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BOOK REVIEWS

more than would a contrary tactic. That, however, seems a gamble worth taking” (p. 268). However, this gamble should only be taken with full recognition of the stakes. Inverting Derrida’s observation that “to state the difficulty is not... to surmount it” (p. 268), one should also note that neither has one surmounted the solution by stating it. Although deconstruction opens up many avenues for intervention in political and legal theory, both sides of the dyads around which deconstruction operates are deeply entrenched. This entrenchment has sites both within the academy and without. To treat them as “merely” literary is to seriously weaken the possibility of using deconstruction as an effective means of intervention. The strength of Kramer’s book is that he recognizes this. His close reading of a selection of texts which give sustenance to the main traditions of legal and political theory is instructive, and should serve as a preliminary model for those working within these traditions—especially Critical Legal Studies.

Greg Howard, Lexington


Though Barnett Newman wrote more and more persuasively than any of his colleagues in the early-'50s school known as Abstract Expressionism, he still remains perhaps the most misunderstood painter in what was the first modern American art movement to free itself in any significant way from European tethers. In that we have learned to enter Rothko’s color field, Pollock’s web, or De Kooning’s splashy landscape, we have not assimilated Newman into a popular understanding. One can stand in the circular room of the National Gallery in D.C. where Newman’s fourteen “Stations of the Cross” hang, and witness the perplexity coupled with derision that crosses viewers’ faces as they encounter these 8-foot canvases, so ascetically rendered that they appear nearly bare, simply “framed” with strips of black or white. How does one go about explaining to the uninitiated that it took Newman 43 years to arrive at this style? One could retaliate in the manner of Adorno that “if one does not understand something, it is customary to behave with the sublime understanding of Mahler’s jackass, and project one’s own inadequacy on to the object, declaring it to be incomprehensible.” But Newman seldom took such high ground. Rather, he tried insistently to explain his art and other like it to an unfamiliar public and critics alike. Selected Writings offers more than ample insight into the resilient psyche of the man who claimed that to understand one of his paintings “would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism” (p. 247).

Before Newman painted his seminal “Onement I” in 1948—a maroon canvas with one orange stripe, or “zip” down the center—he was a relentless proselytizer for the abstract art movement in America. He claimed it was the true American form—“barbaric” and primitive, owing nothing to European notions of representation, which he claimed were simply derivations of classicism. “For the artist in America has the special privilege of being told and reminded every minute of his state of futility. The world here makes no bargain of expediency with him in the name of culture” (p. 112), wrote Newman. Instead, he praised throughout his life the raw sculptural Oceanic and South Sea tribes, with rhetoric that never fell into the racist implications of psychic savagery that became popular in lieu of surrealism. Rather, Newman emphasized the “elemental mystery of life” that these sculptures sought to embody and combat. Primitive art was never decorative, never interested in polished surfaces. Rather it was always totemic, more metaphysical, more “intellectual” in its grappling with the chaos of nature.

By examining primitive cultures in the Americas, Newman arrived at the conviction that contemporary art had become impotent and stylized because it emerged from only one tradition—classicism. Newman had begun thinking about the “Other” decades before it was vogue in this country. “We are to admit that the emperor has no clothes,” he wrote, “for to do so—to admit that primitive art can move us without resorting to the sensuous elements to which we are accustomed—may prove to be a denial of our Western European aesthetics” (p. 146).

In the spring of 1945, in a long essay called “The Plasmic Image,” Newman began seriously to search for a new “language” in which to paint—a new beginning separate from Europe. The myth of “beauty” was obsolete, ornamental, “plastic.” In light of the horrors that were unfolding in Europe, such facile art was unfathomable for Newman. He searched for a “plasmic,” philosophical form that would allow him to express all of the anguish primitive people must have felt at the mercy of forces they could not comprehend.

Newman never lost his ambition to express man’s relation to the transcendental. He simply thought that the European’s “relation to the Absolute become identified and confused with the absolutisms of perfect creations—with the fetish of quality—so that the European artist has been continually involved in the moral struggle between notions of beauty and the desire for sublimity” (p. 171). The crucial question then became for Newman, “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?" (p. 173). Such a monumental interrogation of one's art strikes me as similar to Adorno's statement, which we should rephrased as a question. How do we write poetry (or make art) after Auschwitz?

Newman spent the rest of his life, until he died in 1970, attempting an "authentic answer" (as Adorno would phrase it) via his painting—an encounter with the canvas that became an almost Sisyphus-like experience for the artist. And if Newman's paintings seem pedantically similar, we should remember his often-repeated assertion that he approached each canvas as if the history of painting did not exist.

To what extend he was successful is arguable. I see in these stubborn paintings the futile heroic I also find in a Giacometti sculpture or a sentence by Beckett. Perhaps Newman was discovering at the same time as Beckett that the role of the artist after the Second World War is no longer to create a successful work of art, whatever that might be, but rather "to fail as no other dare fail."

Newman was fond of saying that he was painting the true "subject matter," rather than the "object matter" of decorative art, reviving art "from the making of pictures to the making of paintings" (p. 253). This was Newman's most subversive act—offering up paintings that resisted almost any language of interpretation. To understand them was indeed to dispel power structures because it mean also rejecting the grammar of new mythologies.

Editor John O'Neill divides Selected Writings and Interviews into sometimes arbitrary categorical epithets: "The Artist-Citizen" (what Newman called himself), "The Artist-Critic," "The Artist-Thinker," and then "Statements," "Correspondence" and "Colloquies." The disadvantage of this division is that the writing does not proceed chronologically, or rather it proceeds through five chronologies. The distinctions of critic, thinker, citizen (painter?), however, hold up for the most part and show us an artist whose "job" did not end when he left his studio.

The book is if anything too long. Newman's vision, like his painting, was so focused, that readers will find themselves crossing familiar terrain simply because the artist was addressing different audiences. Much better, I think, would have been to preen some of the prose for a color plate or two of some paintings—a badly needed example of what Newman spend his life defending in prose. It was, finally, the vast oceans of monochrome color in his larger canvases that Newman believed most closely approached the sublime.

And of course the book comes much to late. Had the essays been collected 30 years ago, as would have been chronologically appropriate for the history of art, Newman's prose might have appeared as important precursor to much of the aesthetic theory that has appeared over the last three
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