

male (investigative) and female (by vaginal analogy). Any of these accessible but amorphous meanings abound in Gottlieb's use of the eye image. If *Home of the Magician* rests, basically, on humor, *Equinoctial Rite* has no ironies about its mythic tone which is derived in part from primitive art, as in the columns of eyes and magic fish. Though his paint, in this case, is nuanced, the marks take on animal or vegetal life with the unquenchable vitality of graffiti. (Note the head with feet in the top row and the Modigliani mushrooms, second down on the right, as typical of Gottlieb's biomorphic cast.) The pictographs of 1949-51 tend to be either rich and textured as in *T*, or hard and bright. In the latter the human drama of the earlier pictographs relaxes, as in *Man Looking at Woman* or *Bent Arrow*, to become an unaffactive extension of the clean, hard Miró-esque references of the mid-40s. In retrospect it becomes clear that these years are the end of a period; otherwise extremes of ripeness and crispness could not alternate with such aplomb.

Gottlieb's development has three main phases: the Pictographs, 1941-51; what I propose to call, for the present, his middle period, 1951-57; and his later work, relatable to the Sublime, possibly, from 1957 to date. This rough scheme is not meant to wipe out earlier periods or ancillary groups of work (such as the interesting pastels of 1943, for example, which are omitted from the exhibition), but to indicate a main line. Gottlieb was quoted by Milton Esterow in the *New York Times* as denying that his exhibitions amounted to a retrospective; however, the Guggenheim is showing 1941-56 and the Whitney 1951-66. About forty Pictographs were shown (that is, four for each year he was working in the style), but they were not an adequate sample of the decade. It is a pity, given the scale of the enterprise, that the Gottlieb build-up should have fallen short at this critical point. On the other hand, the period that got doubled up at both museums (1951-56) is his weakest. This is the time when Gottlieb, legitimately bored with ten year's concentration and restraint, opened up flamboyantly into big scale and luxurious color, as in the *Unstill Lives* and *Imaginary Landscapes*. This period includes, too, the overlapping grids in which layered scaffolding rips up the surface and minces the space created, with excessive animation (as in *Labyrinth III*, *Trajectory*, and *Blue at Noon*).

For a work to be a Pictograph the imagery must be significant and the whole must be compartmented; from 1949 on these qualities become respectively lighter and looser, until in works like *Archer* and *Tournament* (both 1951) we are in the presence of pseudo-Pictographs. These are large works partaking of the textures and colors of the middle period, examples of a hedonistic texture and monumentality of form which pulverizes the small scale and momentous content of the main 1941-50 paintings.

THE AMERICAN SUBLIME

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In an exhibition catalogue of 1947 *The Ideographic Picture*¹ Barnett Newman declared that art must make "contact with mystery—of life, of men, of nature, of the hard, black chaos that is death, or the greyer, softer chaos that is tragedy." At the time he wrote, art in New York was bound up with myth and primitivism and undoubtedly these themes, manifesting themselves as an interest in archaic writing and primitive sign systems, can be connected with the exhibition. However, Newman stressed the ideological character of signs, rather than their spatial or linear properties. As he put it: "here is a group of artists who are not abstract painters, although working in what is known as the abstract style." This exhibition included work by Newman (*Gea*, *Euclidean Abyss*), Mark Rothko (*Tiresias*, *Versal Memory*), and Clyfford Still (*Quicksilver*, *Figure*). The use of signs in painting was a way of getting free of systems of representation that destroyed the picture plane, but without adopting non-figurative art. In 1947 Newman abandoned his discrete signs and developed a planar style which depended on the whole format of the picture equally. Still appears to have alternated between various possibilities, but one of these styles was certainly a non-linear, strongly planar image, which may be seen as early as 1944. It is stated decisively in, among other works, 1947-48 *W*, a large black painting which was loaned to Rothko soon after it was painted.² Rothko thinned his iconography, which in the '40s had moved from classical fragments to submarine biology, and made his first 'empty' pictures in 1949-50.³ The excess of subject matter which characterized the myth-rakers and ideographers (other paintings in the show were called, characteristically, *The Fury*, *Astral Figure*, *Dark Symbol*, *The Sacrifice*) subsided, leaving

SOURCE: From *Living Arts*, 2 (1963), 11-22.

1. *The Ideographic Picture*. Betty Parsons Gallery 1947.
2. Reproduced as no. 32 in *Paintings by Clyfford Still*. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, 1959.
3. Lawrence Alloway: "Notes on Rothko." *Art International* VI 5-6 1962.

only a deposit of myth on the simpler forms that emerged. A process of purification and magnification had begun.

The bare plane of the canvas was promoted, not to act as the carrier of solid or linear signs but to be a chief structural feature of the painting. Flatness, emptiness, magnitude followed the abandonment of sign-painting and painting-writing. What was retained, however, was a belief in art's power to connect with the human condition, even in the absence of signs to point to it. The artist's decisions, the picture's substantial presence, a format of primal character, a lack of formal variation, resulted in an art that was both pure and expressive. The myth-rakers' influence persisted, though in an underground mode: although the signs vanished the fund of common humanity they had revealed was not denied. The new phase, which transcended the study of signs, can be approached by a comparison with the aesthetics of the sublime.

In 1948 Newman wrote *The Sublime Is Now*,⁴ a text of central relevance to his own work and to that of artists with whom he was then connected, Still and Rothko. "The question that now arises is how, if we are living in a time without a legend or mythos that can be called sublime, if we refuse to admit any exaltation in pure relations, if we refuse to live in the abstract, how can we be creating a sublime art?" His answer is that "we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings." He defines the new sublime by a series of rejections. The Greek ideal of beauty has led to "a fetish of quality," instead of to a "relation to the Absolute." "A concern with 'beauty'" is identified by Newman with "a concern with what is 'known.'" The exaltation that he was after could not be found in Greek "perfect form," but was more like "Gothic or Baroque in which the Sublime consists of a desire to destroy form." He rejected the possibility of a sublime art remaining within "the reality of sensation (the objective world . . .)." Thus, the sublime was separated from dependence on the classical, the abstract, or the sensational. On the same occasion Robert Motherwell defined the sublime as something "silent and ordered," in which the artist "transcends his personal anguish." It is opposed to expressionism and to "the beauty and perfection of the School of Paris." The sublime was to be reached, to quote Newman again, by "freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth." Rothko rejected "memory, history, or geometry" and Still announced "no outworn myths or contemporary alibis."⁶ Though neither of the artists mentioned the sublime as a quality, what they wrote and painted at the time does not

4. "The Ides of Art: Six Opinions on *What Is Sublime in Art?*" Subsequent quotations from Newman are from this source, unless otherwise specified. Robert Motherwell was among the other contributors with "A Tour of the Sublime," which is quoted below. *The Tiger's Eye*, December 15, 1948.

5. *Modern Artists in America*, first series, eds. R. Motherwell, A. Reinhardt, 1951.

6. Mark Rothko: *The Tiger's Eye*, 9, 1949; Clyfford Still: *15 Americans*, Museum of Modern Art, 1952.

deny its relevance. Still's demand that the measure of an artist's greatness is "the depth of his insight and his courage in realising his own vision" is close to what Newman means by the sublime. It is also close to Longinus' statement that "sublimity is the echo of a noble mind." J. Benjamin Townsend, in the most informative article on Still, quotes the artist as saying: "I fight in myself any tendency to accept a fixed, sensuously appealing, recognizable style"; "I am always trying to paint my way out of and beyond a facile, doctrinaire idiom."

Newman expressly states that the sublime he is talking about is opposed to traditional art. "I believe that here in America, some of us, free from the weight of European culture, are finding the answer by completely denying that art has any concern with the problem of beauty and where to find it." Nevertheless, his version of the sublime can be connected with the 18th-century definition of it, which was also originally conceived as antithetical to the problem of beauty. (It is not my intention to make a section of American painting dependent on a phase of European aesthetics, but to point to an analogy which is useful in characterizing aspects of the work of Newman, Still, and Rothko.) Edmund Burke⁷ separated the sublime both from the pleasures of "the most learned voluptuary" and from the well-being of the healthy body. Instead he linked the sublime to "the passions which belong to self-preservation," evoking "an idea of pain and danger" reminiscent of the old problem of taking pleasure in tragedy. (The pairing of art and danger reappears in statements of Still's, such as "These pictures could be swords slipped through the belly" or "let no man under-value the implication of this work or its power for life; or for death, if it is misused."¹¹) Burke's intention of taking art away from trivial and sensual causes and basing it instead on momentous and powerful ones is analogous to Newman's. Qualities which Burke considered as arousing the sense of the sublime include "greatness of dimensions," "Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude, and Silence," and "Infinity." Here is a precedent, not only for the American distrust of Greek form, but also for liking "a rudeness of the work" (represented by Burke as preferable to "dexterity") which is opposed to the idea of art as contrivance. This is comparable to Newman's and Motherwell's rejection of the School of Paris. The links between Burke's and Newman's sublime are not stylistic. They result from the desire to put art into relation with "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling," to quote Burke. In Newman this appears as the statement: "we are reasserting man's natural de-

7. Clyfford Still: *15 Americans*, op. cit.

8. Longinus: *On the Sublime* IX 2.

9. J. Benjamin Townsend: "An Interview with Clyfford Still." *Gallery Notes* XXIV 2. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, 1961.

10. Edmund Burke: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. 1757. I viii, I xviii, I xi, II ii, II vi, II viii, II xii.

11. Clyfford Still: Statement (typescript). Betty Parsons Gallery 1950; "Paintings by Clyfford Still." Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, 1959.

sire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions." Although Newman does not think particularly highly of Burke, he does allow that at least Burke "insisted on a separation of beauty and sublimity," thus clearing the way for the sublime as a transcendence of notions of beauty.

Still, Newman, and Rothko all paint big pictures. According to Burke the sublime is caused by an astonishment in which "the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it." This idea of an art of powerful domination of the spectator indicates something of the effect of the big picture in American art. Burke's description of the effect of reading sublime passages in poets and orators, "that glorifying and sense of inward greatness," is relevant here. The importance of the link between 18th- and 20th-century ideas of sublimity lies in this (sublime as powerful domination, sublime as absolute emotion, sublime as exaltation) rather than in particular correspondences, though these also exist. Burke, for example, refers to the sublime as being produced by "sad and fuscous colors, as black, or brown, or deep purple,"¹² and Newman, in 1945, wrote of "the revived use of the color brown . . . from the rich tones of orange to the lowest octave of dark browns."¹³

There is another level at which the sublime connects with American art, but this is of reduced seriousness. This involves us with what Benjamin T. Spencer has called the Topographical Fallacy, which assumes that the New World's grandeur in scenery would issue in sublimity of poetic vision and loftiness of style.¹⁴ Connections between an experience of place and pictorial space have a long history in American aesthetics. Based on Romantic ideas about organic national qualities in art, it was believed by promoters of a native style in America in the 19th century, that "the sweep of the prairies, the majesty of the Rockies," and the "thunder of Niagara" could not but "issue in sublimity of poetic vision and loftiness of style."¹⁵ The Continental landscape as the sublime, though embedded in 19th-century thought, persists covertly in 20th-century art criticism. For example, Still has been reported to feel "that his fluid, often flame-like vertical shapes have been influenced by the flatness of the Dakota plains";¹⁶ or "the only possible tie between his image and the spectator's visual associations is the long, horizonless, 'egocentric' (*sic*) plains of the Midwest and West where Still grew up."¹⁷ Dore Ashton quoted Baudelaire on George Catlin's "vast savan-

12. Burke, *op. cit.* 11 xiv.

13. Barnett S. Newman: "La Pintura de Tamayo y Gottlieb." *La Revista Belga* 4, 1945.

14. Benjamin T. Spencer: *The Quest for National Identity*, 1957.

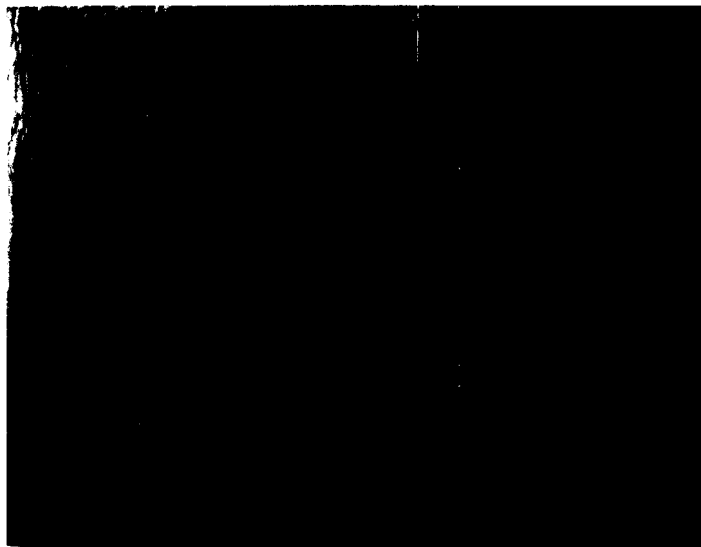
15. *Ibid.*

16. *Magazine of Art*, March 1948.

17. *Art News Annual*, 1960.



9. Clyfford Still: *Untitled* (1946). Oil on canvas, 57"×33". Betty Parsons Gallery, New York.



10. Clyfford Still: *Painting* (1951-52). Oil on canvas, 94"×82". Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Blanchette Rockefeller Fund.

nahs, deserted rivers," and applied it to Still.¹⁸ That the landscape meanings projected onto these big pictures should so consistently use images of the Continental sublime is significant. It does not imply a real link between the land and the art, but, rather, indicates the aesthetic of sublimity being described and half-recognized by its conventional landscape forms.¹⁹ The frequent connection of Rothko's paintings with sunsets of terrific grandeur also records cultural reflexes which continue to identify the sublime with the big country.

Statements made by Rothko in the '40s, though he later regretted them as reductions of silence and freedom, provide background information relevant to his later work. In 1943, for example, he wrote: "only that subject matter is crucial which is tragic and timeless."²⁰ Two years later he referred to "tragic experience" as "the only source book of art."²¹ In 1947 he declared: "both the sense of community and of security depend on the familiar. Free of them, transcendental experience becomes possible."²² In his early work Rothko referred directly to classical tragedy: for example, the Oresteia trilogy of Aeschylus provided the theme for *The Omen of the Eagle*.²³ Obviously, specific references are neither possible nor wanted in his later work, but the momentous sense of a transcendent experience persists, in a purified way. The pictures of Rothko often have an atmosphere fully in accord with his early declarations about the tragic basis of art. He has spoken of himself as the most violent of all American painters.²⁴ His "tragedy" is the analogue of Newman's "absolute emotion" and of Still's "total responsibility" for "an unqualified act."²⁵ The radical simplicity of the art of these three artists is geared to a rigour and autonomy which aim at an imagery of psychic greatness. It is felt, by those who can feel it, through a series of repudiations which makes possible an art of density and silence. This silence is not the cessation of activity, but a

18. *New York Times*, November 15, 1959.

19. Robert Rosenblum was the first writer (after Newman) to revive the term sublime and apply it to American art. He made no use of Newman's article, however, and vitiated his argument, by restricting himself to landscape parallels ("The Abstract Sublime," *Art News* 59 10, 1961). He compared Ward and Still, Turner and Rothko, Turner and Pollock. Earlier ("British Painting vs. Paris," *Partisan Review*, XXIV 1 1957) Rosenblum had more convincingly compared Turner's *Evening Star* with Rothko, and concluded that the star contributed "to nature's infinity" as expressed in the painting, and was therefore crucial to the Romantic spirit of the work. In this way it was unlike Rothko, he pointed out.

20. In a letter to the *New York Times*, June 13, 1943. The letter was signed by Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb. Barnett Newman (who did not sign) and Gottlieb wrote most of the letter, but Gottlieb remembers the "tragic and timeless" bit as Rothko's.

21. Mark Rothko: Personal Statement. Ed. David Porter, 1945.

22. Mark Rothko: "The Romantics Were Prompted": *Possibilities*, 1, 1947-48.

23. Sidney Janis: *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, 1944.

24. In conversation, 1958.

25. Clyfford Still: *15 Americans*, op. cit.

web of mysteriously felt potential acts. The artists' negations issue in a declaration of commanding power.

The American sublime, in the form suggested here, involves certain ideas which can be summarized under the headings of artist, physiognomy, and content. First, the artist is defined in idealistic terms, regarded as a hero, with connections to the prophet, the sage and the seer. He is the antithesis of Picasso, whose art is fundamentally diaristic. There is no sense of occasion in the sublime artist, but neither is there a sense of impersonality. To return art to a central role in society is a purpose of these artists. Their work, the succession of their works, the undeviating spirit in which they are created, become a moral model for human action. The work of art does not depict a moral episode, but is itself the product of an intense moral act. Morality, in such a context, means the seriousness and continuity of the creative act. Secondly, the physiognomy of the picture is, typically, a compound of maximum area with minimum diversity. Still, Newman and Rothko painted enormous canvases which were not divisible into smaller areas, but in which the whole work was a single unit. Rothko's frayed rectangles, Still's tattered planes, Newman's wall-like masses combine the huge and the simple. Thirdly, the content of the painting is partly the result of the artist's morality and partly the result of the work's appearance to the spectator as an imperious but mysterious artifact. The subject is non-verbal but deeply human. The artist is not concerned with diversification or elaboration; his concern is the monumentalizing of his own emotion, creating canvases whose vastness, simplicity and clarity are the statement of a personal subject. Uniqueness is born from monotony, drama from privacy. Nothing is more different than two black Stills, two Indian-red Newmans, or two mulberry Rothkos. These works have a minimum of formal characterization, such as oppositions of line against colour, or large and small forms contrasted, and so on. The picture is not a sum of controlled parts, but a single unit which swallows formal differentiations in its creation of a primary statement.

It is through the artist that the sublime is reached. That is to say, the sublime is not an existing category or state which bestows on the artist, if he wins access to it, ready-made aesthetic rewards. The sublime is not the known, but the unknown. On the other hand, it is clear what is not sublime: beauty, mass taste, habit are not. The artist's capacity is the measure of sublimity. It is not the artist's job, however, to decipher celestial riddles. Mystery is shifted from the unseen to the world of work, to the reality of the artist's achievement. A sublime painting is mysterious, but not because it is the image of a higher, hidden reality. It is mysterious because it is a non-utilitarian object, the product of a creative will, and so shaped that it resists the usual terms in which we analyse and discuss works of art. It is absolute, because it is the evidence

of decision and performance; revelation is the property of the original work of art, because we have not seen it before.

Burke suggested²⁶ that "uniformity" is a cause of the sublime. "If the figures of the parts should be changed, the imagination at every change finds a check; you are presented at every alteration with the termination of one idea, and the beginning of another; by which means it becomes impossible to continue that uninterrupted progression which alone can stamp on bounded objects the character of infinity." Burke's "artificial infinity" is a possible description of the effect of Newman's huge expanses of colour, taller or longer than a man's reach. The big picture that is unified in colour, in which drawing is reduced to modifications rather than interruptions of a single field of colour, gives a sense of grandeur. The spectator's proximity to such a work calls forth the feeling of awe. On another level Newman's titles are clearly clues to the sublime. He has said that "I think it would be very well if we could title pictures by identifying the subject matter so that the audience could be helped."²⁷ Some of his titles are: *Covenant, Tundra, Dionysus, Prometheus Bound, Eve*.

Elaine de Kooning²⁸ listed some of the imagery that has been used to describe Rothko's painting: "doorways to hell," "walls of light," "light falling through a fish pond," "lagoons inhabited by vanishing palaces." All these fancy quotations are responses to the spectrum from glow to refulgence which Rothko's colour-washes create. At the same time, they imply by their figurativeness, the subjects which haunt even empty canvases. Light does not fall on objects or areas but is generated by the entire picture. The light source is within the picture, not visibly located, but diffused throughout the whole area. An influence on Rothko is late Bonnard, but there is a fundamental difference between Bonnard's handling of light (which derives from Impressionism) and Rothko's exalted light. The light of Impressionism and its derivatives (except for Monet's late work) was associated with sensations of the terrestrial good life, whereas Rothko's light dismisses the colourful world. In sublime aesthetics, incidentally, colour was associated with beauty, light with sublimity.²⁹

Light as a metaphor for illumination (in the sense of revelation) has a different character, and one that is more relevant to Rothko. Neo-Platonic and mediaeval mystics regarded light as the radiant energy of the Creator, and this is closer to Rothko's subject than Impressionism is. Rothko's characteristic effect of light combined with obscurity is an-

26. Burke, *op. cit.* II ix.

27. *Modern Artists in America, op. cit.*

28. Elaine de Kooning: "Two Americans in Action: Kline and Rothko." *Art News Annual*, 1958.

29. Burke, *op. cit.* II vii-viii.

anticipated by Burke when he observes that "extreme light . . . obliterates all objects, so as in its effects exactly to resemble darkness."³⁰ Rothko's paintings, though filmy and soft-edged, are dense, united by tonal or colour continuities. The avoidance of complementary colours and of black and white contrasts gives his paintings their other-worldly look. The paintings combine the fugitiveness of an after-image with an architectural stability, based on North-South, East-West axes.

Light, as the medium in which we perceive objects, is often regarded atmospherically as a veil. The continual overlays of thin washes in Rothko, which produce his glimmering and flaring lights, are like veils. Veil imagery is traditional in revelatory art. The only way that mysteries can be presented in art, as Pico della Mirandola, for one, argued, is by veils or symbols. The rhetoric of veils and secreted mystery is implicit in Rothko, and is one source of that feeling which his work has of carrying a momentous but illusive subject. It is the peril of veil- and symbol-users that the veil or symbol becomes substantial and beautiful in its own right, thus interposing its form before that of the mystery it is supposed to serve. In Rothko the veils have solidified and become the substance of the mystery. His is an art in which traditional forms of mystery and sublimity have been retained (obliquely, and even subliminally). Radiance and solemnity have an iconography, and Rothko, as a result of his desire for an art of calm and violence ("tranquillity tinged with Terror," to quote Burke) has repossessed certain past themes of art on his own terms.

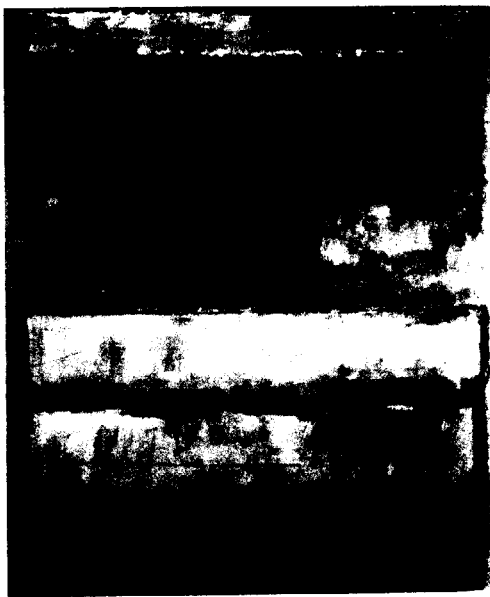
Modern art has been treated by several generations as a breathless succession of "new" movements, each one hedonistically freed from the past. The past has been primitively identified as merely the goal of appeals to authority, both by "modern" and anti-modern artists and critics. An anthology of such statements would reveal extraordinary monotony. However, history is not simply the authority of a gallery of father-symbols. The past is not a static source of unchanging law, but one half of a dialogue with the present. History is the record of human acts and ideas, displayed in more diverse and complex forms than in any other branch of knowledge. The past is always interpreted according to present knowledge and topical interests; it changes as quickly as our apprehension of the present changes. The records of history are highly responsive to new experience.

By comparing a concept of the sublime formulated in the 20th century with its 18th-century form, therefore, I am not necessarily accommodating the art of the present (in what I take to be its greatest manifestation) with the past. Nor am I enlivening the 18th century by attempting to make it appear topical. Common to both usages is the concept of the

30. Burke, *op. cit.* II xiv.

11. Barnett Newman: *Day Before One* (1951). Oil on canvas, 132" x 50". Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel.

sublime as part of an expansive, or transcendent, move, with the intention of showing that art could not be contained by an existing, objective canon. The existence of numerous verbal parallels suggests, also, the persistence of the 18th-century form of idea, even as it is being transformed by Newman for use in, and as a response to, a different situation. It is as part of the endless feedback between history and the present that I see the comparison of the 18th century's and our ideas of the sublime.



12. Mark Rothko: *No. 9* (1958). Oil on canvas, 99" x 82". Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Blinken, New York.

TOPICS IN
AMERICAN ART
SINCE 1945

Lawrence Alloway

To *Sylvia*

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