

BARNETT NEWMAN: THE 'ZIP'
AND SPECIOUS PRESENTS
OR
(SPECIOUS?) PRESENCE.
WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

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THE SHORT answer to this long title is: You are the 'zip' in a stronger than Pickwickian sense; and what you are doing is being, being yourself. Truly!

Harold Rosenberg's great monograph on Barnett Newman bears on a second frontispiece Newman's own: '*The self, terrible and constant, is for me the subject matter of painting.*'¹

As a prolegomenon to this paper I quote *The New Yorker's* art reviewer Peter Schjedahl on the 2002 Barnett Newman show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art:

... The effect [of a Newman] is a brief but intense experience that begs to be called the sublime: *a loss of selfhood to something bigger and nobler than we are.* This happened to me with '*Vir*' [*Heroicus Sublimis*] in Philadelphia ...².

Against 'loss of selfhood' this paper suggests the precise opposite: a finding, however oblique, and if only briefly, of the self behind quotidian 'empirical' selfhood. What, then, can one say of Newman's 'self, terrible and constant'? First, that it is smallish.

I: The First Person Singular

In his elegant and subtle, *I: The Philosophy and Psychology of Personal Identity*, Jonathan Glover writes: 'Whether functionalism is a correct

account of the mind is not yet resolved. Whether it can satisfactorily accommodate *subjectivity* is still disputed'.³ Into the questions of functionalism we cannot here go, but what is up in this paper is a strong assertion of subjectivity, as an ontological *donnée*, and as what Barnett Newman's 'zip' evokes at a deeper than usual level. If you don't believe in subjectivity, please leave quietly.

Being And All That

I shall come clean philosophically—I am an only partially lapsed Thomist and have a vested interest in 'being' and 'existing'. Glover writes in the work cited '...existing is at best an odd sort of activity. J. L. Austin once wondered if it was supposed to be "like breathing only quieter"'.⁴ St. Thomas would have laughed at Austin's jest, but in full agreement. *Being* is for Thomists 'first act', that upon which all 'second acts', that is activities, supervene, and it is their (pre)conditioned condition (necessary but not sufficient). In a more or less Thomist spirit I shall try to tie Newman's 'zip' and Aquinas' 'first act' into an aesthetic love knot. If 'the self terrible and constant' is Newman's theme, let us have an at least partial look at the self. But before that we need a short detour through specious presents. These may, or may not, be 'brief but intense' experiences. And J.-F. Lyotard has suggested that specious presents may be part of the topic of Newman's *oeuvre*. Something here needs teasing out.

Vir Heroicus Sublimis (1950-51)

Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51) is one of the works discussed—or instanced—in J.-F. Lyotard's seminal 'The Sublime and the *avant garde*',⁵ and one of Lyotard's suggestions seems to be that Newman's great work is about, among other things, specious presents. Specious presents are 'specious' in the sense of the word which Edmund Burke uses, that, is 'fine'.⁶ Specious presents are to philosophers 'fine' in yet another sense, viz fine slices of the timeline. The timeline is not of course a mere line, but a plenum of experience had and conceived as linear. A specious present—of which modern philosophy has such notions as a nanosecond present—tends to be specious in the twentieth/twenty-first century vernacular sense of 'specious', that is 'doubtful'. We can set up definitions of what specious presents can be, but can we have them? The dodgy stipulation is that all vernacularly termed presents as in: us here now listening to/reading certain philosophical speculations, are *made up* of specious presents,

and that by definition. This all leads us no further into *having* specious presents as the specious presents they are being said to be.

If we made specious presents conditions of timeline experience, they might be thought of (i) as inapprehensible as and in themselves; and (ii) as Kantian transcendental conditions and inapprehensible in that way. If we do not make specious presents conditions of, for example, this present *now* (fill it in), then they just remain inapprehensible as what they are. Samuel Butler wrote:

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Perfect present has no existence in our consciousness. As I said years ago in *Erewhon*, it lives but upon the sufferance of past and future. We are like men standing on a narrow footbridge over a railway. We can watch the future hurrying like an express train towards us, and then hurrying into the past, but in the narrow strip of present we cannot see it. Strange that that which is the most essential to our consciousness should be exactly that of which we are least definitely conscious.⁷

Specious presents are, on this account, not conditions of the present in the ordinary sense, but microtome slices of it, and not to be had. Though even as he is asserting that specious presents have no existence in ordinary consciousness, Butler flirts with a 'Kantian, transcendental' notion: calling them 'most essential to our consciousness ...'

On its own account a specious present would be, as Lyotard would seem to have it, sublime, as supersensible in the sense of being, in itself, above apprehension. Barnett Newman has a sense of time which goes with his 'zip' which, as we shall see later, is more than a specious present, being an apprehensible time—though a rather short one.

The 'zip' short-time is, as it were, a sideways glimpse of the transcendental ego not as the Transcendental Ego (in capitals) which may come to be on all fours with the highly dubious Kantian Thing-in-Itself (capitals).⁸ The 'zip' short-time is an oblique awareness of the substrate of ordinary thought and apperception: the '*first act*' of a being whose nature it is to be rational. We 'take' a state of that being before it goes into action, or when in an aesthetic moment it is allowed a short rest from the actions of apprehending, knowing and so on. One makes the logical, principle of difference, point that: the Thing-in-Itself, (ambiguously singular or plural), appears constantly but as phenomena, so it might as well not be thought of as appearing

at all, since if it makes no difference to any particular appearances at all then it is empirically otiose. The self, on the other hand, as the self will shape up in this paper, does appear as itself—if briefly and occasionally. There is no transcendental deduction of this, only an invitation to look at some, non standard, empirical sightings, of what Kant would call a non-empirical ego.

II: A Propos the Transcendental Ego What is One to Say ?

There is something very odd in Kant's 'Paralogisms of Pure Reason':

That *the being which thinks in us* is under the impression that it knows itself through pure categories ... is due to the following reason. Apperception itself is the ground of the possibility of the categories ...⁹

The phrase '*the being which thinks in us*',¹⁰ may be either the trace of the philosophico-theological soul, or another 'entity' such as the Thing-in-Itself, whose existence is part of the necessities of the Kantian system, and not necessarily part of 'all that is the case'. That is, a Transcendental Ego in capitals may be like the notorious T-in-I. One, rather *I*, would prefer the soul-trace: but one may be being offered just another bit in the Critical machine's system. The question is open: one can effect a closing of it by writing 'transcendental ego' without capitals, and then making one's claims about it.

Being There

In this paper I would settle for being's being, 'like breathing, only quieter', with certain elaborations. Andy Clark's *Being There: Putting Brain, Body and World Together Again*,¹¹ offers no comfort to a soul seeker, or to the author of this paper. The book's focus is on robotics, and on how the world is manipulated: by robots, and by us. Two of the key notions are that 'the world is its own best representation',¹² and that a central mind operating on the world through representations need not be taken with the traditional seriousness. One cannot deal with Clark's challenges here. Representations one is prepared to jettison, if only because one mucked about with one's Meccano with no clear programme of ideas and without obvious representations, and got somewhere. Nor do 'representations' do, in philosophy, any clear work. The mind and the self one wants, however, to hang on to. An *ad hominem* addressed to Clark, 'Where were *you* when you were writing *Being There*?', might be moderately legitimate. Clark admits

that language is a puzzle still: perhaps the self can hide *pro tem* in linguistic thickets?

That the new sciences of the mind may produce results which are counter-intuitive must be faced. But one will give up one's intuitions only when one has to.

Being Here, For Now

This paper will attempt to make more ontological a transcendental ego which Kant seems at times to brush-off as merely formal. Consider: 'intuition has its seat in the subject only as the *formal* character of the subject, in virtue of which, in being affected by objects, it obtains *immediate representation*, that is, *intuition* of them ...'¹³

Well remembered is, also, the famous 'It must be possible for the "I think" to accompany all my representations ...',¹⁴ where the 'I' seems there for the representations' sakes: which is all very well, but ...

But ...

There is a passage in the *Biographia Literaria*, Ch VII, in which S.T. Coleridge, writing on 'Consequences of the Hartleian Theory', refers to what we might call '*the self*', as being, under Hartley's system, 'a something-nothing'. Coleridge adds, with high rhetoric, 'It is the mere quick-silver plating behind a looking-glass; and in this alone consists the poor worthless I.'¹⁵ Coleridge's best answer to this Hartleian consequence is not in the curious Absolute Idealist metaphysics of the *Biographia*, but in 'Frost at Midnight', where the mere quicksilver becomes the lambent train of the self of ordinary experience: or, rather, something lying behind that self as its better than formal condition. The obliqueness of poetry sometimes comes on the ordinary from a quite unaccustomed angle, and so with great effect. Here are the crucial lines:

... My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
'Tis calm indeed! So calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange
And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,
This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
With all the numberless goings-on of life,
Inaudible as dreams! *the thin blue flame*
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, *which fluttered on the grate,*
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of Nature

Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form,
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling spirit
By its own moods interprets, everywhere
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
*And makes a toy of thought ...*¹⁶

One might make out of this an answer, which Coleridge did not, perhaps, quite make, to Hartley. One attempts to improve Coleridge's case for him, by articulating his two images: 'this blue flame/[which] quivers not', and the film which 'flutters'.

The flame which 'quivers not' is—in my reading-against-the-text¹⁷—the emblem of the 'idling spirit' or first act, always and essentially a 'mirror of itself'. It is as though Coleridge likens the mind to the lambency of—seemingly motionless—flame, opposing this to the fixedness of varnish-backed mercury-compound which makes the looking-glass reflect. Quicksilver unquickenened is opposed to the intrinsic quickness of mind. The mind has a motion of reflection to and on itself which can, in terms of the second image, 'flutter' into explicit consciousness-of-self-and-consciousness-of-the numberless goings-on of life', the first—consciousness-of-self—is the condition and the accompaniment of the second, dealing with the world. Without the 'thin blue flame', no 'flutter'. But the self 'lost' in perception is not so lost that it cannot retrieve itself. Mercury—a mobile liquid—works on a looking-glass by being rendered still: the mind's powers of reflection-of-self and of intensionality-with-respect-to-the-world, are both a function of its *not* being still. (Except in dreamless slumber?)

Almost anything can be attended to. Attention has no *a priori* epistemological limits, (but, arguably, some moral limits, which do not concern us here). The self, centre of ability-to-attend, can usually attend but little to itself, since the world is there requiring to be coped with. But what Coleridge's poetical images make vivid is the lambency of the tain, the possibility that the power of attention become, itself, an object of its own attention. He keeps 'mere quicksilver' (now, as we note, as mirror no longer 'quick') and two kinds of flame—'thin blue' and 'fluttering film'—in a nice aesthetic tension. An aesthetic idea, of stilled quicksilver: lambency and mirroring: quicksilver again quickened. A 'film' re-animated. A flutter over an always-quick stillness, that is *attending* based on the self-attending power to other-attend.

Attention can be conscious of attention *as* attending to-such-and-such: ambiguously still, and engaged in motion. *Or* attention can be, for one reason or another, attention to itself, without having anything else *pro tem* to attend to. This second thing is what is in question with a Barnett Newman 'zip' painting. The 'thin blue flame/[which] quivers not', rather than that other 'fluttering film'.

III: Attention and Kantian 'Substrates'

Twice in *The Critique of Judgement* Kant refers to *substrates*: (i) in §57, 'Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgement'¹⁸, the substrate is something called to mind by notions of the ideal of the unity of nature and the possibility of freedom. But (ii) in an earlier use of 'substrate' Kant has spoken, *à propos* the mathematical sublime, of 'the awakening of a feeling of a supersensible faculty within us'.¹⁹ It is one's suggestion in this paper that the sublime—which, for Newman, is 'now' (see VI below)—makes *sensible* (and sensed) the root and ground of this 'supersensible faculty'. We sense the substrate—the thing which thinks in us—quite apart from the notion of attempting the Idea of Reason, *nature as a completed whole*, and we instead take it cold: raw. The substrate is not merely part of the Critical machinery, but part of the furniture of the world. The supersensible 'ego'—if one may so call it—shows itself, if not plain, at least to the peripheral vision of the moment of a sublime. A sublime not of wide areas of colour but of the punctuating, thin 'zip'.

One is not here rejecting Rudolf A. Makkreel's account of the Kantian *Augenblick* as an *as if* grasp of the universe as a completed whole, a kind of *ekphrasis* of the real, but one is setting it aside for another occasion. One's model here of the aesthetic *Augenblick* is as of a cone, whose open end is *the all*, and whose pointed end is a, single, occasional, transcendental ego.²⁰ Today, the sharp end.

In a paper on boredom and the sublime given to this society²¹, the attention-attending-to-attention thing was split two ways. The first way was, for instance as attention's investing with reveries or aesthetic ideas something as—on the face of it—unremarkable as Barnett Newman's *Onement I*. The second way was offered up by sub-reption, by the quoting of a short, sparse poem by Emily Dickinson, itself boring and not boring:

There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of Death, but these

Society shall be
Compared with that profounder site
That solar privacy
A soul admitted to itself:
Finite Infinity.²²

The subreptive line was 'Finite Infinity'—legitimate subreption in that 'Infinity' might mark the numberless objects of a soul's attention; sly and illegitimate in that one might read 'Infinity' in the sense of 'Eternity', and come up with Graeco-Christian ideas, as of the soul as a thing which persists forever.

Consulting the big Harvard Emily Dickinson²³ one finds one's subreption undercut by a dash after 'to itself', and a blank where 'Finite Infinity' stands in the Gramercy Press edition quoted above. One is at a loss to account for either the omission or the inclusion of the two words. It's ominous. But one shall go on with one's original subreption. Aesthetic theory can only rarely rise far above the tropes with which it traffics.

The finite in 'Finite Infinity' is a no-contest: there was a time when each of us was not: maybe such another time will—in a Pickwickian sense—come, and with it nothingness: 'nothingness "for us" '. Maybe we are destined for life eternal. With Kant, one favours the view that immortality is, from where we stand, thinkable but not demonstrable. As Kant himself said: he was making room for Faith.²⁴ However Faith always hankers after reason. But on what is Faith grounded, and how do the grounds govern the claims which Faith makes?

IV: 'A Soul Admitted to Itself'

Kant does not much encourage, for example, the high epistemic enthusiasm as of Coleridge's lines in 'Frost at Midnight'. The *I* for Kant remains: on the edge of things, Kant writes in his 'Refutation of Idealism':

The consciousness of myself in the representation 'I' is not an intuition, but a merely *intellectual* representation of the spontaneity of a thinking subject. This 'I' has not, therefore, the least predicate of intuition, which, as permanent, might serve as correlate for the determination of time in inner sense—in the manner in which, for instance, *impenetrability* serves in our *empirical* intuition of matter.²⁵

The lambency of the tain seems to be being overlooked. But is it? What 'merely *intellectual* representation' takes away, 'spontaneity' restores. In spontaneity the ego-substrate gets, in some sense, to

manifest and to act. The German for 'spontaneity' is *Selbsttätigkeit* 'self-activity'. The 'thing that thinks in us' is, plausibly, the substrate-self. The notion of 'self' shuffled off in the English word 'spontaneity' is obtruded on us by the German for it. For such happy accidents one can only be grateful: but their chanciness haunts one's assertions. A counter-instance from Kant may be found in the Notes.²⁶ The present writer would like '*spontaneity*' to mark the dynamic of, first act into second act, that is into activity/actions where, between or before first act and second act, hovers self-regard.

***V: Coleridge's Firelight, or What Glows in or before
a Barnett Newman?***

John Updike in *Bech at Bay* has a nice quip: there is no evidence that it is about Barnett Newman, but it could, in a phenomenological sense, be about his once-reviled works. There is an unnamed artist 'who specialized in "things so boring that they verge on non-being"'.²⁷ The word 'boring' need not be pejorative, as has been pointed out by Patricia Meyer Spacks²⁸ and myself. There is a 'negative' sense in which Newman is 'boring': there is no concession to the delight which Aristotle reckons that we take in 'depictions with the utmost fidelity in a picture'.²⁹ And the post modernist is possibly at a loss to find quotations in high Newman. But, positively the effect of the Grand-Boring of Newman is to force the viewers back on themselves. As the sometimes lambent, sometimes flickering flames and films for Coleridge, so the surfaces of a Newman; and the 'zips'. The 'zips' *represent* nothing:³⁰ they merely focus the viewer here in or before the large areas of saturated colour which they punctuate. Like the little map on the museum wall these 'zips' read 'You are here', but 'here' is no Hudson River School painting, or whatever. *Here* is just the big field of colour which deprives you of the exercise of the sort of attention that an 'ordinary' picture attracts, and which forces you to consider either it—and *it* is unyielding—or, yourself. To consider yourself in a self-reflexive stalemate before the Newman, this is the invitation of the 'zip'. You are now 'here' where you always are. The Newman 'zip' maps this. The supersensible substrate becomes momentarily self-sensible. The busy world—'this populous village'—*stilled* by the big area of colour, attention self-attends.

VI: The Sublime is Now

Barnett Newman wrote in 1948 the famous essay, 'The Sublime is Now'. The, local, logical grammar of 'now' is puzzling. In one way it

seems clear enough. Newman, who had majored in philosophy at the College of the City of New York, critiques the Greeks on beauty, Longinus on the sublime, Kant and Hegel all for—more or less—failing to distinguish sufficiently the beautiful and the sublime. He has a good word for Edmund Burke. Newman links the sublime to 'a sense of exaltation'. How is the 'now' of 1948 exalting. And why? The sense of Newman's 'now' may turn on this exaltation notion. Newman writes, *à propos* the 'now' of modern painting:

The impulse of modern art [now?] was [a] desire to destroy *beauty*. However, in discarding Renaissance notions of beauty, and without an adequate substitute for a *sublime message*, the impressionists were compelled to preoccupy themselves, in their struggle, with the culture values of their plastic history, so that instead of evoking a new way of experiencing life they were able only to make a transfer of values. By glorifying their own way of living, they were caught in the problem of what is really beautiful and could only make a restatement of their position on the general question of beauty; just as later the cubists, by their dada gestures of substituting a sheet of newspaper and sandpaper for both the velvet surfaces of the Renaissance and the impressionists, made a similar transfer of values instead of creating a new vision, and succeeded only in elevating the sheet of paper. So strong is the grip of the *rhetoric of exaltation* as an attitude in the large context of the European culture pattern that the elements of *sublimity* in the revolution we know as modern art, exist in its effort and energy to escape the pattern rather than in the realization of a new experience. *Picasso's effort may be sublime* but there is no doubt that his work is a preoccupation with the question of what is the nature of beauty ...³¹

Even Picasso does not quite make the leap that Newman desired. 'The Sublime is Now' goes on, a paragraph or so later, with a rhetoric of exaltation of its own:

The failure of European art to achieve *the sublime* is due to [its] blind desire to exist inside the reality of *sensation* (the objective world, whether distorted or pure) and to build an art within a framework of pure plasticity (the Greek ideal of beauty, whether that plasticity be a romantic active surface or a classic stable one). In other words, modern art caught *without a sublime content*, was incapable

of creating a new *sublime image* and, unable to move away from the Renaissance imagery of figures and objects except by distortion or by denying it completely for an empty world of geometric formalisms—a *pure* rhetoric of abstract mathematical relationships—became enmeshed in a struggle over the nature of beauty: whether beauty was in nature or could be found without nature.³²

One skips a paragraph, and comes to Barnett Newman's conclusion:

We [modern Americans] are *reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted*, for a concern with our relationship to the *absolute emotions*. We do not need the obsolete props of an outmoded and antiquated legend. We are creating images *whose reality is self-evident* and which are devoid of the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful. We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man, or 'life', we are making [them] out of ourselves, *out of our own feelings*. *The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.*³³

The phrase 'whose reality is self-evident' has a Jeffersonian ring to it. *A propos* 'absolute emotions' one may usefully recall Ern Malley's, 'the emotions are not skilled workers'³⁴, and one can never count on them for a standard product. *Bricolage* rather than precision is all that one can hope for from the emotions.

To our present discussion: we might find the emotions arousing themselves before a Barnett Newman as before a Turner, and enjoying the Dynamic Sublime. *The New Yorker* for 25 March, 2002, carries an advertisement for the Barnett Newman 'exhibit' in Philadelphia at the Art Museum (24 March—7 July) 'Sublime Colour. Grand Scale'. There are great Turners in which the object and its nostalgia are almost as effaced as is the object in high Newman. The Dynamic Sublime has always in effect worked both for real sublimes, actual volcanoes, sunsets, alps, waterfalls and so on, and for pictures of them. Faced with real (or painted) 'Nature as Might', Kant avers that:

... we readily call [fearsome] objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resist-

ance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.³⁵

This may be Enlightenment coy for 'we are going to Heaven, the Alps are not: or not in the same way'. Or, it may be a shade more Enlightenment tough.

The difference between Turner and Newman may point up the tough (which may not be tough enough for some). The *New Yorker* advertisement goes on to read '[Newman's] "zip" paintings changed art forever ...' Forget 'art', and look at the 'zip'.

To the 'absolute emotions' (which may go all over the place, as emotions do) Newman adds a new idea, at the end of an essay called 'Ohio' (1949), which is a kind of meditation on some Native American earthworks in Akron. After describing the earthworks, Newman writes, rhetorically: 'The concern for space bores me. I insist on my experiences of sensations in time—not the sense of time, but the physical *sensation*'³⁶. The last line of the 'Ohio' essay gives sense to the 'now' of 'The Sublime is Now' essay.

To the unskilled emotions Newman adds a Bergsonian *durée*, as felt; and perhaps as the primal feeling. Newman's 'sublime colours, and grand scale', excite the emotions: these are felt, as is their very ground, consciousness—'like breathing but quieter'—focused on the 'zip'. The 'zip' is a secular meditation-object. It's a seductive thought that the English 'secular' is as much a *time* notion as it is something in apposition to the sacred. The *durée* is: a *time* before time, a given before measurement. A sense of this 'feel' of the *durée* could account for Newman's being 'bored with space', even Masaccio's. If 'time is the form of inner sense', as Kant has it, then to be in time is before being in space: inner sense is where we start from. The substrate feels itself, perhaps, before apprehensions are learned by an infant, as time.

VII: The Zip and Emily Dickinson's 'Soul Admitted to Itself'

Even if we take Dickinson at a post-Transcendentalist discount and drop 'soul', we then have 'a self admitted to itself', or 'a consciousness conscious of itself'. Following the heuristic for reading poetry, 'always look for ambiguity', we get, either or both of these: (i) a self allowed into itself, which feels odd; (ii) a self avowing itself so 'admitting' in that sort of sense. It seems that the second makes the first intelligible, as self contemplating and reflecting its own self: '... the

idling spirit / By its own moods interprets, everywhere / Echo or mirror of itself ...'

This, which we argue Newman's 'zip' can fix for an observer, is a shade deeper than Kant's 'resistance of another kind' to nature: it is a glimpse—oblique, aesthetic, not logically compelling—of the ground itself of such resistance. It is an intimation—if not of immortality—at least of the 'substrate'. It is, as it were, first act reflecting on itself, and on its powers of action, before engaging these powers. A Newman 'zip' makes sense to a viewer because the viewer *is* the sense. The intensionality of the 'zip' is the viewer's deep glimpse of the viewer.

Subjectivity is not a formal condition of experience: it's its ontological condition. *Esse* may not quite be *percipi*: but without consciousness, no concern: matter, possibly. But matter would no longer matter. This notion—hazy though I myself find it to be—may be a shade tougher than Kant's idea of 'resistance of another kind', which is up in the case of the Dynamic Sublime, if only because the notion in this paper concretises Kant's 'substrate': it does this by fusing for a moment the empirical and 'transcendental' self. This would be 'mechanically' impossible in the first two *Critiques*: it is perhaps implicit in the third: and implicit in the notion of spontaneity, which pops up, spontaneously, in the first *Critique*.

The sublime of Barnett Newman is brought *by* the viewer of his work *to* the work: Newman's work works on the viewer, focusing that viewer through the 'zip' for such a *durée* as the aesthetic entrancement holds, which may be for a rather short time. *The New Yorker* review with which one has previously disagreed, is right on the duration of aesthetic moments:

The art historian Kenneth Clark once remarked that we can experience a pure aesthetic sensation for only as long as we savor the smell of a fresh cut orange—about two seconds by my reckoning. This seems right with regard to Newman, who is imperishably radical for having focussed all his energies on the cultivation of fleeting, exquisite transports on a grand scale ...³⁷

If the duration of the (pure?) substrate's showing is so short, its traditional association with the Graeco-Christian soul's eternity is vastly a-symmetrical: a proportion of two seconds *to* 'from Everlasting to Everlasting'. But intimations—whether of immortality or not—are the best that the aesthetic may run to: not in specious presents but in two-second zips. And intimations are not to be despised.

A crumb is better than nothing at all, if what is to be nourished is either one's personal culture, or one's soulish hopes. (Read 'either or both') As with core-drilling in geology, all one can hope to get of the substrate is a smallish slice.

Coda

If *Onement* was for one one, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* is for five, as there are five 'zips'. *Vir* here is 'universal'. But the universal always 'appears' as a congeries of individuals, irreducible individuals. Alone with a Newman 'zip' painting, I and the sublime is *now*.

Notes

- 1 Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, NY, 1994. Other useful references are Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman*, Walker & Co., New York, 1969, and the catalogue of the 2002 Newman 'exhibit' at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, ed. Ann Temkin, with essays by Richard Shiff and Ann Temkin and with contributions by Suzanne Penn and Melissa Ho. I had not sighted this catalogue at the time of writing.
- 2 Peter Schjeldahl, 'Lord Barney: Barnett Newman's majestic abstractions', *The New Yorker*, 15 April 2002, p. 84, col. a (italic added).
- 3 Jonathan Glover, *I: The Philosophy and Psychology of Personal Identity*, Pelican, Harmondsworth, UK, 1989, see pp. 87 and 94.
- 4 *ibid.*, pp. 90-1.
- 5 J.-F. Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the *avant garde*', *Art Forum*, vol. 22, 18 April 1984, pp. 36-43.
- 6 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), see Part III, Section XXIII 'Elegance and Speciousness' and Part IV, Section XXIV, 'Concerning smallness'.
- 7 Geoffrey Keynes and Brian Hill (eds), *Samuel Butler's Notebooks*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1951, p. 300.
- 8 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, see B xxvii '... though we cannot know ... objects as things in themselves, [we must posit It/them] otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears'. The mechanics of the Critical system begin, so soon, to clank. The Thing-in-Itself is being defined into 'existence'. A transcendental ego may exist, *de facto*, as part of what is the case, as Kant's reference to 'the substrate' in his third *Critique* may already acknowledge. This rough gearing in the first *Critique* makes one all the more willing to dump 'representation'. Translations are taken from the Norman Kemp Smith version, London, Macmillan, 1929, etc.

- 9 *ibid.*, A400, 401 and 402.
- 10 Glover, *op. cit.*, p.89. I am indebted to Glover for drawing this 'mysterious allusion' to my attention again. One's hope is, if not to demystify, at least to use the idea.
- 11 Andy Clark, *Being There: Putting Brain, Body and the World Together Again*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1997.
ibid., pp. 46 *passim*.
- 13 Kant, *op. cit.*, B41 (italics added).
- 14 Kant, *op. cit.*, B131, §16.
- 15 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ch. VII (p. 62 of the 1906 Dent 'Everyman' edition. p. 69 of the current edition.)
- 16 Sir A. T. Quiller-Couch (ed.), *The Poems of Coleridge*, 'World Classics' edition, OUP, Oxford, n.d., 'Frost at Midnight', pp. 221-2 (italic added). Coleridge's notorious insomnia may have had something to do with his inability to 'switch off'.
- 17 My reading-against-the-text gives a role to '*the thin blue flame*{which} *quivers not*', i.e. to be, unlike stilled quicksilver, a *lambent* reflector. The film '*which flutters on the grate*{and} *still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing*', is for Coleridge the 'sympathetic', the 'companionable' thing. I, as it were, 'stack' these two phenomena, the (seemingly) still and 'the fluttering film', as aspects of the one coal fire, where both aspects become 'companionable'. I am (mis-)lead into this reading, (a) by seeing the thing that '*quivers not*' as a still-quick and a not-now-unflowing 'quicksilver', and; (b) by taking the two the, 'thin blue flame' and the 'fluttering film' as first and second act of the one thing, (the coal fire) which conjunction is read as an overall emblem of mind. My memories of the coal fires of my youth are too dim to match up with the Coleridge grate to get the pure description right: there would be no point, as in an allegory assigning a role to each and every element of the fire. Coleridge is 'companioned' by the flutter because he is actively writing: silently musing, he would be liker to the '*thin blue flame*{which} *quivers not*'. Whether or not Coleridge took the images in *Frost at Midnight* to settle his own point about being in the Hartleian theory 'the mere quick-silver plating behind a looking-glass: [in which] alone consists the poor worthless I', I do not know. I doubt that I am the first to read the 'quicksilver', the flame and the 'fluttering film' together, one way or another.
- 18 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §57, 'Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgement'. There is here a fine Kantian paradox: an attempt to free freedom from the mechanism in which he has embroiled it in the earlier *Critiques*. Translations from C.J. are from James Creed Meridith's version, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1928, etc.
- 19 *ibid.*, Book II, 'Analytic of the Sublime: A, the Mathematically Sublime',

- at side number 250.
- 20 Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutical Import of the 'Critique of Judgement'*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990, pb. 1994. For the fullest discussion of *ekphrasis*, see Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of a Natural Sign*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1992. *Ekphrasis* is an *as if*, momentary, *totum simul* of a part, at least, of a text. The Kantian *Augenblick* would take in—as it were—a time slice of reality-as-a-whole. *Ekphrasis* may, or may not, be a good model of this, other, snapshot. Coleridge's celebrated 'Thesis VI' in *Biographia Literaria* where he conflates the *sum* and the *I AM* would collapse the cone of our example into—what?
 - 21 Patrick Hutchings, 'Reflections on Boredom and the Sublime', *Literature and Aesthetics*, vol. 5, October 1995, pp. 104–22.
 - 22 'There is a solitude of space', no. XXV of V, 'The Single Hound' sequence in *Emily Dickinson: Selected Poems*, Christopher Moore (intro.), Gramercy Books, New York, 1993, p. 184. *A propos* our present concerns see 'Adventure most unto itself/ The Soul condemned to be;/ Attended by a Single Hound –/ Its own identity', at p.125. (The word 'soul' occurs in Glover *op. cit.*, pp. 13, 90, 92, & 100 (etc.), but not in the Index.)
 - 23 R. W. Franklin (ed.), *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Reading edn, Bellnap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1996. See poem no. 1696, p. 610.
 - 24 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxx. This is the locus of the famous triad: 'God, freedom and immortality'.
 - 25 *ibid.*, B277 & 278, 'Note 2'.
 - 26 *ibid.*, A405 ('Paralogisms of Pure Reason. A') (italics added):
'Reason is the faculty of principles. The assertions of pure psychology do not contain empirical predicates of the soul but those predicates, if there be any such, which are meant to determine the object in itself independently of experience, and so by mere reason. They ought, therefore, to be founded on principles and universal concepts bearing on the nature of thinking beings in general. *But instead we find that single representation, 'I am', governs them all.* This representation just because it expresses the pure formula of all my experience in general announces itself as a universal proposition valid for all thinking beings; and since it is at the same time in all respects unitary, it carries with it the illusion of an absolute unity of the conditions of thought in general, and so extends itself further than possible experience can reach.'
 - 27 John Updike, *Bech at Bay: A Quasi Novel*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1999, p.155.
 - 28 Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995.

- 29 Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 4.
- 30 A whole critique of the *facture* of Newman's 'zips' is possible. Some are hardedge; more often there is fuzz, buzz and energy. The relationship of the 'zips' to their plane could be analysed at length.
- 31 (ed.), *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, with text notes and commentary by Mollie McNickle, Introduction by Richard Shieff, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1990, pp. 172-173 (some *Italic* added; some Newman's, throughout the quotations).
- 32 *ibid.*, p. 173.
- 33 *ibid.*, p. 173.
- 34 Ern Malley, 'Colloquy with John Keats', in *The Darkening Ecliptic*, poems by Ern Malley, paintings by Sidney Nolan, preface by Robert Melville, introduction by Elwyn Lynn, R. Alistair McAlpine, U.K. Hillingdon Press, Uxbridge, n.d., p. 53.
- 35 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Book II, 'Analytic of the Sublime: The Dynamically Sublime', §28, 'Nature as Might', side number 262.
- 36 Barnett Newman, 'Ohio', in O'Neill, *op. cit.*, pp. 174 ff.
- 37 Schjeldahl, *op. cit.*, p. 84, cols a and b.