

Passion in Painting:
Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*

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Passion in Painting:
Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*

In 1958, Barnett Newman begins a new painting by applying black oil paint on raw, unprimed canvas. This act initiates a series of fourteen paintings that Newman ultimately titles *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* (Figures 1-14). He works on the *Stations* for the next eight years, and exhibits them, along with *Be II*, in the Guggenheim in 1966 (Figure 15). Still exhibited today,* the *Stations* mark a unique occurrence in Newman's oeuvre, for they are the only paintings he makes explicitly as a series. Indeed, it is the structure of the series that enables his recognition of the paintings' dormant content: Jesus' final cry of "*lema sabachthani*," which Newman translates as "*why forsake me?*" Registered in the paintings themselves, this realization of subject occurs after he completes the *Fourth Station* in 1960 (Figure 4). With ten *Stations* left to paint, Newman explores Jesus' cry, building upon his earlier preoccupation with human speech. Newman's interpretation of the cry as "intense" and "stark" is analogous to the *Stations'* physical presence and austere color, and his sustained interest in Jesus' cry invites the question: what is the relationship between the figurative, Biblical story of the Passion and the non-objective, abstract paintings Newman makes?

* Most recently, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. held an exhibit "Barnett Newman: In the Tower," June 10, 2012–February 24, 2013.

Experiencing the *Stations*

When standing in front of any single one of Newman's *Stations of the Cross* paintings, it is nearly impossible not to look up and down the piece. Newman's signature zips of color force the eye to travel the height of each piece, and viewers often move their heads up and down quickly to keep up with the zips' momentum. In 1966, during a public interview with friend and art-critic Thomas Hess, Newman accepts Hess' term "zip" to describe these painted elements, stating that he prefers "zip" over his own word "stripe."¹ Now iconic, the term "zip" captures the function of Newman's zips of color: just like a zipper attaches and detaches two pieces of cloth, Newman's vertical zips integrate the compositional elements of each painting while dividing the field of color surrounding his zip.² In the *Stations*, the zips unite each painting within itself, and they also tie it to the others in the series.

Newman paints his first zip ten years before he begins the *Stations* in *Onement I* (Figure 16). In 1948, on a small, vertically oriented canvas, Newman paints a thick, impasto orange zip slightly left of center; this zip stands apart from the earthy, red fields on both sides of it. Newman claims he sits "with the painting for eight, nine months" in order to realize the effect of the zip: the viewer cannot determine the spatial relationship between the orange zip and the red field(s).³ Which is figure and which is ground? Is the zip in front of, behind, or next to these two fields? The impossibility in ascertaining the precise relationship between the zip and the color field demonstrates the unity of *Onement I*'s composition. Newman continues this compositional unity—the inseparability of zip and field—in the *Stations*.

While term “zip” connotes the speed and simultaneous joining and separating of Newman’s painted elements, we must also understand Newman’s zips to be fields of color unto themselves. In the *Stations*, Newman paints zips of different widths on a single canvas (Figure 7, 11). Thus, we can understand them as bands of paint that extend the height of the canvases. Because his zips extend the height of the *Stations*, the viewer does not interpret them as shapes painted on or within each canvas. This phenomenon occurs frequently in the work of Mark Rothko, Newman’s contemporary. In his 1968 *Untitled* tempera painting, for instance, Rothko relies on fuzzy bands of black that collide to create rectangles within the paper’s painted red surface (Figure 17). If Newman were to paint his zips within the canvas, they would be shapes that alternately suggest depth or openings; they would no longer vacillate between dividing and unifying the paintings and would establish a dichotomy between figure and ground, as Rothko’s *Untitled* does.

With his black and white zips, Newman transforms that which is given: the 32.5 square feet of each *Station*. He does not use the traditional figure-ground hierarchy in the *Stations*, nor does he contain his composition within the rectangle of the canvas. Rather, 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. Spanning the height of each canvas, Newman’s zips form new rectangles not *within* the canvas, but *out of* the canvas. Harold Rosenberg, Newman’s friend and art critic, describes the effect of Newman’s compositions:

So he avoided imposing squares or rectangles *on* the canvas, as Albers, Mondrian, Rothko, and some of the other “color” painters have done; his innovation consisted in transforming the canvas itself into two or more rectangles by means of his stripe, or zip, or color, his “zip.”⁴

Rosenberg captures the purpose of Newman’s zips. They were, and continue to be, significant because his compositions engage, even rely on, the edges of his canvas. In the *Stations*, this

transformation of the canvas is doubly complex. His painted zips cover a portion of the raw canvas, delineating two fields, one of addition (the painted zip) and one of absence (the raw canvas). Furthermore, Newman often leaves part of the raw canvas visible as narrow zips (Figures 1-4, 12). Thus, as he paints “his stripe, or zip, or color” in each of the *Stations*, he also creates another zip, one of raw canvas. The raw canvas appears where we expect a field of color, the traditional ground. The derailment of our expectation makes us aware that the zip can be made by the absence of paint.

In making the *Stations*, Newman limits himself to three “colors”: black paint, white paint, and raw canvas. Within these self-imposed limitations, he varies the tone, value, saturation, and sheen of his colors throughout the series. These variations become apparent upon close inspection of the paintings. The scale of the *Stations* encourages the viewer to approach them and look closely. Newman claims that he “wanted human scale for the human cry. Human size for the human scale.”⁵ Tellingly, each painting is six and a half feet tall and five feet wide, a size Newman never employs before the *Stations*,⁶ further marking the paintings as unique in his oeuvre. No single *Station* floods the viewer’s perception by extending beyond her peripheral vision, as Newman’s massive *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* does (Figure 18). The *Stations* operate in relation to the viewer’s own size because they are slightly larger than an individual: 78” tall and 60” across.⁷ Five feet across, the width of the *Stations* seems as if it could be the viewer’s own arm span,⁸ or even that of Jesus’ arms nailed to the cross. Thus, the viewer’s awareness of her own physical presence in relation to the paintings enhances her visual perception.

As Rosenberg notes, the *Stations*’ austere color and stark compositions create a “simple format” that “[force] each element of the painting [to] assume primary importance.”⁹ In a sense, then, the *Stations* are naked paintings; they reveal everything—the planned and accidental—to

their viewer: the viewer notices the seeming simplicity of the *Stations* while appreciating the unfolding of Newman's touch. She notices the paint splatters in the *Fourth Station* and the halo the oil medium causes in the *Sixth Station* (Figures 19, 20). These (accidental yet preserved?) elements draw the viewer to move even closer to each *Station*. In the *Twelfth Station*, Newman's brushstrokes are evident and his accidental drips lie on the raw canvas (Figure 12). Evidenced by the *Fourth Station* and the *Twelfth Station*, the preservation of accidental drips suggests that there is no hierarchy between the expected and the accidental movement of paint across the canvas' surface (Figures 4, 12). When approached individually, the *Stations* do not overwhelm, but mesmerize.

Each of the individual *Stations* mesmerize because of the difficulty in resolving the tension between Newman's painted zips and the raw canvas: the expected relationship between the figure (zip) and the ground (canvas). Throughout the *Stations*, there is no hierarchy between foreground and background, no portion of the canvas on which we must focus primarily. In his essay "Perceiving Newman," Yve-Alain Bois pinpoints the difficulty of closely looking at, and completely grasping, any of Newman's paintings, especially the *Stations*. With his materials and composition (raw canvas, black and white paint), Newman dissolves the figure-ground hierarchy; this dissolution makes it impossible to look at his zips of color and the painting as a whole at the same time. As Bois describes, the viewer is

constantly in the process of adjusting and readjusting the fundamental figure/ground opposition, never finding a moment of repose when this structure could coalesce...¹⁰

Without "this moment of repose," the *Stations* confront the viewer repeatedly; they present themselves continually to her. Furthermore, because the *Stations* consist of fourteen paintings with complex interrelationships, this phenomenon—the oscillation between figure/ground—is

more complicated in the *Stations* than in Newman's other paintings. Take, for example, the *Eighth Station* and the *Thirteenth Station* (Figures 8, 13). Both might be seen as Newman's most pared-down paintings, for both consist of two black zips of paint separated by canvas. Yet their composition is inversely related: the black zip on the left edge of the *Eighth Station* becomes raw canvas in the *Thirteenth*. Thus, Newman further confuses this "figure/ground opposition" because he does not establish the painted zips as figures and the raw canvas as ground consistently throughout the *Stations*. The viewer cannot determine that the painted zips are figures and the canvas ground, and so each *Station* resists perceptual certainty.

There is a rhythm and call-and-response within and among Newman's *Stations of the Cross* paintings. The rhythm is internal to each of his paintings, created through precise compositional orchestration: of specific blacks and particular whites, of varied widths of zips, of raw canvas. The call-and-response exists among the *Stations* as a series of fourteen paintings. Each painting calls out to the others; their formal elements beg to be in conversation. Because of the physical proximity of the *Stations*, the viewer can detect the subtle shifts in color and composition from painting to painting. Often seen as a coda painting, *Be II* always hangs when the fourteen *Stations* are exhibited (Figure 15). *Be II* reintroduces color with its bright orange/red left zip. Its composition is distinct from the *Stations* in that Newman paints zips on left and right edges of this almost-square canvas. These color and composition changes provide a respite for the viewer, a place to reflect on what she has just seen in the *Stations*.

Furthermore, the color and compositional conversations among the *Stations* and *Be II* reflect Newman's interpretation of the Passion. As Newman explains in the 1966 article he publishes in *ARTNews*,

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.¹¹

In his interpretation, the Passion is a series of events to be understood in totality rather than an assortment of fourteen separate incidents of torture along the Via Dolorosa. The wholeness, the totality of the *Stations*, is most apparent in the viewer's initial encounter with the *Stations*. Hung together, the paintings confront her initially as a group, as series of paintings. The viewer recognizes them all at once, in a single instant: the original moment, shocking and awe-inspiring. As a group, the fourteen *Stations* strike the viewer: the paintings overwhelm her with their austere colors and pared down compositions. In this single, first instant, the *Stations'* zips of black, white, and raw canvas seem endless; they overwhelm by proliferation: the quantity of paintings (fourteen) and the elements within each *Station* (the painted zips and raw canvas). Newman's zips divide each *Station* into new, narrow rectangles, while each *Station* acts as a rectangle within the fourteen paintings. The paintings have not yet separated from each other; they are more part of a coherent group than they are distinct individuals. Within this 'single instant,' the viewer recognizes the *Stations*, yet has not approached them closely.

The *Stations* Exhibited: Sequencing

The *Stations of the Cross* and *Be II* are first shown at the Guggenheim Museum in 1966 (Figure 21). Lawrence Alloway curates the exhibition *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, hanging the first four *Stations* along the Guggenheim ramp, which leads to the following ten *Stations* hung within the High Gallery.¹² With its ascending, cyclical path, the

Rotunda's ramp dictates the route through the exhibition and sets the pace of viewing the first four *Stations*. The path moves clockwise and so the viewer confronts the left side of the first four *Stations* before the right. The installation of the first four *Stations* along the Rotunda's ramp follows the left-right structure of Newman's compositions. In the initial Guggenheim show, as the viewer approaches the *Stations* she sees the black zip hugging the left edge of the *First Station*. After pausing in front of the *First Station*, the viewer is drawn to the *Second Station* by the opaque black on the *Second Station*'s left edge (Figures 1, 2). Like the progression from the *First* to the *Second Station*, the *Third Station* leads to the *Fourth* with the dense, black zip on its left edge and raw canvas on its right (Figure 3, 4). The compositional orchestration within the *First, Second, Third* and *Fourth Stations* tug the viewer into the exhibition and along the required route: the paintings' physical appearance dictates the viewer's physical and visual movement through the exhibition.

In the Guggenheim show, Alloway splits the *Stations* and hangs the *Fifth* through *Fourteenth* in the High Gallery to avoid the "congested effect" of having all fourteen paintings in one room (Figure 22).¹³ As Alloway notes in his article, "Color, Culture, and the *Stations*," a tentative organization of the *Stations* places each painting "into a tall room of 135 running feet and Newman rejected emphatically the congested effect."¹⁴ This "congested effect" would have minimized the viewer's recognition of the *Stations*' sequential flow. If hung too close together, the space between the *Stations*—the transitional walking path of the viewer—would shrink, and the resulting congestion would distract the viewer from the push-pull rhythm that continues throughout her walk by, and observation of, Newman's paintings (Figure 22). This "congested effect" might have diminished the impact of each *Station* by allowing each painting to blend into the others, for the space between the *Stations* permits them to be seen as separate, unique

paintings. The installation of these paintings in the Rotunda and the High Gallery guarantees that the spectator cannot skip over a painting; each has to be confronted consecutively and with space and time separating each one.

Upon entering the High Gallery, the viewer first approaches the *Fifth Station*, and its dry-brush work pushes her away from the *Fifth's* left edge toward the right edge of its canvas (Figure 5). Soon after the viewer reaches the zip of raw canvas on the right edge, the thick black, left zip of the *Sixth Station* pulls her eye (Figure 6). The push-pull rhythm that the viewer finds in the first four *Stations* and in the *Fifth* to the *Sixth* continues throughout the *Stations* in the High Gallery, ending with the progression from the *Thirteenth* to *Fourteenth Stations* (Figures 13, 14). Unlike the compositional and color similarities of the *Fifth-Sixth Stations*, it is the compositional and color differences that draw the viewer from the *Thirteenth Station* to the final *Fourteenth*. In both paintings, Newman creates a zip of equal width along their left edge. In the *Thirteenth Station*, this zip consists of raw canvas, while in the *Fourteenth* Newman paints this zip in white paint that approximates the raw canvas' color. The *Fourteenth Station* is the only *Station* in which Newman covers the entire surface with paint, foreshadowing *Be II*, which hangs outside the High Gallery. In addition to sequencing the paintings, the High Gallery's walls enable the viewer to cross-reference the paintings easily. She can, for example, appreciate the similarities between the *Fifth Station*, the *Tenth Station*, and the *Twelfth Station* in the left-right brushwork that creates variation in the edges of the left zips (Figures 5, 10, 12). In these *Stations*, Newman's hand is apparent, his touch does not disappear from the paintings as it does in the *Stations* whose zips have harsh edges delineated by the removal of masking tape (Figures 6, 9, 11). Within the High Gallery, the viewer might realize that the *Seventh, Tenth, Twelfth, and Thirteenth Stations* all have right zips of equal width made of black, white, gray paint and raw canvas (Figures 7, 10,

12, 13). Thus, the sequencing and cross-referencing enriches the viewer's experience, for she identifies the similarities among the paintings.

For Alloway, the sequencing of the paintings along the Rotunda and within the High Gallery is crucial to understanding the *Stations*. Alloway's attention to the left-right sequencing of Newman's paintings in the installation of the first four *Stations* conforms to the subject's art-historical legacy. A popular theme in religious art, the Stations are linked historically to the site in which they are presented. In his introduction to the Guggenheim exhibit, Alloway writes, "The Stations of the Cross is an iconographic theme that requires a serial embodiment in space."¹⁵ Traditionally, depictions of the Stations of the Cross are found within the architecture of a cathedral's nave or on the "roadsides leading to churches or churchyards."¹⁶ Thus, the viewer's walk to each Station (or *Station*) approximates Jesus' own walk on the Via Dolorosa. Whether within a cathedral or on the road to a church, the "serial embodiment" of the Stations requires that the worshipper or viewer pass them in sequence, pausing for reflection at each marked location. The painting or object marks the location, identifying the site as an important place to pause. The Guggenheim's architecture, like a cathedral's nave, creates an experience of the *Stations* analogous to that of the traditional worshipper. Installed within the Rotunda and the High Gallery, the *Stations* encourage the viewer to move to the next *Station*, and she, like the worshipper, must walk there. Thus, like religious Station markers, Newman's *Stations* are similarly transitional, stopping places for the viewer.

This compulsory physical and visual participation makes Newman's *Stations* confrontational rather than comfortable. The *Stations* are frontal paintings that do not suggest depth, but seem to project themselves into the viewer's space. The black and white pigment sits on top of the canvas' frontal plane; the pigment does not seep into the support or tacking edges

as Rothko's colors do, exemplified in the Rothko's 1963 oil painting, titled *No. 3* (Figure 23). The preservation of raw canvas makes clear that the *Stations* are paintings, ones that are not windows into another world. Rather, they are part of, and projections into, the viewers' space. Though Newman's brushstroke disappears in some of the *Stations* (Figures 8, 13, 14), his paint remains matte and almost reflective, further emphasizing the frontality of the *Stations*.

Traversing the *Stations*, the viewer recognizes how much the paintings emphasize the vertical over the horizontal. Pausing in front of each individual *Station*, her eye inevitably travels the vertical zips easily and quickly. Without the distracting brushwork of the early *Stations* (Figures 1-5), Newman's painted zips begin to act as arrows, directing the viewer to look up and down. Unlike the zips, the wide swaths of raw canvas are difficult to navigate visually: should we move across them horizontally, skipping from zip to zip within each *Station*? The juxtaposition of painted zips and raw canvas induces an almost frenzied eye movement because the raw canvas does not direct our eye overtly (Figure 4). The tension between the fast vertical of Newman's paint and the slow horizontal navigation of the raw canvas is similar to the combination of the vertical and horizontal elements of Jesus' cross. Just as the cross' vertical element is longer than its horizontal bar, Newman's zips accentuate the vertical over the horizontal. This verticality is underscored in the orientation of each *Station*. Each painting is 78" tall and 60" across;¹⁷ they are portraits rather than landscapes, and this uniformity in size creates cohesion among the paintings.

In addition to the consistency of size and orientation, Newman gives the *Stations* similar titles. He numbers and titles each canvas—*First Station*, *Second Station*, etc.—in the order in which he completes it. On many of the *Stations*, Newman includes these dates with his signature, seen for instance in the *Seventh Station* (Figure 24). Why does Newman not title the *Stations*

after the specific, codified, and named Stations? Why, for example, does he not give the *Sixth Station* the title *Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus*? The sequencing titles (i.e. *First, Second, Third, etc.*) further unify the series, linking each painting to the one that precedes it and the one that follows. The numbered and dated titles make explicit the order in which Newman completes the *Stations* and the order in which they should be viewed, and his inclusion of the dates on the *Stations* registers Newman's repeated return to, and sustained interest in, the *Stations*.

Furthermore, these titles allow the viewer to map her experience as observer onto Newman's experience as an artist. Together, the sequential exhibition, numbered titles, uniformity of size, and consistency of color signal that the fourteen *Stations* comprise a series of paintings.

Seriality Explored

Made explicit in their sequential exhibition and titles, the *Stations'* seriality also registers Newman's creative process. The *Stations'* seriality represents a unique occurrence in Newman's typical painting process, and the structure of seriality impacts the meaning of the *Stations*.

Though a series, the *Stations* do not consist of a single painting that repeats itself in slightly different iterations, as his subtle variations in color and composition reveal. The serial structure provides a framework in which Newman can work and realize the subject matter of his paintings by painting. In the statement he writes for *ARTNews* in 1966, Newman claims that "from the very beginning I felt I would do a series."¹⁸ It is only after Newman becomes conscious of the *Stations'* seriality that he realizes *what* he is painting: the Passion.

Though the *Stations* are the only paintings Newman makes explicitly as a series, he prints a series of lithographs, the *18 Cantos*, which he works on throughout 1963-4, simultaneous to the *Stations*. Newman's process of making the *Stations* and *18 Cantos* parallel each other, and looking at the *18 Cantos* helps to reveal Newman's creative process as it applies to the *Stations*. Newman does not begin his lithographs intending to make eighteen prints; rather, as he inscribes on the *Preface to the 18 Canto's*, the "prints really started as three, grew to seven, then eleven, then fourteen, and finished as eighteen" (Figures 25-29).¹⁹ Thus, as with the *Stations*, Newman begins the *Cantos* with a series in mind, for they "started as three." These lithographs expand in number because, as Newman says in the *Preface*, the prints "are the result of grappling with the instrument," i.e. the litho stone, the press, and the paper's margins.²⁰ Like the *Cantos*, the *Stations* grow out of material limitations Newman imposes on himself. In the *Cantos*, "grappling with the instrument" generates the series, while in the *Stations*, the challenge to use only black, white, and raw canvas encourages him to make fourteen paintings. He tells Alan Solomon in 1966,

The challenge to me was...I had been working a lot with color, and I felt perhaps that I was being intoxicated and beguiled by what happens with color for me. And the challenge for me was to see whether I could do without any color at all. And so the limits I put on myself were to work with black, only with black, and to handle the raw canvass [sic] in such a way that the raw canvass [sic] would become color and have a sense of life.²¹

Just as he becomes "captivated by the things that happen in playing with this litho instrument," so too does he want to explore the complexities of using a limited color palette, of using no intoxicating, saturated color. Newman begins the *Stations* spurred by a material challenge that reacts against his older studio practice. In both the *Cantos* and the *Stations*, then, an idea does not compel Newman to complete a series, but the physical, material challenges generate a series.

Newman's realization of subject matter occurs after he encounters the limitations of his materials: the painting process leads Newman to his conscious exploration of the Passion. Though he includes no "eureka" moment in his *Preface to the Cantos*, what becomes clear is that Newman avowedly "had no plan to make a portfolio of 'prints,' " with specific content.²² Likewise, in making the *Stations*, Newman realizes his subject matter—what he paints—in *media res*. He claims to realize that he is painting the *Stations* after he completes the first four canvases.²³ Indeed, this realization seems embedded in the appearance of the paintings themselves. The first four *Stations* rely on similar compositions: the black, matte left zip coupled with a zip divided by a portion of raw canvas (Figures 1-4). In these first four *Stations*, Newman relies on expressive brushwork and thinner zips to convey emotion. It is as if he is not as sure of his subject matter, not as confident in his idea and so he relies on his own gesture and more compositional elements: more zips, more painterly effects. In the first four *Stations*' right zips, Newman paints over masking tape that he removes, leaving a thin zip of raw canvas inside of two narrow zips of paint. The division of this second zip disappears in the *Fifth Station* (Figure 5), and this right zip becomes a thin line, suggesting that Newman becomes more comfortable reducing his composition to two painted elements after he realizes his subject. As the paintings themselves demonstrate, the material challenge of black paint on raw canvas and Newman's growing comfort with it are crucial to his recognition of dormant content. Indeed, the initial exhibition of the *Stations*—splitting them in the Rotunda and the High Gallery—reflects Newman's realization of content.

Newman insists on this moment of realization, and he includes a description of it in an early, hand-written draft of the article ultimately published in *ARTNews* in 1966. In this draft he writes,

But it was only after the fourth one that I analyzed that I am saying ~~in terms of intensity had~~ had a Passion, a singleness, a constancy that made me realize that I was ... to do the Passion. That there was the metaphoric representation of my ideas of the Passion [his edits].²⁴

Why is Newman so emphatic that the paintings themselves—the “Passion,” the “singleness,” the “constancy” of the first paintings—lead him to realization? Newman’s insistence reveals that he values the physical qualities of his paintings just as much as he does the idea he finds embodied in them. The appearance of the pieces is important precisely because how the painting looks reveals to Newman what he communicates. He is not a conceptual artist whose work begins with an idea that the work then executes. His writings and these works show that Newman is interested in, and intrigued by, the materiality of his work first; the realization of “metaphoric representation” comes second. Indeed, Newman preserves this sentiment throughout the numerous drafts he writes. Ultimately, he edits his statement so that it reads:

It was while painting them that it came to me (I was on the fourth one) that I had something particular here. It was at that moment that the intensity that I felt the paintings had made me think of them as the Stations of the Cross.²⁵

Newman recognizes what he paints while, or slightly after, he paints it. The paintings affect him, and the process of painting allows him to explore an idea, although this idea does not generate the work initially. Through the actual process of creating the *Stations*, Newman melds the physical, material elements of his paintings to his interpretation of the Passion.

Compelled to complete a series, Newman seeks to understand how each piece contributes to the totality of the group. Each piece has a simultaneous, double existence. Each is a single, individual work that is also part of a collective whole. The structure of a series is most easily understood by the metaphor Newman uses in his *Preface to the 18 Cantos*. He relates the series to a symphony, where each print behaves as an instrument would, “so that as they separate and

as they join in their interplay, their symphonic mass lends additional clarity to each individual canto, and at the same time, each canto adds its song to the full chorus.”²⁶ Just as a listener can pick out the cello’s unique sound, so too can the viewer focus on a detail in one of Newman’s *Cantos* or *Stations*. Yet the cello’s melody does not exist alone; it contributes to the “symphonic mass.” It enhances the other melodies, just as each print “lends additional clarity to individual canto.” Essentially, the structure of a series allows the viewer to compare and contrast the works, augmenting her appreciation of each piece’s unique nuance. Furthermore, this duality allows the viewer to assimilate the individual *Cantos* and *Stations* into a total, or whole, group. Like the *Cantos*, each *Station* is unique, but is part of a unified series, what Newman terms “an organic whole.” With this phrase “organic whole,” Newman suggests that series—at least as he uses it—does not yield work that merely re-iterates the previous piece. For Newman, the series provides a structure within which he can make creative decisions.

In the preface to the *18 Cantos*, Newman also suggests that a series reveals the artist’s creative process. He writes that the *Cantos* “grew out of the others,”²⁷ and this sentiment applies to the *Stations* as well. The *Stations*’ differentiating features grow more apparent precisely because they are unified by size, color, and title; the serial structure reflects and records Newman’s creative process in a way that his other work does not. In his introduction to the initial Guggenheim show, Alloway makes a helpful comparison between the *Stations* and a single Jackson Pollock painting:

[Newman’s] method of learning from the initial staged work is parallel to the kind of responsiveness that Jackson Pollock revealed in single paintings. He would make a mark and then develop or oppose it by other marks until he reached a point at which he had exhausted the work’s cues to him to act further.²⁸

Just as Pollock’s overlapping drips reveal the order in which he applies paint, as seen in Pollock’s *Number 13A: Arabesque* of 1948 (Figure 30), the *Stations*’ seriality explodes and

makes evident Newman's artistic process. Rather than reacting to a mark he makes in a single print or painting with another mark, Newman reacts to what he has just finished. The evidence of Newman's reactivity lies in the lithographs and the paintings themselves. For example, Newman adjusts the blue ink in *Canto VII* to *VIII* by making it slightly less green and more saturated (Figures 26, 31), just as he alters the gray/black to a dark jet black in the *Twelfth* to *Thirteenth Stations* (Figures 12, 13). These subtle yet important alterations knit the "single, individual expressions" together. The deep black in the *Thirteenth Station* recalls the earlier *Stations'* black hues while pointing (by contrast) to the *Fourteenth Station's* bright white paint (Figure 14).

Taking his cues from the paintings themselves, Newman paints only when compelled; he works slowly and steadily on the *Stations*. He writes in *ARTNews*, "I could not do them all at once, automatically, one after another. It took eight years. I used to do my other work and come back to these."²⁹ Newman would return—he would "come back"—to the *Stations* throughout the 1960s, demonstrating his continued interest in the material challenge of the *Stations* and their content: Jesus' Passion. Newman's repeated return to the *Stations* constitutes a studio ritual, one that allows for continued, thoughtful exploration of the Passion's theme of human suffering. Indeed, this material, intellectual, and emotional interest in the Passion carries over to Newman's verbal description of his creative process. While working on the *Stations*, Newman tells Dorothy Gees Seckler in an interview, "I work only out of high passion."³⁰ His use of the phrase "high passion" connects his own artistic practice to the historical, religious Passion, suggesting he feels a similarity in intensity of emotion between himself as painter and Jesus as sufferer.

Perhaps it is Newman's own "high passion" that helps him resist the legend's tradition (in art history especially) of becoming anecdotal or illustrative. Newman dismisses the specific historical events of the Via Dolorosa, though he relies on the canonical number of Jesus' Stations

of the Cross to determine the number of paintings in his series. Codified in 1731 by Clement XII,³¹ the Catholic Church allows fourteen blessed wooden crosses to represent each Station. As Nurit Sirkis points out, this codification allows “a complex idea like the Passion and crucifixion, [to] be expressed by the most simple and abstract means,” recognizing that abstraction can “arouse the viewer emotionally.”³² Thus, the Catholic Church acknowledges that the Stations need not be representational to foster religious devotion. Newman’s non-figurative paintings and their numbered titles prevent the *Stations* from being illustrative of the Passion’s actual events. Thus, like art historical Stations, Newman’s *Stations* need not be representative to arouse secular admiration and thought.

As Newman writes in *ARTNews* in 1966, he never intends for the *Stations* to be illustrative, for “the Passion is not a series of anecdotes but embodies a single event.” Newman continues, together the paintings “form a complete statement of a single subject.”³³ Newman hopes that these paintings “form a complete statement” rather than existing as individual illustrations of the Passion’s events because anecdotal representation would distract from their intensity. We are not to understand the *Stations* as representations analogous Stations. Newman never intends for the *First Station* to be a depiction of Christ’s condemnation to death, and this improper interpretation—linking each painting to its historical Station—ignores the implications of the full title *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*. As will become apparent, Newman feels Jesus’ final cry of “*lema sabachthani*” is the crucial component of the Passion, the “single moment” that embodies and imbues all of the Stations with its intensity.³⁴

Jesus' Cry

Newman's interest in human speech is evident in the full title of the *Stations: The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*. In speaking and writing about the *Stations*, Newman emphasizes the anguish made obvious in Jesus' final articulation of the Passion. Tellingly, Newman prefers James Moffat's translation to that in the standard King James' version.³⁵ Moffat renders Jesus' *lema* into the present tense "why forsake me"³⁶ rather than the King James' version of "why hast thou forsaken me." The tense of Jesus' cry is important to Newman because the tense affects how we, as viewers, relate to Jesus' suffering. In the King James' translation—"why hast thou forsaken me"—the past tense establishes a distance between Jesus and his followers, what Alloway terms an "historical distance."³⁷ This "historical distance" alienates us from the Passion and Jesus' torment. Moffat's present tense translation declares the timelessness of Jesus' suffering in that the present tense reiterates continually the eternal question "why forsake me," allowing us to approach Jesus' suffering as if it were our own.

The present tense translation of *Lema Sabachthani* corresponds to how religious worshippers approach artistic representations of the Passion. As Alloway notes, in approaching traditional representations of the Stations, the "worshipper reduced the historical distance between himself and Christ, or to put it another way, Christ's suffering is eternal."³⁸ Just as Jesus suffers on the cross more than two thousand years ago, so too do we suffer now. The close relationship between the worshipper and Jesus is underscored in Luke's account, in which Jesus tells his followers, "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children" (Luke, 23.28).³⁹ In seeing Jesus' suffering, we recognize our own personal suffering and that of others. Present before us, the artwork enables this reduction of "historical

distance,” for it allows us to empathize with Jesus’ physical suffering. Especially gruesome depictions of Jesus’ crucifixion make the viewer cringe as she looks at them, exemplified by the viewer’s reaction to Matthias Grünewald’s 16th-century, syphilitic Jesus (Figure 32). The viewer’s own physical response reflects her empathic reaction to Jesus’ pain. Newman, aware of Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece*, collapses time in a similar way to the *Altarpiece* by including Jesus’ final words *Lema Sabachthani* in his title. With his insistence on the present tense of Jesus’ *lema*, Newman declares an eternal presentness to Jesus’ cry.

It is important to note that Newman’s interest in Jesus’ *lema* is a continuation of his earlier preoccupation with human speech. In his 1948 essay “The First Man Was an Artist,” Newman writes,

Man’s first expression, like his first dream, was an aesthetic one. Speech was a poetic outcry rather than a demand for communication. Original man, shouting his consonants, did so in yells of awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and at his own helplessness before the void.⁴⁰

In this excerpt, Newman does not suggest that man’s “first expression” are fully formed words, but instead states that they consist of “consonants.” Perhaps these consonants reference the typical representation of, and shorthand for, the Jewish God (Adonai) as “YHWH,” a name without vowels. With these consonants, we might imagine an ancient ululation, the primal sound that communicates grief without words with set signification, established content. The sound, rather than intelligible words, implies the meaning and emotion: “awe and anger.” Newman’s description of “man’s first expression” elucidates his preoccupation with different types of human speech, one reason that Jesus’ cry of *lema sabachthani* intrigues him.

Newman understands these mythical, shouted consonants to be “a poetic outcry” rather than “a demand for communication.” Implicitly, Newman draws a distinction between the “demand” and the “outcry,” a distinction that recurs in his understanding of Jesus’ final *lema*.

One distinguishing feature between a “demand” and an “outcry” is whether it expects a response from the listener. As a “demand for communication,” the speaker insists on a response, on recognition. He demands that his counterpart speak back to him; he insists that they communicate. In contrast, the “poetic outcry” of Newman’s mythical first man neither expects nor elicits a response. Mythical man’s first expression is, as the word “outcry” suggests, a literal crying out. He does not communicate with “the void” he senses, but expresses his “awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and at his own helplessness before the void.” Just as man’s first words are “a poetic outcry” rather than a “demand for communication,” Jesus’ *lema* “is not a protest but a declaration.”⁴¹ Like first man’s “poetic outcry,” this “declaration” does not require—and could not have—a response. It does not complain; it simply *is*.

Tellingly, Newman uses the word “outcry” to title a painting he completes just before beginning the *Stations* in 1958 (Figure 33). Linked to the *Stations* chronologically, compositionally, and thematically, *Outcry* (82” x 6”) foreshadows Newman’s material preoccupation with black paint and raw canvas. He covers *Outcry*’s initial layer of blue and white paint with a thick layer of black oil paint, leaving only a small portion of raw canvas exposed. Thus, *Outcry* registers Newman’s movement toward the austerity of black paint and raw canvas, a decision he makes only after putting down blue and white color. Thematically, *Outcry*’s title heralds Newman’s preoccupation with Jesus’ *lema*. How does the word and title *Outcry* relate to the physical painting itself? As the title suggests, the painting *Outcry* manifests physically an outcry, though whose outcry might be unclear. Indeed, the title *Outcry* begins to suggest that both words and images can be exclamations. In a sense, *Outcry*’s title is one of Newman’s most obvious ones, a word that labels how this painting functions rather than imputing any specific meaning. Indeed, the notion that *Outcry* manifests physically the act of

crying out corresponds to Newman's understanding that the *Stations* as paintings "form a complete statement of a single subject," Jesus' *lema*.

Newman's process of titling his works is a sincere one. As he tells David Sylvester in 1972, Newman titles paintings in order to express the "emotional complex [he] was under" while painting them.⁴² If we take Newman's explanation at face value, the full title of the *Stations* reflects the Passion's resonance with Newman's own creative process. With his titles, Newman seeks to *capture* what he was feeling, to convey the emotion embodied in the paint to his audience. Thus, to view the works is to witness (repeatedly and continually) Newman's expression, the "emotional complex" that he finds similar to Jesus' final cry. Like Newman's titles, Jesus' *lema* expresses his agony and reflects on it. Jesus' *lema* summarizes and articulates the "emotional complex" of enduring the fourteen Stations. At each of the fourteen Stations, Jesus feels forsaken, but it is only after the torturous walk down the Via Dolorosa that he puts his experience into recognizable language, just as Newman titles the *Stations* only after he completes the first four paintings.

Jesus' articulation of his "emotional complex" is reminiscent of first man's shouted consonants. Newman's mythical man shouts his consonants just as Jesus cries out with a loud voice. Indeed, Newman's description of mythical first man's plight applies to Jesus on the cross. Both cry out, and both for the same reason: "in yells of awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and at his own helplessness before the void," at being abandoned.⁴³ Mark and Matthew both include Jesus shouting his own consonants on the cross. Mark 15:34 reads: "And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"⁴⁴ Matthew's account is similar: "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama

sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).⁴⁵

The repetition of “Eloi” or “Eli” conveys Jesus’ agony just as powerfully as the actual content of his words: *My God, My God, why has thou forsaken me?*

To conclude his 1966 *ARTNews* article, Newman interprets the *lema* as “the cry, the unanswerable cry, is world without end. But a painting has to hold it, world without end, in its limits.”⁴⁶ Here, Newman confronts the question of how the word and the image connect, how his interpretation of the “unanswerable cry” is related to the *Stations*. He does not claim that the *Stations* portray Jesus’ agony, as figurative crucifixion paintings do. Rather, for Newman, the abstract *Stations* must somehow do something different than portraying or illustrating Jesus’ agony. Each painting must hold the cry, must contain it: “world without end, in its limits.” In addressing the physical limits of each *Station*’s canvas, Newman considers this ambiguous, metaphysical idea of holding the “world without end” within the canvas. Newman focuses on the edges of the canvases by leaving his tacking edges unpainted, though occasionally the priming medium drips the sides of the canvases. Within the canvases’ frontal planes, Newman pays attention to the edges of his zips: the compositional boundaries he establishes. The differences in the zips’ borders affect the viewer’s interpretation of the paintings. The *Twelfth Station*’s integration of harsh, taped edges and brushwork makes the viewer’s eye jump between the various zips (Figure 12), whereas the uniformly harsh edges of the *Eleventh Station*’s zips hold the viewer physically in the center of the canvas (Figure 11). In observing each *Station*, the viewer’s eye travels along the edges of each zip; the limits of Newman’s zips hold the viewer physically and visually in front of each *Station*.

The placement of zips also corresponds to Newman’s assertion that this cry must be held and contained within the paintings. Throughout the *Stations*, Newman never paints zips that hug

both the left and right sides. This decision stands in contrast to the composition of *Be II* (Figure 15). Up against *Be II*'s left limit Newman paints a red/orange zip, and on the right edge he places a black zip. Of equal width, these zips alternate between compressing, and being compressed by, the white paint covering the middle of the canvas. In light of Newman's decision to paint his zips on both edges of *Be II*, what is the significance of his placement of zips in the *Stations*? Without a zip on both sides, each *Station* pushes the viewer onto the next painting until she reaches the *Fourteenth Station*, whose right edge is not raw canvas, but white paint (Figure 14). In a sense, then, Newman's painted zips make the space for the viewer; they temporarily hold her in front of each painting, forcing her to ascend and descend visually the height of the zip before she moves physically to the next *Station*.

Newman's interpretation of the *lema* as a "world without end" influences the physical appearance of the paintings. He believes that Jesus' final words are not simple, and he wants to explore "the emotional complexity" of this final outcry in the fourteen *Stations*.⁴⁷ The series' predetermined number—fourteen—enables Newman to discover that the "emotional complexity" of Jesus' *lema* hinges on the cry's "intensity" and its "starkness." Mark and Matthew both include the repeated ululations of "Eli, Eli" and "Eloi, Eloi" in their accounts of Jesus' crucifixion, and this repetition indicates the intensity of Jesus' feeling of abandonment by God, his Father. Newman's interpretation of the *lema* as stark is not one that reflects the content of Jesus' words—the feeling of abandonment—but rather depends on *how* Jesus makes his final utterance. With his *lema*, Jesus does not silently resign himself to his death, nor does he make a forceful demand on God. Rather, the *lema* is a blunt and simple "declaration" of his suffering. The "starkness" of the *lema* is made clearer when Mark and Matthew are contrasted with Luke's account: "Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit:

and having said thus, he gave up the ghost” (Luke 23:45).⁴⁸ In Luke’s account, only after Jesus accepts his death graciously, with the accepting words of “into thy hands I commend my spirit,” does Jesus die. In Luke, unlike Mark and Matthew’s accounts, Jesus’ final words are not an outcry of anguish, but a testament of faith; they are articulate and accepting rather than stark and intense. The intensity of the cry corresponds to the intense physical presence of the paintings, and the starkness of the *lema* is analogous to the austerity of Newman’s limited color palette.

Intensity and Presence

In the article he publishes in *ARTNews*, Newman writes that he seeks to “maintain this cry in all its intensity and in every manner of its starkness” in the *Stations* as paintings.⁴⁹ With this intention, Newman wants to *transfer* what he finds in the story, in the literary text, into his paintings. The “intensity” of Jesus’ cry translates into the physical presence of the paintings themselves. Just as Jesus’ final words declare his suffering in the present tense, so too do Newman’s paintings declare themselves as being physically present for the viewer. The viewer recognizes that the *Stations* are present before understanding their significance. Newman’s work often resists initial interpretation, but its physical presence—its power and intensity—is not dependent upon any meaning or interpretation the viewer imputes. Presence creates a moment independent of its temporal context, separate from any interpretation informed by the past and made in the future. Jean-François Lyotard, in his essay *Newman: The Instant*, defines presence as “the instant which interrupts the chaos of history and which recalls, or simply calls out that ‘there is,’ even before that which is has any signification.”⁵⁰ According to Lyotard, we recognize

presence (“that which is”) before understanding meaning (“any signification”), a definition uniquely suited to Newman’s abstract paintings.

Newman’s paintings announce themselves and in doing so they arrest time for the viewer, interrupting “the chaos of history.” Lyotard’s decision to use the phrase “calls out” is not so different from Newman’s own term “outcry.” By calling out (the inverse of ‘out crying’), the *Stations* summon the viewer. For Lyotard, the paintings call out that “there is” in the first instant the viewer sees the *Stations*. In this first moment, the viewer cannot attach any meaning to the canvases, but recognizes immediately that both she and the paintings exist. This existential affirmation of “there is” occurs within the exhibition space: the *Stations* do not dissolve into their surroundings, but project themselves off the wall with their deep stretcher bars. In front of the *Stations*, the viewer stands alone with the paintings, apart from the “chaos of history,” separate from her surroundings. She stands mesmerized, entranced without knowing why.

In his definition of presence, Lyotard picks up the idea that speech substantiates existence, a notion Newman implies in his essay “The First Man Was an Artist” (quoted above). With his phrases “calls out” and “recall,” Lyotard implies that the paintings speak, for they call out to the viewer. The paintings are not silent, unobservable works. They attract the viewer simply by being present. In using the word “recall” to describe how the paintings announce themselves, Lyotard suggests that the *Stations* call out repeatedly, in an eternal present, not dissimilar to Jesus’ final *lema*. The *Stations*’ persistent recalling and calling out is reminiscent of first man’s “outcry” and Jesus’ “declaration.” Both first man and Jesus shout their words, thereby affirming their existence, stating that they are. Likewise, Newman makes paintings that call out to the viewer. Thus, both Lyotard and Newman connect existential affirmation to the speech act.

This affirmation of self is embedded in both Newman's mythical first man's "poetic outcry" and Jesus' final "declaration," for both statements affirm their speaker's existence in the present tense. First man shouts his consonants because he is conscious of his tragic state; his words originate out of "his own self-awareness and at his own helplessness before the void." First man's recognition of "the void" necessitates a second, implicit understanding: that man is not the void; that he *is*. Man understands "the void" precisely because he recognizes himself. He identifies the dichotomy between absence (the void) and presence (himself) by speaking. Like original man's first words, Jesus' final *lema* affirms his existence. On the cross, Jesus reiterates this first question of first man: "why forsake me?" With this declaration, Jesus faces abandonment by God, his father, just as man confronts "the void." In questioning why God forsakes him, Jesus implies that he understands absence (being forsaken) as distinct from presence (his life, God's attention). By identifying this existential dichotomy, Jesus and mythical man probe the quality of life: of what it means to be alive though forsaken.

For first man, being forsaken induces a feeling of emptiness, of lacking. Newman's own description of his artistic process parallels first man's and Jesus' articulation of absence. While working on the *Stations*, Newman claims that he "always hated the void" and that his interest in emptiness drives his creative efforts.⁵¹ Painting—the physical act of putting paint on canvas, of making a thing rather than no thing—is the only way to stave off the void, the emptiness present at the creative moment. This binary of "something" to "nothing" correlates to the *Stations'* raw canvas and paint (Figure 13). The raw canvas, the ground of the painting represents "no thing," the layer upon which he paints "some thing," his black or white zips. Concerned with "the void," Newman claims that he "discovered that one does not destroy the void by building patterns or manipulating space or creating organisms." Rather, Newman tries to create full paintings,

abstract works whose “color makes the fullness.”⁵² Newman seeks to limit emptiness, to hold it by creating paintings that are full of color. In absorbing this color, the viewer becomes aware of her own presence. Just as first man’s “shouts” and Jesus’ *lema* reflect and articulate the emptiness caused by abandonment, Newman’s *Stations* react and respond physically to Newman’s own hatred of the “void.”

Not only does Newman empathize with Jesus’ *lema*, but he also believes that Jesus’ final words articulate a feeling we all share. As he scrawls on a note-card in preparation for the Guggenheim exhibition catalogue: “Lama Sabachtani [sic] is everyman’s cry—.”⁵³ We are meant to identify with the paradox of simultaneous abandonment and affirmed existence. Thus, the *Stations* perform a double function in making us aware of abandonment while simultaneously affirming ourselves. First they make us acutely aware of being forsaken, a feeling that permeates life, by resisting initial interpretation. After we identify the physical presence of the paintings, the *Stations* affirm our existence—our presentness—by making us self-aware. This existential affirmation becomes overt in the title of *Be II*, the *Stations*’ coda painting. In its title, *Be II* commands and answers this abandonment. The inclusion of the color red gives *Be II* a different mood from the somber, serious *Stations* (Figure 15). It rejoices in a way that the *Stations*’ black paint and raw canvas do not allow. Lyotard argues that *Be II* provides a coded answer to the difficulty of abandonment; he writes, “the only response to the question of abandonment,” to this void, is the affirmative “*Be*.”⁵⁴ Both the word and the painting *Be II* command the audience to be present. We must recognize our existence despite being forsaken, for one does not cancel the other.

According to Lyotard, the “question of abandonment” Jesus’ *lema* poses is especially poignant because Newman’s Passion is “the Hebrew version of the Passion: the conciliation of

existence (and therefore death) and signification does not take place.”⁵⁵ In the Hebrew tradition, Jesus does not die for humanity’s sins; he is simply a good man unjustly executed. In the “Hebrew version of the Passion,” there is no *reason* for, no *significance* to Jesus’ death. He is one man in a long lineage of men whom God forsakes. Indeed, in his *Statement* in the Guggenheim catalogue, Newman links Jesus to Abraham and Adam by claiming that they all confront God’s abandonment.⁵⁶ In the Hebrew account of the Passion, the “signification”—the *purpose*—of Jesus’ death never occurs. Indeed, in Mark and Matthew, Jesus dies without understanding why he dies. His final words pose a question to God, his father: “why forsake me?” He never receives an answer nor does he accept his death gladly; he even cries out a final time before he “yielded up the ghost” (Matthew 27:50).⁵⁷ Forsaken, Jesus experiences death devoid of any meaning, of any “signification.” Without this “signification,” it becomes more important to “*Be*,” to be present.

To use Lyotard’s language again, a “feeling of ‘there’”⁵⁸ floods the viewer as she stands in front of the *Stations*. The “feeling of ‘there’” that Lyotard describes affirms existence and provides the viewer with the certainty that she is located in space and in time. Because Newman’s paintings are so austere, so pared down, they create a place for the viewer to view herself. For example, as the viewer stands in the center of the *Eighth Station*, its two black zips pull her vision to the left and right (Figure 8). In confronting the limits of her perception, she confronts herself. The *Stations* force the viewer to address herself and reflect on her own perceptual experience. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of this presencing (except for personal experience of the *Stations*) is an anecdote Newman shares with David Sylvester in a 1965 Broadcast Interview. Newman says,

I remember an incident during my first show in 1950, where a friend of mine, a painter, got terribly upset and had tears in his eyes and begun to abuse me. And I

said “What’s the trouble?” He said, “You called me names, you made me aware of myself.”⁵⁹

The presence of these paintings induces new self-awareness in the viewer, and this heightened self-awareness affirms her existence.

How does this self-awareness, this existential affirmation, last? Does the experience of becoming “aware of myself” outlast looking at the paintings? In other words, how necessary are the physical paintings themselves? Newman argues that this self-awareness outlasts the time the viewer spends in front of his paintings. As he tells Alan Solomon in the same 1966 interview, if:

...at one instant one gets the whole painting, and the painting can be unforgettable and at the same time there’s nothing to really examine. The feeling is instantaneous, complete and...you cannot ever sort of wipe it out of your mind. If I succeed in doing that I feel I have moved in relation to the true feeling of what it is to be alive.⁶⁰

Newman hopes that the viewer “cannot ever sort of wipe it out,” that she remembers the feeling of standing in front of his paintings. The memory of the *Stations* outlasts the paintings themselves, and by remembering their powerful impact, we as viewers can affirm our existence repeatedly. Newman’s words resonate with my personal experience of the *Stations*. For me, I remember that “instantaneous, complete” feeling the *Stations* caused when I first saw them: the intake of breath, Lyotard’s “Ah.”⁶¹ But this feeling occurred only once, only the first time the *Stations* came into my view. The paintings’ unexpected effect contributed to my initial admiration, for the next day I returned to the *Stations*, and I could not reproduce that instantaneous feeling of completion or wholeness. The *Stations* had already separated into distinct paintings, ones that I could compare. As Newman states, I must rely on my memory of that singular moment, even when standing in front of the *Stations* or *Be II* again.

Starkness and Color

Just as the “intensity” of Jesus’ cry is analogous to the *Stations* continuously presenting themselves, the “starkness” of the *lema* translates into the *Stations*’ austere color palette. Newman’s color is austere in that he limits it to black, white, and raw canvas. In using only black, white, and raw canvas, the *Stations* look different from Newman’s other works which often include fields of saturated, rich color underneath, or next to, zips of a different hue or value (Figure 23). As Carol Mancusi-Ungaro notes, “It was as if by denying himself the use of color and variable formats—that is, eliminating customary artistic options—he was forcing himself to pay greater attention to what was physically left.”⁶² This “attention to what was physically left” impels Newman to focus acutely on the physical components of the *Stations*: the specific materials he uses to make this series. He cannot apply his paint lazily or haphazardly, for the canvas will register it. With each decision, Newman enters into a make-or-break relationship with the paintings. In using the most simplistic means—black and white paint—Newman reduces hue to value, creating austere paintings.

Yet the *Stations* are not the only paintings in which Newman couples black paint and raw canvas. After his brother George dies, Newman paints *Shining Forth (To George)* in 1961 (Figure 34).⁶³ Newman sets up *Shining Forth* in landscape orientation, and its symmetrical composition consists of three narrow zips separated by fields of raw canvas. The parallel color between *Shining Forth* and the *Stations* suggests that Newman’s process of making the *Stations* impacts the material decisions he makes in his other paintings. Perhaps, working on *Shining Forth (To George)*—with its raw canvas and black paint—replaces the *Stations* in Newman’s studio practice, for he completes it in 1961, a year in which he does not finish a single *Station*.

This color parallelism also implies that Newman uses certain colors both to react to, and to evoke, what he feels in the studio. For Newman, therefore, color is a vehicle through which he expresses his ideas and emotions. As the color and content similarities between *Shining Forth* and the *Stations* demonstrate, black and raw canvas becomes synonymous with death and suffering in Newman's oeuvre.

Black paint on raw canvas is not the only color combination that becomes affiliated with content in Newman's oeuvre. Throughout his career, Newman finds specific instances for specific colors. For example, according to Hess, Newman interprets the lush green of *Dionysius* (1949) in relation to "my image of Bacchus," one of "luxuriousness, a lazy girl lying down in abandon—eating grapes" (Figure 35).⁶⁴ The tropical orange and yellow combined with the saturated green conforms to Newman's idea of Bacchus, of Dionysius. Newman uses red throughout his career, and as Hess points out, Newman thinks of red as representing man, made explicit in *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, whose Latin title translates into *Man, Heroic and Sublime* (Figure 21). This intense, blazing red is also present in *Joshua* (1950), *Adam* (1951/1952), and *Achilles* (1952), all paintings Newman titles after archetypal male heroes (Figures 36-38). Another example of color's relationship to content is the deep blue of *Ulysses* (1952), which Newman claims he paints "based on Homer's *Iliad*" (Figure 39).⁶⁵ The two deep, dense blues of *Ulysses* recalls Ulysses' long journey across the Mediterranean Sea to return to Penelope, his wife. As this small selection of paintings demonstrates, Newman believes color corresponds to the content of his paintings, both creating and evoking content.

By his own account, Newman wants to make painting into a "medium capable of pure expression," by making "pigment expressive rather than representational."⁶⁶ Newman's professed aspiration builds on what Paul Gauguin, the impressionist painter, strives to do in the

1890s. Famous for his paintings of Polynesian men and women, Gauguin began to apply color without matching what he sees to what he paints. In his paintings, color does not always identify its referent; for example, in *Maternity*, Gauguin paints the sky a bright yellow with one large pink cloud (Figure 40). These saturated yellow and pinks instill a mood in the painting rather than identifying or representing the sky as it appears to us in nature. Newman respects Gauguin's radical use of color: "Gauguin, with his flat, decorative planes consisting of large areas of color, paved the way for the abstract art movement of our century," he writes early in his career.⁶⁷ Like Gauguin's "large areas of color," Newman's color fields and painted zips are flat; they exist on top of the surface of the canvas. However, unlike Gauguin's, Newman's planes of color oscillate between pushing forward and suggesting impenetrable depth. The *Stations'* sections of dense black, for example, oscillate between falling behind and receding into the flat plane of the canvas. Yet the border between the black paint and the raw canvas returns these fields to the same perceptive plane.

Though Newman often uses saturated colors, he does make at least one other painting—*Prometheus Bound* (1952) using only—or mostly—black and white before beginning the *Stations* (Figure 41). This painting, however, does not appear entirely black and white. As Bois points out in his article "On Two Paintings by Barnett Newman," *Prometheus Bound's* pigment seems blue where the black paint abuts the horizontal white band. The overlap of the black and white planes in *Prometheus Bound* causes its blush tint, whose "irregular zip is due to the fact that white paint was applied over the black coat while it was not yet dry and caught some of its pigment."⁶⁸ Newman's wet-on-wet painting style alters the viewer's perception of color. The pigment never appears blue in the *Stations*, and only in the *Twelfth* does Newman use gray, which he mixes from his black and white acrylic paints (Figure 12).⁶⁹ Unlike *Prometheus Bound*,

Newman keeps the *Stations*' color separate and distinct. Indeed, not a single *Station* contains both black and white paints. Only in *Be II* does the combination of black and white pigment occur. The collisions of value and hue disappear in the *Stations*. This separation of colors is significant, for it makes the *Stations* Newman's most austere work (Figure 6). In a certain sense, the zips in the *Stations* stand isolated, almost as if they have been forsaken.

Within his self-imposed color limitations, Newman achieves maximum expressive capacities by using different kinds of paint, all applied on top of raw canvas. The exposed, raw canvas is crucial to Newman's attempt to "maintain this cry in all its intensity and in every manner of its starkness." Indeed, the raw canvas itself suggests "starkness," for it makes each of the *Stations* bare, vulnerable, nude. The *Stations* constitute the first time in which Newman leaves large swaths of canvas exposed, though he used this medium-weight cotton duck canvas for many of his other paintings.⁷⁰ Familiar with the weave and texture of this canvas, Newman decides to leave the raw canvas uncovered, exposing a binary between the supposed emptiness of the ground and the fullness of the paint, a binary similar to the paradox of simultaneous absence and presence that first man and Jesus express through their speech acts. In the *Stations*, Newman allows the skin of the painting to be revealed, just as Jesus is partially naked on the cross. The bareness of the canvas allows the different types of Newman's paint to become more apparent to the viewer, deepening the contrast between the plasticity of the material and the woven skin of the canvas.

Throughout the *Stations*, Newman uses Magna, oil, acrylic and duco. Each paint Newman applies possesses different hues and physical properties, and Newman's repeated material shifts suggests that he consciously uses whatever material he feels will achieve the desired effects. In other words, Newman's comfort with his materials means that each canvas'

effects are intended. In the first two *Stations*, Newman paints directly onto the unprimed canvas, so that his paint seeps into the fabric of the canvas (Figures 1, 2).⁷¹ Contrasting the paint's bleeding into the canvas, Newman uses a matte finish in these first two *Stations*. The matte paint simultaneously suggests depth, but also deflects the viewer from the painting, for she cannot see herself, literally, in the work. The reflective sheen of the *Tenth Station*, however, tracks the viewer's position relative to the piece; she witnesses how her physical location affects her perception of the painting by how the light reflects off of the paint (Figure 10).

In describing the color of the *Stations* in the Guggenheim catalogue, Newman expresses his desire to transform the pigment into "true color."⁷² Does he actually succeed in this transformation? Does he "make the material itself into true color—as white light—yellow light—black light"?⁷³ Hess helps elucidate what Newman means with his desire to transform pigment into "true color." In his book *Barnett Newman*, Hess writes that Newman's paintings have a "sense of liberated color; paint had not glowed like this since the days of the Fauves."⁷⁴ Inspired by Gauguin and led by Henri Matisse, the Fauves paint without trying to match the color of life in their paintings. Painted skin or painted roofs not need be the tone of flesh or the color of brick. In the early twentieth century, color becomes a vehicle to convey the emotion of life. Inspired by the Fauves, Newman liberates color by transforming the pigment's physicality into ethereal light. He exchanges paint's chunkiness, its fleshiness for the glowing quality of light without allowing layers of paint to seep into the canvas' surface support as Rothko does (Figure 23). Making light out of paint is not an easy effect to achieve, one made harder by the use of black paint because of black's tendency to absorb light.

A brief comparison of Newman's paintings and Matisse's later paintings will elucidate this concept of "pigment" transforming into "true color." In this transformation, the pigment

transcends its materiality and begins to resemble colored light. It behaves almost as if stained glass, a transparent surface through which light is filtered and its color affected. In many of his paintings, Matisse, whom Newman admires,[†] uses black, the darkest hue and value, to create a sense of luminous interior spaces. This strategy is obvious in Matisse's *Interior with a Violin (Room at the Hôtel Beau-Rivage)*, which he completes in 1918 (Figure 42). The viewer senses the bright light of Nice because Matisse paints a brilliant pink layer underneath the black, and this pink shines through the black in certain parts of the painting. Matisse also places taupe window slats above the black interior, and the taupe's contrast in value and hue brightens the black pigment. Like Matisse's desire to transform black into light, Newman pushes paint, pushes color, beyond what it has traditionally done: to create a sense of light.

While Newman's black pigment is instrumental in setting the somber tone of the *Stations*, he most effectively transforms material into "true color" when using white pigment. The first of the *Stations* in which Newman uses white paint, the *Ninth Station* illustrates this transformation of pigment into light (Figure 9). The white of the *Ninth Station* differs from the acrylic and duco whites Newman uses in the *Tenth*, *Eleventh* and *Fourteenth Stations* (Figures 10, 11, 14). These non-oil whites appear duller than the white in the *Ninth*. Yet the sudden, startling brightness of the *Ninth Station* is reliant not only upon the rich, viscous oil paint, but also upon seeing the first eight *Stations*, all of which consist of black paint on raw canvas. The *Ninth's* composition returns to the composition of the first four *Stations*, though the color of the *Ninth* (white from black) is its opposite (Figure 2). A zip hugs the left edge, drawing the viewer into the painting. Separated by a wide swath of raw canvas, another zip sits roughly a foot from the right edge.

[†] See, for example, Newman's 1944 article "On Modern Art: Inquiry and Confirmation," published in *La Revista Belga* (November, 1944), reproduced in *SWI*, p. 69, in which Newman claims: "Matisse and the fauvists created a freedom of expression that emancipated the artist from the use of modeling, or the building-up of a third dimension."

Newman returns to this composition—left zip with a mid-right zip divided by raw canvas—when using new material: black paint on raw canvas in the first four *Stations* and white paint on raw canvas in the *Ninth* (Figures 1-4, 9). Like in the first four *Stations*, we can interpret this middle-right zip either as two or three distinct zips. In the *Ninth Station*, Newman exposes a narrow zip of raw canvas between two white zips, so that this right incident is made of pigment-canvas-pigment in equal widths (Figure 9). The white paint, brighter than the canvas support, changes our previous perception of the raw canvas: the raw canvas appears darker than it does in the preceding *Stations*. Furthermore, Newman uses only a small amount of paint on this canvas, and the relative difference between paint and canvas electrifies the pigment. The *Ninth Station's* white is luminous and bright. No longer does the white seem like paint on canvas. The introduction of white into the series cause a perceptive shift that makes both the raw canvas and the paint feel like “true color,” or “white” and “yellow light.” This transformation, evident in the *Ninth Station*, is made possible only by Newman’s use of specific materials and restricted colors.

Newman’s decision to use only black and white paint pertains to a long lineage of black and white paintings. Newman understands that the *Stations* exist within this art historical tradition, and he believes that the restriction of black and white is uniquely positioned to convey human suffering. Aware of Pablo Picasso’s monumental *Guernica* (1937) (Figure 43), Newman tells Hess in their public 1966 conversation:

It’s interesting to me that with a large, tragic theme of this kind—for example when Picasso did *Guernica*, he couldn’t do it in color he did it in black and white and gray. I couldn’t make a green Passion or a red one. You wouldn’t have me make a purple Jesus or something like that. It had to be black and white. The compulsion was absolute—I was compelled to work this way.⁷⁵

In this excerpt, Newman implicitly equates Picasso’s decision to use black, white, and gray in *Guernica* with his own decision to use black, white, and raw canvas in the *Stations*. He further

links *Guernica* to the *Stations* in their subject matter: “a large, tragic theme of this kind,” the tragedy of human suffering. Thus, for Newman, “a green Passion or a red one” strips the Passion of its essential quality—that human suffering is universal, eternal, and inevitable. Indeed, Picasso’s and Newman’s use of black, white, and a mid-tone (gray or raw-canvas) might reference chiaroscuro, a traditional method of using exaggerated and dramatic light to illuminate and picture forms. This reduced color palette might be a shorthand for, or simplification of, chiaroscuro. We see evidence of this in *Guernica*, in which an outstretched arm holds a candle, lighting the scene and showing the world the horrors of the Spanish Civil War.

Newman states that he is “compelled to work this way,” to limit himself to black and white. He recognizes the raw communicative power of Picasso’s black and white, and he senses a resonance between black and white and the fundamentality of human suffering, the subject matter of both *Guernica* and the *Stations*. Perhaps Newman senses this resonance because black and white reduces the color palette to its most fundamental values (dark and light). In simplifying their palettes, Picasso and Newman strive to convey strong emotion to the viewer clearly, without the distraction of color. Indeed, black and white corresponds to Newman’s (and Picasso’s) interest in human speech. Black and white—or black on white—is a typical format to convey written speech: text. While the canvas of Newman’s *Stations* might allude to the traditional parchment of the Hebrew Torah, Picasso’s gray tone recalls the newspaper’s black text on gray paper. In the *Stations*, the color of the raw canvas approximates the specific type of parchment upon which the scribe writes the black Hebrew letters, just as Picasso’s short, painted black lines imply text.

The “tragic theme” of *Guernica* or the *Stations* includes physical, bodily destruction. To convey the pain of his fellow Spaniards, Picasso paints many of his figures—humans and

animals—with mouths aghast and arms extended. They writhe in agony, their bodies destroyed. The central horse contorts its body, its mouth open as if letting loose a terrified and terrifying neigh (Figure 44). This never-ending neigh is a “demand for communication,” one that Newman interprets as political. In a letter to Alloway, Newman writes that Picasso “is making journalistic comments on the political issues of our time”: the Spanish Civil War.⁷⁶ As Newman understands it, Picasso’s *Guernica* is a commentary on the subject matter of his painting, for he paints in the guise of a journalist. *Guernica*, as journalistic commentary, lodges a “protest” against Franco’s oppressive regime. By exhibiting this painting at the 1937 World’s Fair, Picasso demands that the world respond to the Spanish Civil War. In contrast to Picasso and *Guernica*, neither Newman nor his paintings protest Jesus’ death, though the avowed subject matter of the *Stations* also involves physical suffering. Even in his final *lema*, Jesus does not object to God, his father. Along the Via Dolorosa, Jesus suffers repeated physical torture, culminating in his crucifixion. Newman’s *Stations* do not depict this repeated physical torture figuratively or overtly; rather, his paintings convey and declare the emotional content Jesus articulates with his *lema*.

The Story and the *Stations*

For Newman, the subject matter of the *Stations*—the *lema* that embodies and reflects Jesus’ physical pain—is inextricably connected to how he paints. Just as he restricts his color to black and white, he asserts that his application of paint corresponds to the story of the Passion: the subject matter determines the physical appearance of the paintings. In an interview with Frank O’Hara, Newman explains that just as the Impressionists “did the little strokes because

they had to deal with a specific subject matter,” Newman feels that he could not “do a big crucifixion with little strokes. You can’t do a heroic scene with little strokes.”⁷⁷ Newman claims that his “big crucifixion” paintings, the *Stations*, cannot have “little strokes,” thereby linking their content—the Passion—with his brushwork. The paintings themselves demonstrate the accuracy of Newman’s claim. As mentioned above, only after the *Fourth Station* does Newman recognize the subject latent in his paintings, and it is after this realization that he takes overt steps to minimize the finicky brushwork seen in the first *Four Stations*. The *Stations* with the least obvious brushwork—the *Eighth*, *Thirteenth*, and *Fourteenth*—confront the viewer most intensely, holding her physically in front of them (Figures 8, 13, 14). In these austere paintings, it seems as if Newman makes his zip with one wide stroke. Even if we accept that Newman’s brushwork is linked to his subject, we should ask ourselves again how the literary, figurative story of the Passion relates to Newman’s abstract, non-objective *Stations*: how does the Biblical story connect to the paintings?

Before focusing on the *Stations* specifically, we must first understand Newman’s basic conception of how abstraction functions. In 1947, Newman curates a show of contemporary art for Betty Parson’s Gallery, which includes works by Theodoros Stamos, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still.⁷⁸ For this show, Newman writes a short introductory piece that elucidates how he believes abstraction functions for these contemporary artists, comparing their work to that of the Northwest Coast Indian Kwakiutl artist “painting on hide.”⁷⁹ He claims that the Kwakiutl artist uses abstraction to communicate emotion both to himself and to his viewer. Newman terms this type of emotive abstraction the “abstract shape.” He continues, the Kwakiutl painter knows that that the abstract 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.”⁸⁰ The

abstract shape is the conduit that conveys the artist's own "awesome feelings." It manifests the artist's reaction to his "terror of the unknowable," and it *communicates* the artist's "abstract thought-complex" first to the artist and then to the viewer. Even in Newman's early interpretation of abstraction, the paint precedes the idea. For Newman, this act of painting—the process itself—both reveals and defines the meaning embodied in the work.

Interestingly, Newman differentiates among types of abstraction. The Kwakiutl artist's "abstract shape" is not "the pleasant play of nonobjective pattern," like that of the craftsmen, the basket-weavers.⁸¹ The "abstract shape" is neither pleasant nor playful, neither enjoyable nor lighthearted. Its purpose is serious, aimed at uncovering some deep, metaphysical truth by communicating and holding physically the artist's emotional response to the "terror of the unknowable." As Newman defines it, the artist is "directed by a ritualistic will toward metaphysical understanding."⁸² The Kwakiutl's painting records the occurrence of that "ritualistic will," and in giving that will a physical form, the product might reveal "metaphysical understanding." Indeed, Newman's early understanding of the Kwakiutl's process applies to his own creative process. We might understand each of the *Stations* to be a painting "directed by a ritualistic will"—Newman's own—because the actual making of the paintings occurs throughout eight years, interrupting his other studio work.

As Newman defines it, the emotive "abstract shape" is not present in all abstract paintings. Throughout his career, Newman tries to distinguish himself from the abstract paintings of Piet Mondrian, to whom he is often compared. As Bois notes, Mondrian's paintings possess a "pedagogical, demonstrative function,"⁸³ which cancels this "terror of the unknowable" (Figure 45). Without any "abstract shape," without intuitive painting, Mondrian's work is predictable and expected: it resembles the "pleasant play of non-objective pattern." Like the basket-weaver's

pattern, abstract formalism like Mondrian's provides a predictable structure, one in which one painting generates the next. In conversations with Bois, Annalee, Newman's wife, tells Bois that her husband avoids repeating himself because each painting has to be for him like a person, "a unicum."⁸⁴ What begins to become clear is that Newman confronts the canvas each time striving to begin anew,⁸⁵ to make a painting that might resemble but does not reiterate his past work. By his own account, Newman's avowed desire to begin each painting "as if [he] had never painted before,"⁸⁶ means that the terror of the unknown is present at each of the creative junctures Newman approaches in his studio.

For Newman, the Kwakiutl artist's "abstract shape" transmits his fear, his terror in some *genuine* way, and through its authenticity the viewer recognizes the work as powerful. The Kwakiutl's "awesome feelings he felt before the terror of the unknowable" are analogous to Newman's own experience during the creative process. As Newman's writings and statements reveal, his creative process too includes the "terror of the unknowable." Newman describes this creative terror in relation to his work on *Abraham*, a painting relevant to the *Stations* in its title and its reliance on black paint (Figure 46). Newman links Abraham to Jesus in the *Stations'* exhibition prologue. He 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.⁸⁷

In a certain sense, God abandons Abraham just as he does Jesus. After all, after the non-sacrifice of Isaac, God never speaks to Abraham again. (Likewise, God's expulsion of Adam from Eden might also be interpreted as God forsaking man.) Abraham's experience foreshadows Jesus' *lema* on the cross because the *lema* expresses the "original question" Abraham's experience poses. Intrigued by Abraham and Adam, Newman titles two paintings he makes prior to the

Stations Abraham and *Adam* (Figures 46, 35). Thus, through making and titling these paintings after Biblical male heroes, Newman explores the question their stories raise.

Newman's description of making *Abraham* also elucidates the creative process of the *Stations*. In an unpublished interview with K. Osis that Bois includes in his article "On Two Paintings by Barnett Newman," Newman describes the process of painting *Abraham*:

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. I could not do it. I could do it.⁸⁸

Like the *Stations*, *Abraham* is borne out of Newman's obsessive concern with the painting's material appearance, for he "tried to do everything else except the black." It is the application of the color—the black paint—that terrifies Newman. As a mode of expression unfamiliar to Newman, the newness of black on black manifests physically and creatively the "terror of the unknown." Interestingly, Newman reveals his process of making *Abraham* in describing the colors that lie underneath the central black zip: white and blue. These are the same colors that Newman covers with black paint in *Outcry*. Thus, in his progression to the all-black composition of *Abraham* and the black paint on raw canvas in the *Stations*, Newman relies on the application and subsequent abnegation of color, specifically white and blue.

As Newman's description of painting *Abraham* demonstrates, Newman seems to live out the experience of the person after whom he titles his work. His recollection of painting *Abraham*, for example, might approximate Abraham's ascent up Mount Moriah. It takes Abraham three

days to arrive at the peak where he readies the sacrifice of his son,[‡] just as it takes Newman “weeks to arrive at the point” where he finally paints the central zip black. The overlap of Newman’s creative process and this Biblical story might even be what Newman identifies as the “emotional complex” he is under when painting *Abraham*. In titling the *Stations*, then, Newman articulates a different, yet similar, “emotional complex”: Jesus’. Tellingly, in describing the process of making *Abraham*, Newman uses language similar to that of the *Stations*. With *Abraham*, Newman’s application of black paint occurs in the “moment of high feeling,” just as he paints the *Stations* only out of “high passion.” At some point in the painting process, *Abraham* and the *Stations* present material challenges. These challenges inaugurate the intense moment that motivates Newman to overcome the terror of the unknowable, the creative terror of the unexpected, of “what would happen.”

Newman’s creative “state of terror” corresponds to the same existential terror that Abraham, Jesus, Newman’s first man, and the Kwakiutl artist feel so acutely: all fear the “terror of the unknowable.” This correlation between creative and existential terror is corroborated by Newman’s description of working on the *Stations*. In a 1966 public conversation with Hess, Newman describes this terror in relation to his creative process:

...as you move into the blank area, and the terror of that blank area is the whole issue. What is the most difficult thing about painting? The most difficult thing is sitting in that room by yourself. You have to sit there by yourself; its not like sitting at a place with a desk, where other people are talking to you and the phones are ringing. You are there all alone with that empty space...⁸⁹

The “blank area” to which Newman refers is the unpainted painting, the raw canvas devoid of its zip(s). In the *Stations*, Newman preserves the blank canvas as raw canvas: he allows some of the

[‡] I am relying here on Soren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, which was an important book to many Abstract Expressionists. For more on Kierkegaard’s relationship to Newman, see Yve-Alain Bois, “On Two Paintings: *Abraham*,” *October*, vol. 108 (Spring 2004) pp. 12-16.

“blank area” to persist in his finished products. However, in most of his other paintings, Newman destroys the “blank area” by covering it with swaths of saturated color that fill the entire canvas. Interestingly, Newman seems to conflate the “empty space” of the studio with the “blank area” of the canvas. Forced to confront this void—the solitariness of the studio or the emptiness of the canvas—Newman is terrified. Indeed, we might understand the repeated act of making fourteen abstract *Stations* as Newman’s own “ritualistic will toward metaphysical understanding,” toward his own existential affirmation in the face of the emptiness of the studio and the blankness of the canvas.

Made obvious by the *Stations*’ non-imagistic compositions, Newman does not intend for the *Stations* to represent literally or illustrate obviously Jesus’ suffering. As his admiration for Grünewald suggests, Newman sees himself in a lineage of artists who reinterpret Jesus’ suffering to fit the exigencies of their present. Commissioned to paint the *Isenheim Altarpiece* for a hospital of syphilitics, Grünewald makes this fantastical work in the early 16th-century (Figure 32).⁹⁰ In his library, Newman has a copy of *Matthias Grünewald and Other Old Masters in Colmar*, a short book describing the history of the *Altarpiece* in addition to high quality reproductions.⁹¹ Newman also visits Colmar in 1964 to see the *Altarpiece*.[§] Like many other crucifixion paintings, Grünewald relies on the human figure to portray Jesus’ agony, his terror. The orange-red blood dripping from his mottled, green, lacerated, syphilitic feet communicates Jesus’ pain to the viewer (Figure 47). Grünewald’s Jesus reaches out with his hands, clenching them in pain, trying to grasp the air, the black background Grünewald places behind Jesus’

[§] Apparently, Newman enjoyed his visit to Colmar so much that he advised J. Leering of Holland’s Eindhoven Museum to visit it. Leering wrote a postcard to Newman, “Returning from Basel, I followed your suggestion and went to Colmar. It is really a life-time painting,” referring to the *Altarpiece*.

crucifixion (Figure 48). Jesus' gruesome feet and strained hands make his suffering eternally present for the viewer, for they portray his physical pain.

As Newman tells Alan Solomon soon after the Guggenheim show opens in 1966, he admires the *Altarpiece* in large part because he believes Grünewald is not:

...illustrating so much the Christ in terms of legend, but since he was doing it for a hospital of syphilitics, that he was able to identify himself with the human agony of those patients, that he was willing to turn the Christ figure into a syphilitic.⁹²

Grünewald changes Jesus' story: he adapts it to his audience. He uses the story as a way to structure the *Altarpiece*, but he does not rely solely on the literal story in his portrayal of human suffering. For Newman, this decision—Grünewald's re-interpretation that emphasizes Jesus' human suffering—"is one of the boldest things that anyone could have done. Yet I think this is part of his genius."⁹³ As Grünewald transforms the Christ figure into a syphilitic figure, he takes ownership of the Biblical story and links Jesus' suffering to the place (the hospital) in which it is originally displayed. He makes Jesus into a figurative mirror who reflects and suffers from the same, physical pain as the patients. Because of Grünewald's modification of the Biblical story, the syphilitic patient empathizes with Grünewald's Jesus precisely because he sees the same sores on his own body on Jesus'. The viewer's empathic reaction to the *Altarpiece* further reduces the "historical distance" between Jesus and his followers. While Grünewald modifies, perhaps even expands upon the crucifixion story, Newman does not change the content the Passion. Indeed, Newman's attention to Jesus' *lema* is his own individual interpretation—not a modification—of the Biblical story.

Furthermore, the abstract images Newman's *Stations* present correspond to a moment described in the Biblical story of Jesus' crucifixion: the renting of the temple veil. To close his lecture "Barnett Newman—the Ugly Duckling," David Sylvester mentions the veil's renting.⁹⁴

Mark and Matthew both read: the “veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom” after Jesus lets out his final cry (Mark 15:38, Matthew 27:51).⁹⁵ How is the renting of the veil related to Newman’s *Stations*? The physical ripping of the veil reflects the destruction of Jesus’ earthly, human body, just as the *Stations*’ paint on canvas disrupts the field of raw canvas. Indeed, there is an obvious material similarity between the veil and Newman’s raw canvas: both are a type of cloth more visible than what exists behind it (the temple mount hidden by the veil or the wall covered by the paintings). Additionally, how the veil rips relates to Newman’s compositional choices. Just as the veil “was rent in twain from the top to the bottom,” Newman’s zips of color extend the height of his canvases.

More than the visual and physical similarities, the renting of the veil and the *Stations* are linked in that the image they present has the same significance: both relate to the idea of beginning, of generation. The renting of the veil symbolizes the initiation of a new era of time inaugurated by Jesus’ crucifixion. It manifests physically the start of the Christian epoch, one that integrates Jesus’ physical suffering into its legend. Just as the renting of the veil announces a new religious era, Newman’s *Stations* register his new material concern: black paint on raw canvas. On the topic of beginnings—cosmic and creative—Lyotard again proves helpful. He argues that beginnings follow a pattern that division initiates:

Like a flash of lightning in the darkness or a line on an empty surface, the Word separates, divides, institutes a difference, makes tangible because of that difference, minimal though it may be, and therefore inaugurates a sensible world.⁹⁶

Interestingly, Lyotard seems to connect divine creation (“the Word”) with artistic creation (“a line on an empty surface”); he associates God’s Word with man’s image. Lyotard might easily have added the “renting of the temple veil” to the list that includes the “flash of lightning in the darkness” and the “line on an empty surface.” In Lyotard’s description, the lightning divides the

darkness into two sections and the line separates the empty surface into two parts. Likewise, the renting of the temple veil—an explicit act of destruction—transforms the veil into two pieces of cloth. In painting his zips, Newman divides the raw canvas. He transforms the canvas by applying a zip of color, and through the zip’s transformative division of the canvas, Newman “inaugurates a sensible world” in paint.

Conclusion

Since Newman’s *Stations* neither illustrate nor modify the Biblical account of the Passion, what is the relationship between the story and the *Stations*? Newman’s paintings make visual—and make physical—the emotion Jesus’ *lema* articulates. After creating the first four *Stations*, Newman recognizes a resonance between his own reaction to his paintings and Jesus’ response to the Passion: *why forsake me*? Newman’s realization of subject occurs within, and because of, the *Stations*’ serial structure. Indeed, the content dormant in the first four *Stations* is made evident to Newman only through his process of painting, after he encounters the self-imposed limitations of his materials. Unified by title, size, and color, the fourteen *Stations* present themselves to the viewer as a series of paintings; this seriality reflects Newman’s interpretation of the Passion as a group of events to be understood in totality rather than fourteen separate incidents of torture along the Via Dolorosa.

Conscious that his paintings involve the Passion, Newman focuses on Jesus’ final *lema* because it articulates the physical pain he endures at each of his Stations. For Newman, the subject matter of the *Stations* is inextricably connected to the appearance of the paintings. His

interpretation of the cry as “world without end” corresponds to his careful attention to edges—both the canvases’ tacking sides and the borders of his zips. Furthermore, the “intensity” and “starkness” he finds in the *lema* are analogous to the paintings’ physical presence and austere color palette. These formal elements—the compositional orchestration of his zips, the physical presence of the *Stations*, and the austere color—cohere to evoke an emotional response in Newman, the maker and first viewer of the *Stations*. Just as Jesus reflects on the Passion with his *lema*, Newman responds to his paintings with the full title *The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*. Newman’s insistence on the present-tense translation of the *lema* declares the timelessness of Jesus’ suffering, encouraging viewers to approach Jesus’ pain as if it were our own.

The word and image connect in what they seek to communicate: the paradox of simultaneous abandonment and presence. In witnessing the paintings, the viewer is struck immediately by their powerful physical presence. Yet the overwhelming presence of the paintings does not lead directly to clear “signification”; the paintings resist interpretation, and in doing so, seem to abandon the viewer. She approaches each *Station*, standing directly in front of Newman’s painted zips, held by the border between the zip and the raw canvas. She experiences physically and visually the painting as she traces the height of the zips, focusing on the border between raw canvas and applied paint. Newman’s abstract, non-objective paintings allow the viewer to have an experience of herself, one in which she becomes self-aware.

The viewer’s experience of the *Stations* maps on to Jesus’ experience on the cross and Newman’s process of painting. With his *lema*, Jesus declares his suffering, expressing his confusion and terror at the abandonment by God, his father. Through the *lema*, Jesus conveys terror, and in giving form to his fear, he affirms his existence. Just as Jesus’ *lema* responds to

God's abandonment, Newman's painted zips grow out of his hatred of the void. Newman fears the emptiness—the terror—present at each creative juncture. For Newman, the physical and repeated act of putting paint on raw canvas staves off the void. Exhibited together, the *Stations* are fourteen places in which Newman declares himself and his passion in paint.

Endnotes

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⁴ Harold Rosenberg, “Icon Maker: Barnett Newman,” in the *De-Definition of Art* (New York: Horizon Press, 1972), p. 96. Hereafter cited as *De-Definition of Art*.

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⁶ Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, “Barnett Newman’s Pilgrimage in Paint,” in *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*, p. 68.

⁷ Lawrence Alloway, “The Stations of the Cross and the Subjects of the Artist” (1966), in *Barnett Newman, Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation), p. 17. Hereafter cited as *Guggenheim Exhibition Catalogue*.

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¹⁸ Barnett Newman, "The Fourteen Stations of the Cross," reproduced in *SWI*, p. 191.

¹⁹ Barnett Newman, "Preface of 18 Cantos" (1964), reproduced in *Barnett Newman*, ed. Ann Temkin (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002), p. 255.

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²¹ Barnett Newman, "Alan Solomon's Interview Transcripts," *Archives of American Art Smithsonian Institution*, roll no. 3923. Transcript reproduced at *Barnett Newman Foundation*, Folder 15/98, "Alan Solomon—Interview(s) Transcripts, 3/20/66," p.2.

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