no matter in which land or what time, changing only in detail but never in substance..."*⁴² This statement signifies that he believed that there is something general, "the spirit" or some theme that runs through myths across times.

It is undeniable that both Rothko and Newman knew Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the question is to what extent were they persuaded by it. Freud was indispensable for Surrealists and his disclosure of unconscious part of human mind was in general revelatory, but the problematics of dreams did not really concern Rothko and Newman and their outlook on myth was based on different grounds. They did not approach myth as something personal, something that stems from psychology of specific human being.

Jung might have been more appealing, he was quite popular in New York at that time and some of those Americans associated with our Mythmakers were certainly inspired by him. Best known is the favour of Jackson Pollock, who became a Jungian and attended analyst in New York.⁴³ In case of Rothko and Newman we can recognize

⁴¹ *Mark Rothko 1903-1970. Ex. Cat., The Tate Gallery, 1987, p. 78-81, in PAPPAS 1997 (note 3), p. 102*

⁴² *Mark Rothko and Adolf Gottlieb: The Portrait and the Modern Artist. WNYC broadcast, 13 Oct. 1943, quoted in CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 92*

⁴³ *Jackson Pollock and the Unconscious in LEJA, 1993 (note 1), p. 121 - 202*

Jung's influence too, as he approached myths from a wider perspective, he assumed that the unconscious is not strictly individual and that there is a collective unconscious based on archetypes.⁴⁴ Jung understood the myths as relicts of primordial consciousness.

He was also an important critic of modern society with its focus on rationality and thus he must have been appealing for them:

“Our modern attitude looks back proudly upon the mists of superstition and of medieval or primitive credulity and entirely forgets that it carries the whole living past in the lower stories of the skyscraper of rational consciousness. Without the lower stories our mind is suspended in mid-air. No wonder that it gets nervous.”⁴⁵

We get back to the point of those above mentioned poets, the shared foundation was dismembered and the modern man stands disconnected in the hostile world. The time when people understood their culture, and they were united by the same religion, traditions or rituals, was gone. Depression started before World War II, but only the horrors of what was happening in the “civilized Europe” confronted them with real terror. It showed what kind of world they live in despite all rationality and sophistication. As Rothko described it:

“those who think that the world of today is more gentle and graceful than the primeval and predatory passions from which these myths spring are either not aware of reality or do not wish to see it in art.”⁴⁶

This statement suggests that Rothko's outlook on myth was not unduly optimistic. He regarded its origin as aggressive, and he found “the predatory passions” awakening in modern society as well. Jung comprehended the modern man in a similar way, as someone whose rationality is fragile and insecure and who can be

⁴⁴ „Jung claimed that myth issued from the same depth as art. This inner hinterland, the so-called ‚collective unconscious‘, was supposedly common to all human beings, whether primitive or civilised.“ in ANFAM 2012 (note 20), p. 82

⁴⁵ Carl Gustav JUNG: *Psychology and Religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938, p.61, 11, quoted in CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 93

⁴⁶ Mark Rothko and Adolf Gottlieb: *The Portrait and the Modern Artist*. WNYC broadcast, 13 Oct. 1943, quoted in CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 102

easily entrained by mass hysteria. Similarity might be found in Nietzsche's "The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music", he believed that the civilization is on the surface of reality and that in antique tragedy the primordial impulses awaken at full strength: *"the illusion of culture was wiped away by the primordial image of man; here the real man revealed himself, the bearded satyr, who cried out with joy to his god."*⁴⁷

Adolf Gottlieb expressed his feelings about the modern world and the disconnection that those artists experienced in one of his statements:

*"Different times require different images. Today when our aspirations have been reduced to a desperate attempt to escape from evil, and times are out of joint, our obsessive, subterranean and pictographic images are the expression of the neurosis which is our reality. To my mind certain so-called abstraction is not abstraction at all. On the contrary, it is the realism of our time."*⁴⁸

As I suggested before and as we can see in Mark Rothko's and writings of others, not only the evil done by Nazis, but also the state of civilization were compared to myths and rituals with the brutality accompanying them.

In 1943 on a radio show with Rothko, Adolf Gottlieb stated:

*"In times of violence, personal predilections for niceties of colour and form seem irrelevant. All primitive expression reveals the constant awareness of powerful forces, the immediate presence of terror and fear, a recognition and acceptance of the brutality of natural world as well as the eternal insecurity of life. That these feelings are being experienced by many people throughout the world today is an unfortunate fact, and to us an art that glosses over or evades these feelings, is superficial or meaningless."*⁴⁹

I am not going to try to cover the whole spectrum of opinions on myth in the former New York milieu. My main interest is Rothko and Newman and although they were close to some of their contemporaries, I believe that their approach was in some ways

⁴⁷ Friedrich NIETZSCHE: *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, Vancouver Island University, Richer Resources Publisher, 2012, p. 29

⁴⁸ Originally published in the short-lived avant-garde periodical *Tiger's Eye*, New York, vol. 1, no. 2, December 1947, p. 43, in: *Art in Theory 2003* (note 38), p. 565

⁴⁹ Mark Rothko 1903-1970, Ex., cat., Tate gallery, June 17 – September 1, 1987 (typescript of a broadcast on „Art in New York“ Radio WNYC, 1943), in *PAPPAS 1997* (note 3), p. 165

quite unique. Their interest in this topic lasted until the very end unlike in case of, for example, Gottlieb, who devoted himself to different issues after the war.

There were also artists who acknowledged the resemblance of myths and Hitler's ideology and rejected myths from this very reason. Mostly, it went hand in hand with rejection of Christianity which was falsely identified as a different form of myth. Some of the Surrealists made it clear in their statement in magazine *View*, 1943:

"If we are against myths of questionable historic significance, be they pagan or Christian, we are naturally still more opposed to degenerate forms of myth which some suggest ought to inspire us in the present or immediate future, such as the hitlerian adaptation of the theory of a chosen race... It is the forces of reaction, not we, that cling to the mythical explanation of the world!"⁵⁰

3.3. The Role of Jewish Ancestry

We have already addressed the connection of Rothko's and Newman's present situation (the beginning of war and finding about the Nazis attitudes in Europe) to the origins of myths. It is important to realize how exactly did they perceive these horrifying news coming to United States.

They were indisputably shocking for anyone, but one can hardly imagine the intensity with which this tragedy struck sensitive people like Rothko, who escaped Russia as a ten-year-old after experiencing persecution as a member of oppressed minority. Newman was born in USA to Jewish emigrants from Russian Poland, his father was Zionist and the children were tutored at home by young Jewish scholars from Europe.⁵¹ Both Rothko and Newman were Jews (so was Gottlieb) and the importance of this fact was discussed by many scholars. Is the question of their origin really that significant as some suggest?

As I would like to approach myths from Girard perspective I could not pass over the problematics of persecution that Jews underwent during centuries. Girard pointed

⁵⁰ "Point of View: An Editorial" 3rd ser. April 1943, p. 5 quoted in CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 94

⁵¹ Chronology of the Artist's Life, The Barnett Newman Foundation, In: <http://www.barnettnewman.org/chronology.php>, searched on 15 March 2016

out that Jews were more likely to recognize the scapegoat mechanism of which they were often victims.

*"They demonstrate exceptional discernment in the matter of persecutory crowds and their tendency to close ranks against foreigners, those who are isolated, the crippled, the disabled of all sorts."*⁵²

There is no doubt that Rothko went through those experiences himself, not just as a child, but even after his emigration, since the antisemitism spread through American society as well. There were surveys affirming that the stereotypes of Jews as greedy, dishonest and so on operated in society. Rothko as the only child of his family gained a religious education, he learned Hebrew and Talmudic law. Soon after they moved to America, his father died and Marcus, destined to be rabbi became a newspaper seller, an immigrant. He was a Jew and a foreigner in United States. In 1940 he changed his name from Marcus Rothkowitz to Mark Rothko, so his origin would not be clear at the first sight.⁵³

Another important fact was mentioned by A. Pappas - the awareness of Holocaust spread by Jewish press. Mainstream periodicals did not bring complete news about it before the end of the war, Jewish ones informed about them from 1941.⁵⁴ The moral dimension of their art was a necessity in these circumstances. Statement in a "Letter to editor" that Rothko, Gottlieb and Newman wrote in 1943 confirms this: *"Only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless."*⁵⁵

Such news were accompanied by photographs, one of them in Life magazine was of mass grave from a Warsaw ghetto and it was published in 1942. Rothko remarked that he was haunted by the image of the mass grave.⁵⁶ Apart from magazines with reports from Europe there were many anthropologists interested in themes relevant for those artists. Even if they wrote, as for example Ruth Benedict, about the Native Americans, the references to present situation in Europe were clear:

⁵² GIRARD 2001 (note 5), p. 114

⁵³ PAPPAS 1997 (note 3), p. 29-32

⁵⁴ Idem 1997 p. 22

⁵⁵ Adolf Gottlieb, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, Letter to the Editor, 1943 in Art in Theory 2003 (note 38), p. 562

⁵⁶ PAPPAS 1997 (note 3), p. 87

"It is impossible for certain people to conceive the possibility of a state of peace, which in their notion would be equivalent to admitting enemy tribes to the category of human beings, which by definition they are not, even though the excluded tribe might be of their own race and culture."⁵⁷

The enemy was considered inhuman and by that he could have been killed with no guilt. Finding parallel to this tribal behaviour in modern Europe was not complicated and even Rothko and Newman compared the "primitive" or ancient manners to modern brutality.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to point out the important theses on which I will base the rest of my work. As I suggested, the historical situation played the prime role in those artist's development. It was the situation of modern man lacking his natural position in a society with shared religion and coherent culture. And with the beginning of World War II, it was also a situation of sheer terror, when confronted with the brutality devastating the civilized Europe.

Those artists felt as their duty to reflect the unhappy situation and they found myth satisfying enough for this purpose. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Jewish people became the sacrifice of Nazi ideology. They were considered inhuman parasites and by that their immolation was justified.

From this point of view, Rothko's often-used titles concerning sacrifice or ritual might be approached as references to ongoing events. Any abbreviated explanation would be misleading but there is no doubt that those themes were the centre of his attention.

⁵⁷ Ruth BENEDICT: *Patterns of Culture*, written in 1934, Boston 1961, p.31

4. Mark Rothko

4.1. Antique Tragedy, Ritual and Actors

Mark Rothko as well as Barnett Newman insistently talked about the subject matter of their paintings, which was supposed to be tragic. They both perceived their images as symbols. The painting was not an issue of aesthetics for them. Even though Rothko mentioned the importance of the “subject” many times, he never clearly stated what he meant by that. He was concerned with themes running through the whole history of painting but at the same time relevant to the modern man. The source of the themes should have been the “spirit of the myth”. As I mentioned before, Rothko complained about the pitiful position of a modern artist and wanted to create symbols as archaic artists did. He expressed this intention in a letter to publisher:

“Since art is timeless, the significant rendition of a symbol, no matter how archaic, has as full validity today as the archaic symbol had then. Or is the one 3000 years old truer?”⁵⁸

Rothko believed, under the influence of Nietzsche, that the rebirth of myth was coming and wanted to create symbols as components of new spiritual art. As Anna Chave puts it, *“Using mythology had become legitimate because a congruity had been established between the phantasmagoria of the unconscious and the objects of everyday life.”⁵⁹* Nietzsche talked about symbols in the context of awakening Dionysian forces in ancient Greece. He declared that in the rhythm of dithyramb⁶⁰ *„the essence of nature is to express itself symbolically“* and that *„a new world of symbols is necessary“*. It was the time when mythical violence and “primitive” behaviour were often compared to the action of Nazis as I have mentioned above and some of Rothko’s statements demonstrate that he intended the same ferocity in his art:

⁵⁸ Letter to the Editor, in: Art in Theory 2003 (note 38), p. 562

⁵⁹ CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 95

⁶⁰ A hymn dedicated to Dionysus

*“The public, therefore, which reacted so violently to the primitive brutality of this art, reacted more truly than the critic who spoke about forms and techniques.”*⁶¹

The response of public was essential, as Rothko intended his art to reach out for a spectator in some kind of communication and wanted the reaction to be emotional and impulsive. He never searched for a critical acclaim and did not paint for intellectuals only, on the contrary, he cared about human response.

With the rebirth of myth, the renewal of art was anticipated, too. This art was supposed to be a modern counterpart of antique tragedy, Rothko wanted his paintings to be “dramas” and he saw the shapes in them as “performers” of the act, the painting was more like a stage and the viewer became a spectator, a participant.

*“I think of my pictures as dramas; the shapes in the pictures are the performers. They have been created from the need for a group of actors who are able to move dramatically without embarrassment and execute gestures without shame.”*⁶²

It might be complicated to understand these statements and to approach Rothko’s paintings this way. I believe that his interest in tragedy comes from his study of “The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music”, in which Nietzsche described antique tragedy as an event that connects community members, as the reconciliation of Dionysian and Apollonian principle and *“as the common goal of both impulses, whose secret marriage partnership, after a long antecedent struggle, glorified itself with such a child.”*⁶³ Nietzsche proclaimed that *“tragedy developed out of the tragic chorus and originally consisted only of a chorus and nothing else”*⁶⁴.

The chorus was a gathering of voices that accompanied the play, they didn’t enter into action but rather communicated the emotions of the play to the spectators. Those ancient spectators were participating emotionally in the drama and through the music of chorus they connected with the performers. Nietzsche compared this audience with the modern one:

⁶¹ Manuscript draft no 2 of a letter to the editor by Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, 1943, In Miguel LÓPEZ-REMIRO: *Writings on Art. Mark Rothko*. Yale University Press, 2006, p. 32

⁶² Mark ROTHKO: *The Romantics were prompted*, originally published in *Possibilities*, I, New York, 1947, p. 84, in *Art in Theory* 2003 (note 38), p. 563

⁶³ NIETZSCHE 2012 (note 47), p. 20

⁶⁴ Idem 2012, p. 26

*“we had always thought that the proper spectator, whoever he might be, must always remain conscious that he has a work of art in front of him, not an empirical reality; whereas, the tragic chorus of the Greeks is required to recognize the shapes on the stage as living, existing people.”*⁶⁵

Nietzsche considers Chorus to be a Dionysian element and he speaks about the original member of it as a satyr which is *“related to the cultural person in the same way that Dionysian music is related to civilization.”*⁶⁶ This satyr figure represents the vivacity and eagerness of Dionysian principle which destroys the social hierarchy and all boundaries and creates a state of complete freedom: *„the cultured Greek felt himself neutralized by the sight of the chorus of satyrs, and the next effect of Dionysian tragedy is that the state and society, in general the gap between man and man, give way to an invincible feeling of unity, which leads back to the heart of nature.”*⁶⁷

He talks about “the metaphysical consolation” that the tragedy brought to ancient spectators, a catharsis, that is felt by participating audience. For Nietzsche, the myth comes to life in tragedy and therefore is experienced, instead of being just a narrative. I believe (and Anna Chave also suggested this) that this liveliness of tragedy was very appealing for Rothko. He wanted people to be emotionally involved with his art, not just perceive it as a matter of aesthetics. Chave talks about a “religious experience” or a “marriage”, the participants are solaced by the drama.⁶⁸

*“The presentation of this drama in the familiar world was never possible, unless everyday acts belonged to a ritual accepted as referring to a transcendent realm. since the archaic artist was living in a more practical society than ours, the urgency for transcendent experience was understood, and given an official status.”*⁶⁹

The quotation above suggests what Rothko intended his paintings to be. He wanted to mediate a transcendent experience. He perceived the tragedy as a ritual, spiritual

⁶⁵ Idem 2012, p. 27

⁶⁶ Idem 2012, p. 27

⁶⁷ Idem 2012, p. 28

⁶⁸ CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 80-104

⁶⁹ The Romantics were prompted, 1947 (note 62), in Art in Theory 2003 (note 38), p. 563

event that the society needs. According to him this was something that the modern society was missing and he wanted his art to function as such a drama. The connection between tragedy and ritual was explored by Girard. He understands the ritual as substitution for the original event that brought consolation to the community and functioned as a solution of social crises. Girard described tragedy as something like a sublimation of this event, rather than exposure of its real nature. The violence and brutality of some primitive rituals are transformed and elevated by art. Nevertheless the ritual character of tragedy is still perceptible as we can see in Nietzsche's writing.

Rothko was attracted by these ideas. He didn't want his drama to be strictly outlined or illustrated, the painting comes from a specific moment with a specific mood, but when finished, it becomes its own entity. The painter is a mediator of this experience, not its ultimate creator.

"The most important tool the artist fashions through constant practice is faith in his ability to produce miracles when they are needed. Pictures must be miraculous: the instant one is completed, the intimacy between the creation and the creator is ended. He is an outsider. The picture must be for him, as for anyone experiencing it later, a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need."

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Anna Chave understands the "eternally familiar need" as a need for reconciliation, responding to the fundamental human problem, the fear of death. She argues that those "*pictures yielded a catharsis by responding to and assuaging the viewers' primal terror – their terror of mortality.*"⁷¹ I believe that her assumption is right, but I would like to point to more social than personal context that tragedy brings. The fear of individual and his life drama was something that Rothko wanted to address but that does not say anything about the problem of shared spirituality and culture. Rothko wanted people to participate, the drama of tragedy was experienced by the whole community, not separate individuals.

⁷⁰ Idem 2003, p. 563

⁷¹ CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 79

Oresteia and the vindictive nature of myths

In 1940s Rothko uses titles of his artworks that signify his interest in myths, apart from broad and unspecific titles, such as *Ritual*, he refers to themes from various mythologies. Some of them remind specific characters as Oedipus, Leda or Orpheus. His main source was the writing of Aeschylus and the most significant the Agamemnon trilogy, *Oresteia*.

He was inspired by this theme in his painting entitled *The Omen of the Eagle*, from 1942 [1], which is the only painting that was associated with a particular text by Rothko. He wrote about inspiration in “the Agamemnon trilogy of Aeschylus”, in his statement for an exhibition catalogue.⁷² The composition here is structured hierarchically by rows, the first one consists of (five?) fused heads, beneath them some people recognize two eagles, even though the shapes are very abstract, the title suggests this reading. Then comes a layer mixing organic and architectural-like elements, that bear a resemblance to columns or columnades and this formation rests atop a scrum of human feet. The whole structure reminds the totemic objects (consisting of animal, human, vegetable), which does not function primarily as works of art but as ritual objects for religious practice.

I do not want to impose any specific reading on Rothko’s paintings, but as Anna Chave suggested⁷³ the reference to war or conflict can be found in the title. It also occurs to me that the stylization of those heads can tell us something about the ideas behind it. Since he connects them into one organism, he creates the impression of chaos and confusion. The heads evoke a crowd of people, melting together. As in Girard’s understanding of crisis, people lose their differences. We can also recall Nietzsche’s statements about the Dionysian festivals in which the individual disappears in a collective mass.

In the beginning of 1940s he also painted *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia* [2]. We can recognize some ambiguous figures in this painting and the specific readings had been suggested before, but I will not try to make any interpretation of the shapes, since it seems to me quite vague and uncertain. The title refers to events prior to *Oresteia*.

⁷² CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 84

⁷³ Idem 1989, p. 84-85

Agamemnon, Atreus' son, sacrificed his own daughter Iphigenia, as a debt for killing a hare, goddess Artemis sacred animal. As we can see, even the gods participate on this vindictive tragedy.

The events of Oresteia take place some years after the offering of Iphigenia, but the chorus remembers Agamemnon's deed: "*supplications and her cries of father were nothing, nor the child's lamentation to kings passioned for battle. She struck the sacrificers with the eyes' arrows of pity, lovely as in painted scene.*"⁷⁴ Chorus hear functions as an emotional link to the scene.

The Oresteia recounts the story of the house of Atreus, which is haunted by the vengeance cycle that takes lives of innocent children because of envy and the thirst for revenge. Agamemnon is killed by his wife, Clytaemestra and her lover Aegithus, son of Thyestes, who was involved in vindictive family crisis himself. Clytaemestra is murdered by her own son, Orestes, in revenge for his father's death.

The omen of the eagle might symbolize the curse that has been put on Agamemnon for sacrificing his daughter. The tragedy teaches about the horrors caused by envy and vindictiveness. Orestes is absolved and the goddess Athene promises that the cycle of treachery and revenge can be ended: "*Such life I offer you, and it is yours to take. Do good, receive good, and be honoured as the gods are honoured.*"⁷⁵

In the Bible, we find the story of Cain and Abel, which teaches about the same problem. After he killed his brother out of envy, Cain received the sign from God to prevent the revenge and he is becoming the founder of cities and culture. God himself prevents the cycle of hatred to begin.

During the 1940s we can find similar examples of Greek and other myths and the influence of Nietzsche endures. In a second half of 40s the titles are becoming more and more vague or disappear completely and the shapes in those paintings aim to abstraction. The period of so-called "multiforms" occurs around 1947 and in 1949 the first "classical" paintings follow. Rothko is becoming more mysterious, not just by making his paintings abstract, but he is also speaking about art less than before.

⁷⁴ AESCHYLUS, *Oresteia: Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, The Eumenides*, trans. Richmond Lattimore, University of Chicago Press, 1953, Agamemnon, p. 228-230

⁷⁵ Idem 1953, Eumenides, p.867-869

4.2. Fear and Trembling of Seagram Murals

The change of form signifies a change in Rothko's philosophy. In 1958 he gave lecture at Pratt Institute, where he discussed Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling". The main theme of the book and therefore of the lecture was a sacrifice of Isaac that Abraham was willing to make. Rothko compares this story with the sacrifice of Iphigenia and points out the important distinction between Agamemnon and Abraham, based on his understanding of "Fear and Trembling". He admits, he did not read Kierkegaard before 1955 and talks about his identification with Abraham. He was especially inspired by Abraham's reticence – *"I as a craftsman prefer to tell little."*⁷⁶

Rothko receives the commission for The Four Seasons restaurant in Seagram building in New York in 1958, that means about the same time as he gave the above mentioned lecture. I believe that reading Kierkegaard meant so much to him at that time, that it must have influenced his work on Seagram murals and his thinking about art in general. He is not trying to paint mythical creatures anymore, but an existential drama, human tragedy. He wants people to realize the tragic aspect of human existence.

John Hurt Fischer recalled Rothko's statement about this task for the restaurant: *"I accepted this assignment as a challenge, with strictly malicious intensions. I hope to paint something that will ruin the appetite of every son of a bitch who ever eats in that room. If the restaurant would refuse to put up my murals, that would be the ultimate compliment. But they won't. People can stand anything these days."*⁷⁷ Rothko talked about the influence of Michelangelo's walls in the staircase room of the Medicean Library in Florence. Viewers are trapped between those walls seemingly bricked up from top to bottom.

The existential drama of those murals may be understood as an artistic expression of Abraham's struggle as described in "Fear and Trembling". Kierkegaard thinks over

⁷⁶ Mark Rothko: Lecture at Pratt in James E. B. BRESLIN: Mark Rothko. A Biography, University of Chicago Press, 13. 8. 2012 p. 282

⁷⁷ John Hurt Fischer: Mark Rothko, Portrait of artist as an angry man, 1970, in LÓPEZ-REMIRO 2006 (note 61), p.131

Abraham's feelings after he came back from Mount Moriah, the paradox of God requesting the sacrifice of Isaac and then returning it is a complicated one. Was it alright that Abraham was to obediently fulfill God's command or was it a crime?

*"He could not comprehend that it was a sin to be willing to offer to God the best thing he possessed, that for which he would many times have given his life; and if it was a sin, if he had not loved Isaac as he did, then he could not understand that it might be forgiven."*⁷⁸

When Kierkegaard compares the tragic hero and Abraham, it is exactly this dubiety of Abraham that distinguishes them. The hero sacrifices for the good of nation or to win the battle and his act is universally valid. Abraham has no support in the universal, just his faith. Abraham does not act for greater good, he is alone and does not speak about his act.

God is trying him but then rejects this sacrifice and Abraham is left with doubts. Something changed with his act, in Christianity there is no place for a heroic action of this kind, nor for human sacrifice in general. Girard saw Abraham as a new beginning, as a discovery of God, who does not approve this offering. If Abraham's hesitation would make him not to obey God's command, people would never find out this truth about God. But with this case the whole sacrificial practice is condemned.

I believe that Rothko's admiration of myths and antique tragedy retreated to more existential questions. Once he even mentioned that his paintings are about the "trembling" in Kierkegaard's sense⁷⁹. And the doubts came. Rothko proclaimed that for some time he used mythology and various creatures to express the gestures he needed. And that his contemporary paintings (second half of 1950s) are about the whole range of feelings in human drama.⁸⁰

4.3. Christianity, Shakespeare and Doubts

"As I have grown older" Rothko told Peter Selz around 1961, *"Shakespeare has come closer to me than Aeschylus, who meant so much to me in my youth. Shakespeare's*

⁷⁸ Soren KIERKEGAARD, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, original 1843, Translated by Walter Lowrie, Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 5

⁷⁹ James E. B. BRESLIN: *Mark Rothko. A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 13. 8. 2012, p. 408

⁸⁰ Address to Pratt Institute, November 1958, in LÓPEZ-REMIRO 2006 (note 61), p 127

*tragic concept embodies for me full range of life from which the artist draws all his tragic material, including irony, irony becomes a weapon against fate.”*⁸¹

From the last decade of his life, we have almost no Rothko’s statement or writing, it seems that he has fully dedicated to above mentioned need for reticence. This proclamation about his interest in Shakespeare was one of the few he made until his death in 1970. But it is a crucial one for understanding the changes of his thinking and his art. This subchapter is therefore my interpretation of this interest and can be hardly supported by other quotes or any previous research.

Girard valued Shakespeare as one of the main sources, crucial for his interpretation of antique tragedy, Christian Revelation and human behaviour in general. According to him, Shakespeare reveals the truth of myths that is veiled in antique tragedy. He shows the role of envy and mimetic rivalry in human relationship (Troilus and Cressida or Midsummer Night's Dream), he exposes the scapegoat mechanism and in the end he reveals the role of forgiveness and repentance (Winter Tale). Those latter are truly Christian experiences and I am convinced that Shakespeare is a truly Christian author.

Rothko’s interest in Shakespearean tragedy contradicts with his admiration for Nietzsche, the exemplary anti-Christian author. This signifies the radical shift in his thinking. The Christian (or Judeo-Christian) topics were present in his oeuvre even during the 1940s and signify his concern for victims and different approach to tragedy than the Nietzschean one.

One of them was the Gethsemane from 1945 [4], Chave describes it as a “*scene of Christ’s psychological confrontation with dead on the eve of the crucifixion.*”, even though the theme could refer to betrayal of Christ by Judas, too, the visual side of the painting defies clear answers, we could recognize the Christ with stretched arms in it or maybe Judas but there is no clear interpretation. We can find Christian themes alongside the Greek myths, he made at least four paintings entitled The Entombment

⁸¹ Peter SELZ: Mark Rothko. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1961, p. 12 in <https://www.questia.com/read/6094579/mark-rothko>, searched on April 15th 2016

and others that are formally close to them, also there is a painting called Immolation, which parallels the more mythological or ritual themes of his other paintings.⁸²

Among those 1940s artworks is an untitled image of circa 1941-42 [5] that was described as a crucifixion in Anna Chave's monograph⁸³. At the same time, she pointed out the fact, that there are many figures dismembered and arranged into weird composition, not just the body of Christ. It is really doubtful that there is anything like a cross, but probably the hands with stigmata might suggest the crucifixion theme. Chave identified the heads in upper left part as a multiplied head of bearded Christ or some strange composition of Christ's head connected with heads of the thieves crucified with him. To me it seems more like a crowd of people that condemned Christ or the hateful mob craving for sacrifices. This "multihead" reminds the confusingly connected faces of The Omen of the Eagle from about the same time. The bodies fragmented in an uncomfortable setting also recall the mass graves that were used during the World War II.

We can see, how Rothko's thinking about tragedy and war sacrifices associates with the Christian themes. This oscillation and fragmentation of Rothko's sources might be confusing, but it expresses his attitude, when his attempt to create something meaningful and spiritual left him full of doubts and insecure.

I believe that this uncertainty about myth reached its peak in his latest works, the dark pallet and the trembling of the shapes might signify his skepticism about the Nietzschean celebration of myth. Rothko certainly was not convinced Christian, but he oscillated between those two possibilities – modern gnosis and Revelation. He sought spirituality without religion and ended his life with suicide.

⁸² CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 147

⁸³ Idem 1989, p.147

5. Barnett Newman

5.1. Rituals and Nietzsche

In early 1940s Newman's interests in many respects paralleled those of Rothko. Most importantly it was their admiration of Nietzsche and his interpretation of antique tragedy. Rothko sought to create a drama in his paintings and wanted to address the spectator in the same way that Greek tragedy did. Newman was not far away from those aims in late 1940s but he had one important predilection.

It was the Native American art, which he studied and exhibited. Jackson Rushing gave detailed information on this subject in his essay published in *Art Journal*⁸⁴. Newman's interest in Indian art dates from early 1920s, while studying at the Art Students League. His teacher, John Sloan was a critic, curator and admirer of Indian art. Another influence was probably John D. Graham, a painter and critic, interested in primitive art (namely the totemic art of Northwest Coast) and Jung's theory.⁸⁵ When Newman organized the exhibition of Northwest Coast painting at Betty Parson's gallery in 1946, Graham lent objects from his collection.⁸⁶

Newman's interest in this subject was not the same as Picasso's fascination with the primitive forms, for Newman did not consider the aesthetics as the main aspect of those objects. He approached them as an educated specialist interested in both art and culture of those people. In his library he kept about fourteen titles relevant to this issue, five of them exclusively focused on Northwest Coast art and society, others were general studies of "primitive" art and culture from the field of anthropology. He possessed studies from Franz Boas, Northwest Coast specialist (*Anthropology and Modern Life*, 1928, *The Mind of Primitive Man*, 1943 and *Primitive Art*, 1955).

It is also more than likely that Newman knew, then very popular, Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* from 1932.⁸⁷ According to Ann Gibson this book made the Dionysian-Apollinian distinction "*part of the standard intellectual apparatus of the*

⁸⁴ W. Jackson RUSHING: The Impact of Nietzsche and Northwest Coast Indian Art on Barnett Newman's Idea of Redemption in Abstract Expressionism, *Art Journal*, Vol.47, No.3, 1988

⁸⁵ Graham talked about the evocative quality of primitive art, he proclaimed that it can „bring to our consciousness the clarities of the unconscious mind...“ in LEJA, 1993 (note 1), 175-176

⁸⁶ RUSHING 1988 (note 84), p.189

⁸⁷ Idem 1988, p.190

period.”⁸⁸ Newman was in contact with the Chairman of the department of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History, Harry Shapiro, who also assisted Newman with his exhibition of pre-Columbian Stone sculpture at the Wakefield Gallery in 1944.⁸⁹

In his essay for the exhibition of Northwest Coast Indian Painting Newman wrote about the “urge to abstraction”. He compared the abstract art of “primitive” people to modern art and saw both of them as authentic expressions. It was the “metaphysical pattern of life” what according to him concerned those aboriginal artists.⁹⁰ In proclamation like these echoes the Benedict’s outlook on primitive expression. Newman was surely inspired by her comparison of Indian rituals and antique tragedy as understood by Nietzsche.

In *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*⁹¹ Nietzsche speaks about the Apollonian/Dionysian duality, the pronounced opposites in Greek culture. Synthesis of these forms gave birth to ancient tragedy. Nietzsche described the Dionysian principle as the primal state and the music associated with it as an expression of the original oneness: „*Music addresses itself symbolically to the primordial contradiction and pain in the heart of the original oneness, and thus presents in symbolic form a sphere which is above all appearances and prior to them.*”⁹² The Apollonian mode was seen as repression of those barbaric passions creating the illusion of ideal world, it was the representation of individual element, whereas Dionysian stood for the great unity.

Tsatseka ritual, Death and Redemption

One of the rituals studied by Ruth Benedict as an example of Nietzschean duality was the Tsatseka of Northwest Coast Indians. Ritual of great transformation of society derived from the changing seasons. During this time, novices are initiated into four dancing societies. The novice which comes to Hamatsa has to fast in the woods and in

⁸⁸ Ann GIBSON: Painting outside the Paradigm: indian Space, Arts Magazine 57, 1983, p. 104, n. 9

⁸⁹ RUSHING 1988 (note 84), p. 190

⁹⁰ Idem 1988, p. 189

⁹¹ NIETZSCHE 2012 (note 47)

⁹² Idem 2012, p. 26

an ecstatic trance he meets the Cannibal spirit, which endows him with power (cannibalism was a tabu in this society and so it really symbolized the terrible and forbidden).

Ruth Benedict approached following events as a Dionysian-like frenzy and Apollonian reconciliation. The man which is possessed by a Cannibal spirit comes back “full of power that destroys man’s reason”. During the ceremony the Cannibal dancer had to come back to secular existence. For those Indians this ritual expressed the Dionysian purport of their culture.⁹³ The Cannibal dancer lost control over himself and by overall expression of his body (trembling...) he performed a different state of existence. He was supposed to shout *haap* (eat) and run around the winter house, trying to bite the bystanders. Those participants even encouraged him, saying words like *eat* or *body*.

After that he was tamed, exorcised and ushered to four months of tabu. The dancer goes through ritual death and experiences the ritual rebirth.⁹⁴ This ceremony might be understood as a defense before winter death of nature.

Girard describes ritual as an event, during which the acceptable and directed amount of violence is allowed. Rituals are used in critical times (even the long darkness during the winter might be experienced as a critical state and therefore ritual might be repeated each year). We can imagine that those rituals repeat the events that incorporated real violence and that the practice of contemporary Indian societies counterparts the original events in more acceptable form.

But the pattern recognized by Girard is still visible here. It begins with creation of scapegoat (one member of society has to leave to the woods), his demonization (he is “possessed” with the Cannibal spirit) and killing (ostensible) precedes his apparent resurrection that solaces the whole community. This pattern might be found in the original myth of Dionysus, that talks about the brutal collective murder of this figure, which was separated into pieces and then brought to life again. This event is then re-enacted in Dionysian festivals. The figure of Cannibal dancer represents the

⁹³ BENEDICT 1934 (note 57), p. 177

⁹⁴ Idem 1961, p. 180-181

primordial man, without structured society, without laws, driven with primitive impulses and instincts. In Nietzschean terms this ritual might be perceived as a tragedy, since the members are performing acts, that are scheduled and planned and the result is some sort of pagan catharsis.

5.2. Modern Man as Oedipus, the Ideograph and the First Expression

Jackson Rushing suggested that Newman's interest in Northwest Coast "tragedy" was probably related to the present situation. Soon after the World War II, which was perceived as brutal and primitive in some of its aspects, he exhibited the sacred objects that figured in this ritual and he himself found in it an inspiration for his paintings.⁹⁵ Newman obviously believed that art may redeem society from chaos. His works from about the middle of 1940s evoke organic growth and blurred creatures, that seem chaotic and random, created probably automatically, without rational control.

Newman felt close to those primitive artists, he talked about the freedom of expression that is characteristic for both the uncultivated and modern abstract art.⁹⁶ One of those works from 1945 is called The Song of Orpheus [5] a musician who was killed and fragmented during the Dionysian orgy. The elements of music and dismemberment remind the story of Dionysus and the chorus of tragedy. For Nietzsche, music was a main Dionysian element.

Newman compared the state of modern world to "the tragic position of the Greek", he wrote about the horrifying experiences of war in his essay entitled "New Sense of Fate" from 1948: *"The terror has indeed become as real as life... after more than two thousand years we have finally arrived at the tragic position of the Greek and we have achieved this Greek state of tragedy because we have at last ourselves invented a new sense of all-pervading fate...."*

Our tragedy is again a tragedy of action in the chaos that is society... and no matter how heroic, or innocent, or moral our individual lives may be, this new fate hangs over

⁹⁵ RUSHING 1988 (note 84), p. 191

⁹⁶ Notion of Betty Parson as quoted in RUSHING 1988 (note 84), p. 192

us. We are living, then, through a Greek drama, and each of us now stands like Oedipus and can by his act or lack of action, in innocence, kill his father and desecrate his mother."⁹⁷

This all-pervading fate made modern man look like a helpless creature. World that was once understandable and relatively safe became a "wasteland" in Eliot's sense or a mine-field. Newman talks about the chaos that is society. In such situation, what can the artist do? Newman despises the Greek sculpture for creating beautiful, idealized form, he turns to Greek tragic writers and finds the right inspiration for his art.

Newman seeks art that would be understandable immediately and that would transform society as the tragedy did. He wants to achieve this immediacy through "ideograph", which, according to him, expresses the abstract idea through symbol and immediately affects the viewer. Newman was inspired by the Indian Kwakiutl artist, who also uses symbols and abstract shapes to express meaning: *"The abstract shape he used, his entire plastic language, was directed by a ritualistic will towards metaphysical understanding... a shape was a living thing, a vehicle for an abstract thought-complex, a carrier of the awesome feelings he felt before the terror of the unknowable"*. Newman intended his paintings to *"make contact with mystery"* in a same way that those ritual objects did.⁹⁸

Through act of creation he wanted to address the truly existential issues that were with us from the beginning of humankind. Newman asks the most basic question of what is to be human in his essay from 1947 entitled with a daring proclamation: *"The First Man Was an Artist"*. Newman argues that any practical doing of man was preceded by a spiritual act and only later became utilitarian. Those spiritual acts, be they idols or poetic outcry, expressed the helplessness of this first man, his "awe and anger at his tragic state", his self-awareness. The same helplessness which Newman attributed to modern man.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Barnett NEWMAN: *New Sense of Fate*, 1948, unpublished, in John Philip O'NEILL: *Barnett Newman. Selected Writings and Interviews*, 1992 p. 164-169

⁹⁸ *Idem* 1992, p. 165

⁹⁹ Barnett NEWMAN: *The First Man Was an Artist*, first published in *Tiger's Eye* (Newman was its associate editor) in 1947, in: *Art in Theory 2003* (note 38), p. 566-568

He seeks the primal expression of the human condition in a time when the civilized world seemed to be shattered and became hostile and alienated. Modern man is lost, as Yeats expressed it *“the falcon cannot hear the falconer.”*

This idea of abstract shape as a symbol for metaphysical thought manifests itself in his artworks from that period. We can associate the ideograph to what is called “zip” in his typical paintings as Onement I [7] and Onement II from 1948. The first one was something like a revelation for him. Newman claimed that he sat *“with the painting for eight, nine months in order to realize the effect of the zip.”*¹⁰⁰ It was a symbol and also a miracle, Newman might have associated it with an archetype emerging from his unconscious mind. David Anfam understands the Onement I as a symbol of genesis¹⁰¹, it may also refer to human figure with its verticality and human scale or the primordial unity described as Dionysian dissolution of society by Nietzsche. In that primordial time, individuality was an unknown concept, even the social structure developed only gradually.

Girard also suggested that the foundations of social stratification evolved from a society connected by rites and religion. That the first sacrifice in many cultures represents the origin of social order (this idea is very visible in Upanishads). The act of division of space and time by this sacrifice marks the beginning of something. Girard explained how the ritual, which repeats the original brutal act of sacrifice, is elevated by art in tragedy. Freud called this suppression of truth that is uncomfortable and socially unacceptable, sublimation. The brutal and primitive is turned into art form of tragedy.

Reference to sublimation of the primal expression might be found in another Newman’s essay, entitled *“The Sublime is Now”* from 1948.¹⁰² He talks about *“man’s natural desire in the arts to express his relation to the Absolute”*. He despises the urge for beauty and perfection through idealization and sees this effort as opposite to

¹⁰⁰ Kate LIEBMAN: *Passion in Painting*. Barnett Newman’s Stations of the Cross, Yale University, 2016, p.5

¹⁰¹ ANFAM 2012 (note 20), p. 121

¹⁰² Originally published in *Tiger's Eye*, vol. 1, no. 6 r December 1948, pp. 51-3., in *Art in Theory* 2003 (note 38), p. 572-574

sublimity in art. Therefore he rejects the European tradition of painting nudes and draperies, but even modern art cannot escape his critique, since there is no sublime subject matter according to him.

Newman finds an equivalent to his art in primitive objects. Those were, as he points out, committed to metaphysical message. He perceives the desire for the exalted as a natural human need. But where does he find this exaltation without religion?

“The question that now arises is how, if we are living in a time without a legend or mythos that can be called sublime, if we refuse to admit any exaltation in pure relations, if we refuse to live in the abstract, how can we be creating a sublime art?”

This essay is concluded with a poetic outcry of his own *“Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or life, we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings.”*

Newman proclaimed that “the self”, terrible and constant is the subject matter of his paintings.¹⁰³ It would be a misunderstanding to perceive Newman’s statement as an urge for self-expression. As Michael Leja explained: *“Newman saw the self as an avenue to the transcendental and the sublime, not as an end in itself.”*¹⁰⁴ The main concern is not the painter’s personality but the “world mystery” approached through the self.

5.3. Stations of the Cross - Suffering with no Redemption

Between 1958 and 1966 Newman created a series of fourteen paintings entitled The Stations of the Cross, each of them with an individual title (First Station and so on). He began his work on those paintings in 1958, without title and subject matter in his mind, he admitted that they were getting clear to him during the process.

They were first exhibited in 1966 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (today at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C.)¹⁰⁵ Those paintings obviously refer to fourteen parts of the Passion of Jesus, the final events of his life containing his condemnation, crucifixion and burial. The additional title of the series used at the Guggenheim exhibition in 1966 is *“Lema Sabachthani”*, in Aramaic meaning *“why have*

¹⁰³ ANFAM 2012 (note 20), p. 145

¹⁰⁴ LEJA, 1993 (note 1), p.38

¹⁰⁵ Jeffrey J. KATZIN : Perception, Expectation and Meaning in Barnett Newman’s Stations of the Cross Series, Wesleyan University, 2010, p.11

you forsaken me?”, last words of Jesus on the cross as reported in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark.¹⁰⁶

All of these paintings include the “ideograph”, vertical line also called a “zip”, their visage is very simple, combining a bare canvas and one colour, either black or white. Together they seem more like different versions of one theme.

The stations of the cross traditionally represent a reminder of Christ suffering and actualize those last moments before crucifixion. When people walk from one to another they reflect on those moments and experience the suffering of Christ. Lawrence Alloway listed the canonical Stations in the Guggenheim’s catalogue for Newman’s 1966 exhibition as “Christ condemned to death, Christ carrying the Cross, the First Fall, Christ meets Mary, Simon helps to carry the Cross, Veronica hands Him the face-cloth, the Second Fall, He comforts the women, the Third Fall, He is stripped of His garments, the Crucifixion, the death of Christ, the Deposition, the Entombment.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless Newman does not use those titles for the actual paintings.

During the exhibition Newman wrote about them in an article for *ARTnews* magazine: *“Just as the Passion is not a series of anecdotes but embodies a single event, so these fourteen paintings, even though each one is whole and separate in its immediacy, all together form a complete statement of a single subject.”*¹⁰⁸

The subject of this series was not the gradual reflexion on each of those stations, it was rather the complex expression of one specific moment. Newman explains this at the beginning of the Guggenheim’s catalogue for the 1966 exhibition: *“Lema Sabachthani—why? Why did you forsake me? Why forsake me? To what purpose? Why?... this is the Passion. This outcry of Jesus. Not the terrible walk up the Via Dolorosa, but the question that has no answer.”*¹⁰⁹ The suffering is presented as this outcry without consolation.

¹⁰⁶ Barnett Newman: *The Stations of the Cross, Lema Sabachthani* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966) in KATZIN 2010 (note 105), p. 12

¹⁰⁷ Lawrence ALLOWAY, “The Stations of the Cross and the Subjects of the Artist,” in *The Stations of the Cross, Lema Sabachthani*, in KATZIN 2010 (note 105), p. 13

¹⁰⁸ Barnett Newman, “The Fourteen Stations of the Cross, 1958–1966,” 1966, in O’NEILL 1992 (note 97), p. 189

¹⁰⁹ KATZIN 2010 (note 105), p. 38

Since he was not a Christian he did not approach this theme in its orthodox meaning. It was more like his interpretation of Christ's cry and the suffering. He talked about the human scale of those paintings and the raw material of canvas still visible on finished artworks.¹¹⁰

This hopelessness of Christ may remind us of the "first man" who suffers in his "tragic state". The cry of Jesus parallels the outcry of the first man and reflects the situation of everyone who suffers in this world. This was obviously one of the key themes for Newman, as he created a painting entitled *Outcry* just before beginning the Stations in 1958.¹¹¹

The solitude of man in tragic situation echoed strongly in *Abraham [8]*, his painting from 1949. Connection between this work and the suffering of Christ has been made by author himself. In the Stations' exhibition prologue Newman writes: "*Why forsake me? To what purpose? Why?...This question that has no answer has been with us so long—since Jesus—since Abraham—since Adam—the original question.*"¹¹²

The suffering present in Abraham figure is expressed by black colour on black. Newman described the process of painting it in an unpublished interview with K. Osis that Bois includes in his article "On Two Paintings by Barnett Newman":

*"I had the desire to make that central thing black and the rest of the painting was black. Well, I was in a state of terror because what would happen—I never had black on black. The terror of it was intense. As a matter of fact, it took me, you might say, weeks to arrive at the point where I finally did it. I tried to do everything else except the black. I tried to make it, you know, I would leave it white. It looked all right; I thought maybe, you know, make it blue, make it.... But I couldn't. I had it to make it black. That as I recall was a moment of high feeling for me which was almost obsessive as I could not leave it; I could not do it. I could not do it...."*¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Barnett Newman, "The Fourteen Stations of the Cross, 1958–1966," 1966, in O'NEILL 1992 (note 97) p. 189.

¹¹¹ LIEBMAN 2016 (note 100), p. 24

¹¹² Barnett Newman: Statement, in the *Guggenheim Exhibition Catalogue*, p. 9., quoted in LIEBMAN 2016 (note 100), p. 45

¹¹³ Yve-Alain Bois: *On Two Paintings*, p. 16, quoted in LIEBMAN 2016 (note 100), p. 46

Newman's journey was to some point quite close to that of Mark Rothko - from Nietzsche and his appreciation of Dionysian origin of tragedy to the basic question of human existence. Newman's conception of human tragedy reflects on our loneliness in world. Modern man who has no spirituality, no religion to comfort himself is in position of primitive expressing his awe and anger. Even the crucified Jesus symbolizes this loneliness and torment for him, no redemption seems to come. It is questionable if we should approach those paintings as religious ones. It rather seems that Newman used a well-known symbol of suffering to communicate his message.

His expression of suffering aims to be universally valid, yet at the same time deeply personal and intimate. His pessimistic attitude undoubtedly reflected his own feelings about war, his Jewish identity and even the personal experience of loss. His father, Abraham died two years before he finished the painting of the same name.

Newman though stays one of those who are impossible to label, his art despite its minimalistic form does not bring any simple or one-sided message. Especially in 1950s when he retreated the heroic Nietzschean approach it might be helpful to approach his art as a kind of meditation in which his dark black-on-black Abraham is balanced by his white-on-white The Voice. The pessimism of human loneliness and suffering is silenced in its soft light. Created just one year later, this seemingly calm painting is stirred by mystery.

6. Mythical Content in Abstract Painting

The visual side of Rothko's and Newman's art is at least as mysterious as their writing, abstract forms of their late paintings are hard to grasp, both intellectually and visually. From my personal experience they are almost indescribable. Rothko's late paintings evoked movement and depth, Newman's expanded in front of me. It is helpful to read reactions of people who are trying to describe their encounter with them.

6.1. Metaphorical Resurrection

Both Rothko and Newman felt that painting has to start over again after the war. Even though they wanted to create myths and found inspiration in older mythological traditions that did not bring them a simple and clear object. In letter to publisher they proclaimed that *"the Rape of Persephone' is a poetic expression of the essence of the myth; the presentation of the concept of seed and its earth with all the brutal implications; the impact of elemental truth."* It was exactly this essence or truth that they intended to address with their paintings. The myth is obviously narrative and as such might be easily illustrated, but they insisted that there is more than this descriptive component of myth, something that underlies it, the elemental truth, that was later covered with a simple story. Their statement was supplemented by disdainful question: *"Would you have us present this abstract concept, with all its complicated feelings, by means of a boy and girl lightly tripping?"*¹¹⁴

But how to present mythological "abstract concepts" in painting? As I discussed earlier, the Nietzschean interpretation of Greek tragedy was the main inspiration, as according to Nietzsche, tragedy brought myth to life and made people feel it and experience it. Nietzsche argued that tragedy was born out of the chorus, which presented the unrestrained Dionysian "spirit of the music". The question was, how to transform this tragic character into visual form.

¹¹⁴ letter to editor, 1943 in *Art in Theory* 2003 (note 38), p. 562

If we review their paintings from early to mid 1940s, we will find the surrealist-like works of art. The shapes are floating and remind us of organisms or figures, blurred and unclear. Almost uncontrolled or automatic painting might reflect their need for new beginning, David Anfam talks about “*metaphors of resurrection – verbal and imagistic.*”¹¹⁵ This birth of “new painting” was to be approached through irrational action.

Newman’s Song of Orpheus [5] from 1944-1945 represents this unbounded creative technique. Loose strokes and chaotic composition bring us no clue to the subject matter he intended. Just through the title he manages to evoke the mythical context so that we could approach this chaotic and lively painting with the myth in our mind. As Newman proclaimed: “...my idea was that with automatic move you could create the world.”¹¹⁶ According to Anna Chave this approach was typical to Rothko as well, she mentions his Birth of Cephalopods [6] from 1944, where biomorphic shapes bear resemblance to tentacles, chaotically circling. Chave pointed to the idea of birth that may reflect both the origin of prehistoric creature and its (re)creation by the painter. She also suggested to interpret it as a symbol of primordial elements surviving into modern times, which were capable of destroying the whole civilization.¹¹⁷ This idea of primitive chaos threatening to wipe out our culture was definitely sensible for Rothko in that time.

I believe that visual language of those paintings represents an equivalent to thought complex that can not be clearly described by language. Something that we are not able to grasp rationally and so the paintings are similarly intangible. But despite their poetic visage, we can still recognize familiar objects, even if difficult to identify. The remains of narrative character of myth and superficial elements are gradually disappearing in late 1940s. As Rothko later noted: “*The familiar identity of things has*

¹¹⁵ ANFAM 2012 (note 20), p. 145

¹¹⁶ Thomas B. HESS: *Barnett Newman*. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1971, p. 43 quoted in CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 67

¹¹⁷ CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 67-69

to be pulverized in order to destroy the finite associations with which our society increasingly enshrouds every aspect of our environment."¹¹⁸

6.2. Abstract Shape as a Living Thing

Rothko was aiming for clearer image, that would express his thoughts immediately. In 1945 he wrote to Newman, *"I have assumed for myself the problem of further concretizing my symbols, which give me many headaches but make work rather exhilarating. Unfortunately one can't think these things out with finality, but must endure a series of stumblings toward a clearer issue."*¹¹⁹ We could probably perceive this aim to concretize the symbols as a parallel to Newman's conception of ideograph, which is supposed to express the abstract idea immediately. Newman attached significance to abstract shapes and lines, which possessed this evocative quality, as his "zip" did and perceived them as living entities of their own.

Rothko's rhetorics was similar, in 1947 he proclaimed that his shapes *"move with internal freedom, and without need to conform with or to violate what is probable in the familiar world. They have no direct association with any particular visible experience, but in them one recognizes the principle and passion of organisms."*¹²⁰

Newman was inspired by "primitive" objects, as I have described earlier, and his association to modern art with ritual objects, that were both artworks and symbols of religious meaning, played an important role. Those objects were regarded as a link to unknown forces and a mediator of transcendent experience. Newman emphasized this vivacity of religious objects claiming that *"the abstract shape was, therefore, real rather than a formal 'abstraction' of a visual fact."*¹²¹

The liveliness came from personal experience that, as Newman believed, could be expressed in visual abstraction. He intended his paintings to achieve those qualities he found in religious objects and to communicate them to modern audience. Rothko's intention to produce miracles was of the same origin.

It is obvious from their writing that they both attributed almost human characteristics to their paintings. When Newman described his work on The Stations

¹¹⁸ The Romantics were prompted, 1947 (note 63), in Art in Theory 2003 (note 38), p. 564

¹¹⁹ James E. B. BRESLIN: *Mark Rothko. A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 2012, p. 232

¹²⁰ The Romantics Were Prompted, 1947 (note 63), in Art in Theory 2003 (note 38), p. 564

¹²¹ Response to the Reverend Thomas F. Mathews, 1967 in O'NEILL 1992 (note 97), p. 287

of the Cross he admitted that the subject was not clear to him from the beginning, it was only when he painted the Fourth stop, that he realized what was the meaning of them. *"I felt the paintings had made me think of them as the Stations of the Cross. It is as I work that the work itself begins to have an effect on me. Just as I affect the canvas, so does the canvas affect me."*¹²²

6.3. Eyes of the Sensitive Observer

Human-like characteristics and temperaments were indeed attributed to the shapes in Rothko's paintings. Chave mentions (Eliza) Rathbone's notion on this issue perceived by other critics as well, when she attributed them with *"a subjective and emotional quality, as of something properly internal and unseen that has been successfully externalized and imaged."*¹²³ Rothko articulated it himself, by proclaiming that he is rendering *"pictorial equivalents for man's new knowledge and consciousness of his inner self."*¹²⁴ The self was a main source from which the artist was to draw. This notion of liveliness is probably encouraged by the "optical vibration" (Chave) or a "trembling" (Rothko) of those shapes.

It is without a question that Rothko intended those paintings to be "more than just paintings" and attributed them with subjectivity. They might be experienced but also hurt or even killed according to him. Human contact is important, because, as he famously stated, *"picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token."*¹²⁵

Chave enumerated specific qualities of his rectangles, that endows them with emotional significance. *"Some of the rectangles look sheer, fragile, and torn, whereas others appear solid, opaque, and impermeable. Sometimes the rectangles are rendered with turbulent or declamatory brushstrokes, at other times the brushwork is muted and self-effacing. The relations among the rectangles and between the rectangles and the*

¹²² O'NEILL 1992 (note 97), p. 189

¹²³ Quoted in CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 120

¹²⁴ Letter. New York Times, 1945, X2 in CHAVE 1989 (note 17) p. 120

¹²⁵ Also published in Tiger's Eye, December 1947, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 44 In Art in Theory 2003 (note 38), p. 565

*edges of the support can also carry an emotional charge.*¹²⁶ It is hard to determine if there is a specific subjectivity of a painting or if the specific elements inside the painting represent individual subjects. We may recall the way Rothko talked about the shapes as actors that interact with each other and paintings as dramas. Interpretations vary among the viewers, some of them even perceive his paintings as doors, veils or facades. The latter ones suggest the idea of something hidden and the possibility of revelation. Rothko's paintings often arouse strong emotions and even make people cry, which was something that Rothko intended because he tried to communicate "the basic human emotions".

Newman recalled an incident from his first show in 1950, where his friend told him with tears in his eyes "*...you made me aware of myself*"¹²⁷. This effect of Newman's paintings was also intended by their author. Especially in his Stations, where he works with the human scale, those paintings represent "the other" to the viewer a separate entity of its own "self". I already mentioned that I experienced Newman's paintings as expanding in space. This effect was described by Newman himself: "*Anyone standing in front of my paintings must feel the vertical domelike vaults encompass him to awaken awareness of his being alive in the sensation of complete space.*"¹²⁸ It was observed by others that "*Newman's zips extend the height of the canvases, making it seem as if each painting transcends the boundaries provided by the surface's edges.*"¹²⁹

Newman's minimalistic work creates an impression of perfect order and control, but in some of them the accidental drips of paint contradict this classification, as if the painting truly lives according to its own rules. The surviving automatic impulses bring an astonishing tension and vivacity.

¹²⁶ CHAVE 1989 (note 17), p. 121

¹²⁷ Interview with David Sylvester, broadcasted on BBC 1965 (printed in The Listener 1972) in O'NEILL 1992 (note 97), 258

¹²⁸ „Frontiers of Space“ Interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler, in Art in America 50, 1962 (83-87), in O'NEILL 1992 (note 97), p. 249

¹²⁹ LIEBMAN 2016 (note 100), p.6

7. Conclusion

Miraculous Painting and Spiritual Emptiness

Those religious connotations to Rothko and Newman's paintings may seem overly emphasizing or even pathetic, but the fact is that anything less would be inadequate. I am convinced that they were trying to achieve something like a salvation with their post-war painting and that the visual side of their art has to be understood in connection with experienced encounter with the paintings and with insight into their situation.

The critique may see their statements as exaggerating, David Anfam described their interest in myth as a good framework *"that added a universal or archaic dimension to the narratives of a troubled present, hence redeeming it sub specie aeternitatis."*¹³⁰ He perceived their heroic proclamation in a context of post-war crisis and saw it as a *"strategy to dramatize the apocalyptic situation after the Holocaust and Hiroshima"*.¹³¹

I guess we could say that sometimes they overstated their goals as this Newman's proclamation demonstrates: *"Harold Rosenberg challenged me to explain what one of my paintings could possibly mean to the world. My answer was that if he and others could read it properly it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism. The answer still goes."*¹³²

But the emotional impact is undeniable and impressive. James Elkins described his encounter with Rothko's paintings in Houston Chappelle (1964-1967), which may be understood as a parallel to Newman's Stations of the Cross. He mentioned reactions of visitors who cried in front of the paintings. One of them found the experience *"absolutely antagonistic and chilling."* Elkins remarked that if those people stay on, they begin to feel much stronger emotions.¹³³ People find silence, emptiness, death in them, some really talk about religious experience. Rothko encouraged those reactions and identified with them. *"The people who weep before my pictures,"* he said in an

¹³⁰ ANFAM 2012 (note 20), p. 80

¹³¹ ANFAM 2012 (note 20), p. 144

¹³² 249 – 251 - „Frontiers of Space“ Interview with Dorothy Gees Seckler, in Art in America 50, 1962 (83-87), in O'NEILL 1992 (note 97), p. 249 - 251

¹³³ James ELKINS: Pictures & Tears, A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings, Routledge New York, 2004, p. 8

interview in 1957, *“are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.”*¹³⁴

But what exactly was the meaning of them, what kind of “religious experience” could an atheistic painter create? Rothko proclaimed that he thought his paintings *“should have a religious subject matter, but they became dark, on their own.”*¹³⁵ And I believe that despite their overwhelming emotional impact, the sheer darkness is exactly what he accomplished. Elkins pointed out the fitting formulation of Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *“they say Rothko promises us something transcendent, beyond the world of viewers, painters, and paintings, but nothing appears. Viewers then begin to wander among the colors; they don’t discover any sudden revelation, and so they turn inward, and start thinking of the ways their own minds are made of empty frames, vague hues, and shifting distances.”*¹³⁶

Newman, even though his paintings were associated with suffering and the tragic sense of life, did not want to encounter Rothko’s late paintings. He found them too dark and depressive. As he wrote in his letter to Sidney Janis: *“It was Rothko who in 1950 said to me that he could not look at his work because it reminded him of death. Am I to disagree with him? Why should I look at his death image?”*¹³⁷

I would like to hereby conclude my thesis without definitive formulation to summarize the outcomes, since I believe that any kind of ultimate statement would have been inadequate.

Because I see Girard’s insight into the problematic of myths and their origin as appropriate, I don’t find the failure of Rothko’s original mission surprising. Girard explains that Christianity offers transcendental redemption and exposes the nature of myths. When modern man turns away from this message and wants to revert to myths he finds emptiness and darkness as Rothko finally discovered or solitude which Newman experienced and mediated through his paintings. As I see it, the strength of their art lies in their ability to expose those feelings and to confront the spectators, with their own emotions.

¹³⁴ ELKINS 2004 (note 133), p. 9

¹³⁵ Idem 2004, p.3

¹³⁶ Idem 2004, p. 12

¹³⁷ Letter to Sidney Janis, 1955 in O’NEILL 1992 (note 97), p. 201

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Illustrations

Mesurments in centimetres (if not specified otherwise), height before width

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7. Barnett Newman: Onement I, 1948, Oil on canvas and oil on masking tape on canvas, 69.2 x 41.2, Collection of the MoMA, New York

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2. Mark Rothko: The Sacrifice of Iphigenia, circa 1942, oil on canvas, 50 x37 in. Collection of Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko. In:
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8. Barnett Newman: Abraham, 1949, oil on canvas, 210.2 x 87.7, Collection of the MoMA, New York. In: <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/80191?locale=en>, searched on 20 April 2016