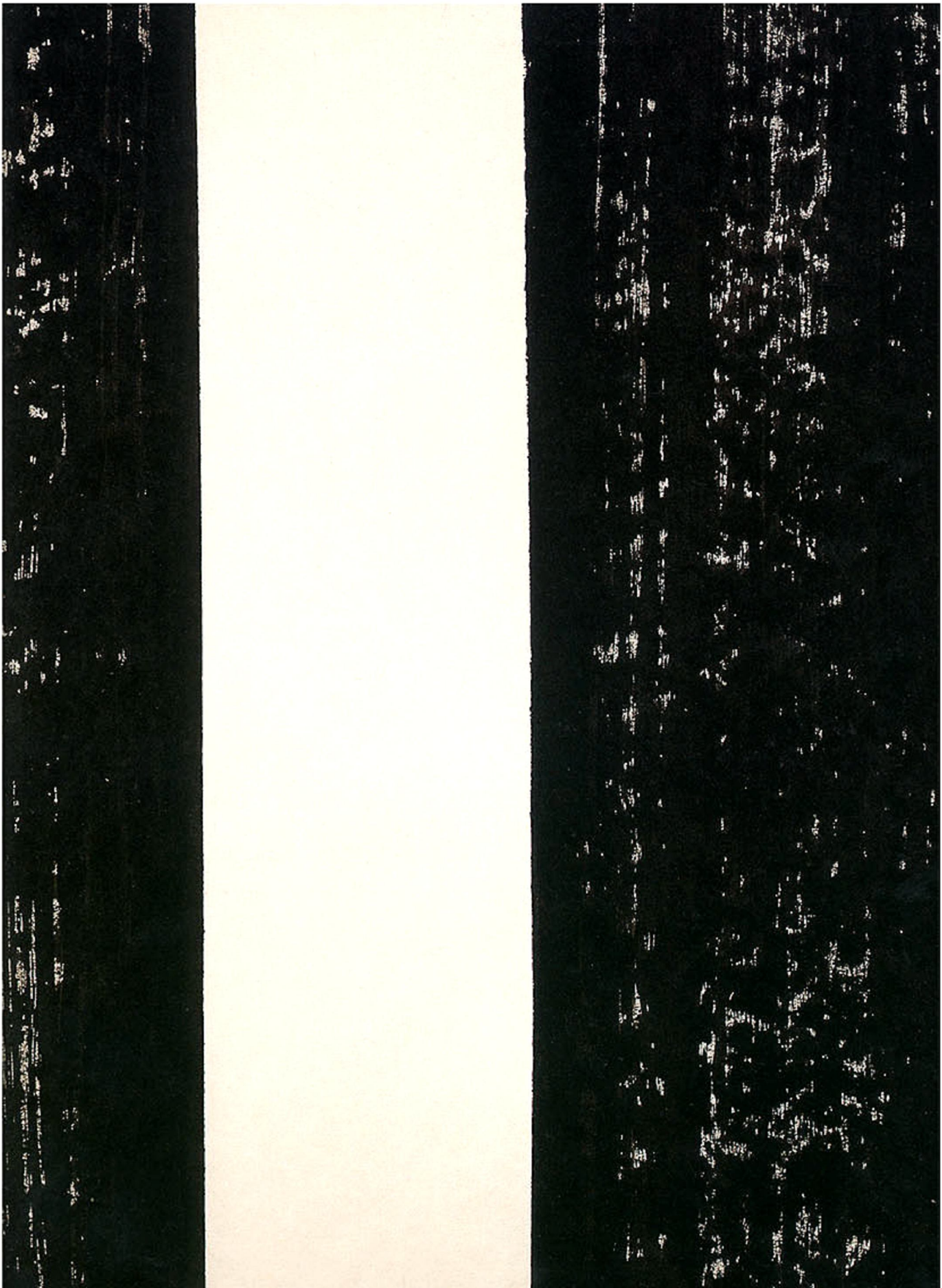

*How some of the most heretical concepts of modern
American abstract painting relate to the visionary nature-painting
of a century ago.*

THE ABSTRACT SUBLIME

ROBERT ROSENBLUM



“It’s like a religious experience!” With such words, a pilgrim I met in Buffalo last winter attempted to describe his unfamiliar sensations before the awesome phenomenon created by seventy-two Clyfford Stills at the Albright Art Gallery. A century and a half ago, the Irish Romantic poet, Thomas Moore, also made a pilgrimage to the Buffalo area, except that his goal was Niagra Falls. His experience, as recorded in a letter to his mother, July 24, 1804, similarly beggared prosaic response:

I felt as if approaching the very residence of the Deity; the tears started into my eyes; and I remained, for moments after we had lost sight of the scene, in that delicious absorption which pious enthusiasm alone can produce. We arrived at the New Ladder and descended to the bottom. Here all its awful sublimities rushed full upon me.... My whole heart and soul ascended towards the Divinity in a swell of devout admiration, which I never before experienced. Oh! Bring the atheist here, and he cannot return as an atheist! I pity the man who can coldly sit down to write a description of these ineffable wonders: much more do I pity him who can submit them to the admeasurement of gallons and yards.... We must have new combinations of language to describe the Fall of Niagra.

Moore’s bafflement before a unique spectacle, his need to abandon measurable reason for mystical empathy, are the very ingredients of the mid-twentieth-century spectator’s “religious experience” before the work of Still. During the Romantic Movement, Moore’s response to Niagra would have been called an experience of the “Sublime,” an esthetic category that suddenly acquires fresh relevance in the face of the most astonishing summits of pictorial heresy attained in America in the last fifteen years.

Originating with Longinus, the Sublime was fervently explored in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and recurs constantly in the esthetics of such writers as Burke, Reynolds, Kant, Diderot and Delacroix. For them and for their contemporaries, the Sublime provided a flexible semantic container for the murky new Romantic experiences of awe, terror, boundlessness and divinity that began to rupture the decorous confines of earlier esthetic systems. As imprecise and irrational as the feelings it tried to name, the Sublime could be extended to art as well as to nature. One of its major expressions, in fact, was the painting of sublime landscapes.

A case in point is the dwarfing immensity of Gordale Scar, a natural wonder of Yorkshire and a goal of many Romantic tourists. Re-created on canvas between 1811 and 1815 by the British painter James Ward (1769-1855), *Gordale Scar* (fig. 1) is meant to stun the spectator into an experience of the Sublime that may well be unparalleled in painting until a work like Clyfford Still’s *1956-D* (fig. 2). In the words of Edmund Burke, whose *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) was the most influential analysis of such feelings, “Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime.” Indeed, in both the Ward and the Still, the spectator is first awed by the sheer magnitude of the sight before him. (Ward’s canvas is 131 by 166 inches; Still’s, 114-1/2 by 160 inches.) At the same time, his breath is held by the dizzy drop to the pit of an abyss; and then, shuddering like Moore at the bottom of Niagra, he can only look up with what senses are left him and gasp before something akin to divinity.



Lest the dumbfounding size of these paintings prove insufficient to paralyze the spectator's traditional habits of seeing and thinking, both Ward and Still insist on a comparably bewildering structure. In the Ward, the chasm and cascades, whose vertiginous heights transform the ox, deer and cattle into Lilliputian toys, are spread out into unpredictable patterns of jagged silhouettes. No laws of man or man-made beauty can account for these God-made shapes; their mysterious, dark formations (echoing Burke's belief that obscurity is another cause of the Sublime) lie outside the intelligible boundaries of esthetic law. In the Still, Ward's limestone cliffs have been translated into an abstract geology, but the effects are substantially the same. We move physically across such a picture like a visitor touring the Grand Canyon or journeying to the center of the earth. Suddenly, a wall of black rock is split by a searing crevice of light, or a stalactite threatens the approach to a

precipice. No less than caverns and waterfalls, Still's paintings seem the product of eons of change; and their flaking surfaces, parched like bark or slate, almost promise that this



Fig. 1: James Ward. Gordale Scar (A View of Gordale, in the Manor of East Malham in Craven, Yorkshire, the Property of Lord Ribblesdale), 1812-14, exhibited 1815. Oil on canvas, 131 x 166 in. (332.7 x 421.6 cm). Tate Britain, London, Purchased 1878 (N01043)
 Fig. 2: Clyfford Still. 1957-D, No. 1, 1957. Oil on canvas, 113 x 159 in. (287 x 403.9 cm) Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1959



natural process will continue, as unsusceptible to human order as the immeasurable patterns of ocean, sky, earth or water. And not the least awesome thing about Still's work is the paradox that the more elemental and monolithic its vocabulary becomes, the more complex and mysterious are its effects. As the Romantics discovered, all the sublimity of God can be found in the simplest natural phenomena, whether a blade of grass or an expanse of sky.

In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant tells us that whereas "the Beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having boundaries, the Sublime is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it, or by occasion of it, boundlessness is represented (1, Book 2, §23). Indeed, such a breathtaking confrontation with a boundlessness in which we also experience an equally powerful totality is a motif that continually links the painters of the Romantic Sublime with a group of recent American painters who seek out what might be called the "Abstract Sublime." In the context of two sea meditations by two great Romantic painters, Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* of about 1809 (fig. 3) and Joseph Mallord William Turner's *Evening Star* (fig. 4), Mark Rothko's



Light Earth over Blue of 1954 (fig. 5) reveals affinities of vision and feeling. Replacing the abrasive, ragged fissures of Ward's and Still's real and abstract gorges with a no less numbing phenomenon of light and void, Rothko, like Friedrich and Turner, places us on the threshold of those shapeless infinities discussed by the estheticians of the Sublime. The tiny monk in the Friedrich and the fisher

Fig. 3: Caspar David Friedrich. Der Mönch am Meer (*Monk by the Sea*), ca. 1809-10
 Oil on canvas, 43-1/3 x 67-1/2 in. (110 x 171.5 cm)
 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie
 Fig. 4: J. M. W. Turner. The Evening Star, ca. 1830. Oil on canvas
 35-7/8 x 48-1/4 inches high (91.1 x 122.6 cm)
 The National Gallery, London, Turner Bequest 1856 (NG 1991)

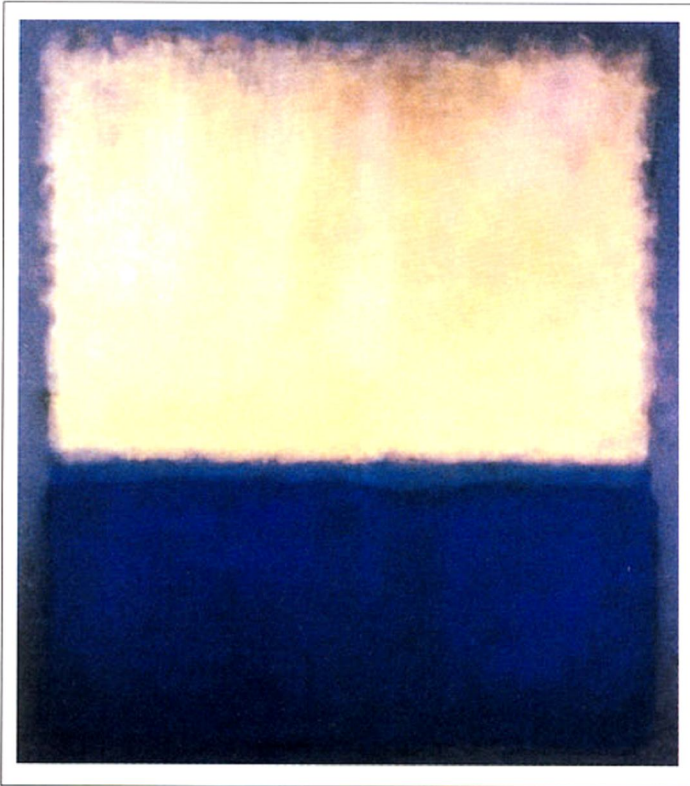


Fig. 5: Mark Rothko. Light Earth over Blue, 1954

Oil on canvas, 76 x 67 in. (193 x 170.2 cm). Private collection

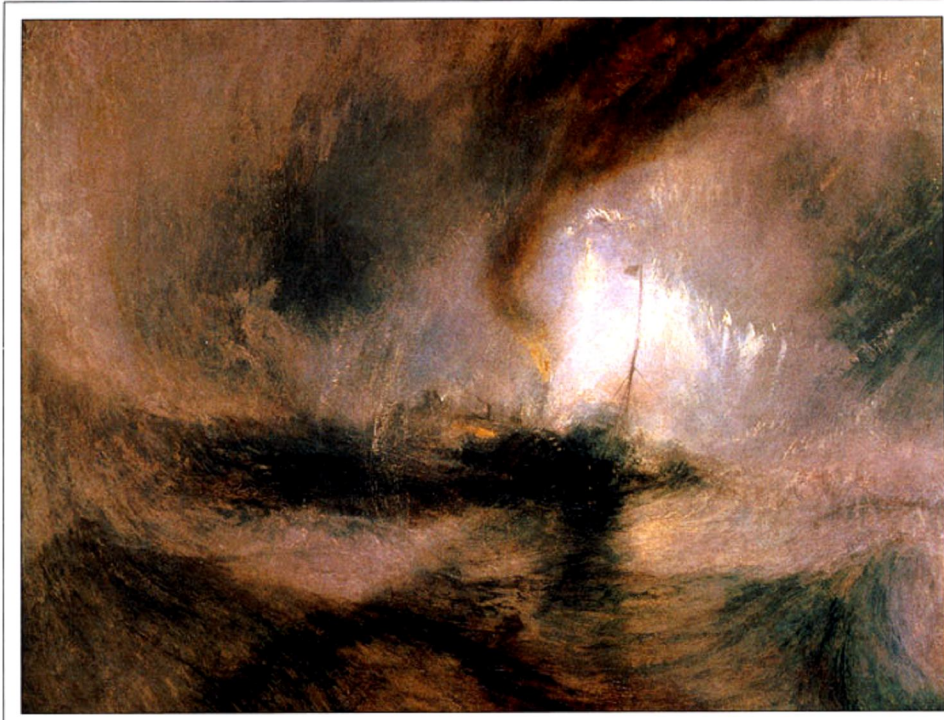
Fig. 6: Barnett Newman. Vir Heroicus Sublimis, 1950-51. Oil on canvas

95-¹/₈ in. x 263-¹/₄ in. (242.2 x 541.7 cm)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ben Heller, 1958

essary; we ourselves are the monk before the sea, standing silently and contemplatively before these huge and soundless pictures as if we were looking at a sunset or a moonlit night. Like the mystic trinity of sky, water and earth that, in the Friedrich and Turner, appears to emanate from one unseen source, the floating, horizontal tiers of veiled light in the Rothko seem to conceal a total, remote presence that we can only intuit and never fully grasp. These infinite, glowing voids carry us beyond reason to the Sublime; we can only submit to them in an act of faith and let ourselves be absorbed into their radiant depths.

If the Sublime can be attained by saturating such limitless expanses with a luminous, hushed stillness, it can also be reached inversely by filling this void with a teeming, unleashed power. Turner's art, for one, presents both of these sublime extremes. In his *Snowstorm* of 1842 (fig. 7), the infinities are dynamic rather than static, and the most extravagant of nature's phenomena are sought out as metaphors for this experience of cosmic energy. Steam, wind, water, snow and fire spin wildly around the pitiful work of man – the ghost of a boat – in vortical rhythms that suck one into a sublime whirlpool before reason can intervene. And if the immeasurable spaces and incalculable energies of such a Turner evoke the elemental power of creation, other work of the period grapples even more literally with these primordial forces. Turner's contemporary, John Martin (1779-1854), dedicated his erratic life to the pursuit of an art which, in the words of the *Edinburgh Review* (1829), "awakes a sense of awe and sublim-



ity, beneath which the mind seems overpowered." Of the cataclysmic themes that alone satisfied him, *The Creation*, an engraving of 1831 (fig. 8), is characteristically sublime. With Turner, it aims at nothing short of God's full power, upheaving rock, sky, cloud, sun, moon, stars and sea in the primal act. With its torrential description of molten paths of energy, it locates us once more on a near-hysterical brink of sublime chaos.

That brink is again reached when we stand before a *perpetuum mobile* of Jackson Pollock, whose gyrating labyrinths recreate in the metaphorical language of abstraction the superhuman turbulence depicted more literally in Turner and Martin. In *Number 1, 1948* (fig. 9), we are as immediately plunged into divine fury as we are drenched in Turner's sea; in neither case can our minds provide systems of navigation. Again, sheer magnitude can help produce the Sublime. Here, the very size of the Pollock – 68 by 104 inches – permits no pause before the engulfing; we are almost physically lost in this boundless web of inexhaustible energy. To be sure, Pollock's generally abstract vocabulary allows multiple readings of its mood and imagery; although occasional titles (*Full Fathom Five, Ocean Greyness, The Deep, Greyed Rainbow*) may indicate a more explicit region of nature. But whether achieved by the most blinding of blizzards or the most gentle of winds and rains, Pollock invariably evokes the sublime mysteries of nature's untamable forces. Like

Fig. 7: J. M. W. Turner. Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off

a Harbour's Mouth, exhibited 1842. Oil on canvas

35-¹/₂ x 47 in. (91.4 x 121.9 cm)

Tate Britain, London, Bequeathed by the artist 1856 (N00530)

Fig. 8: John Martin, *The Creation*, 1831. Engraving

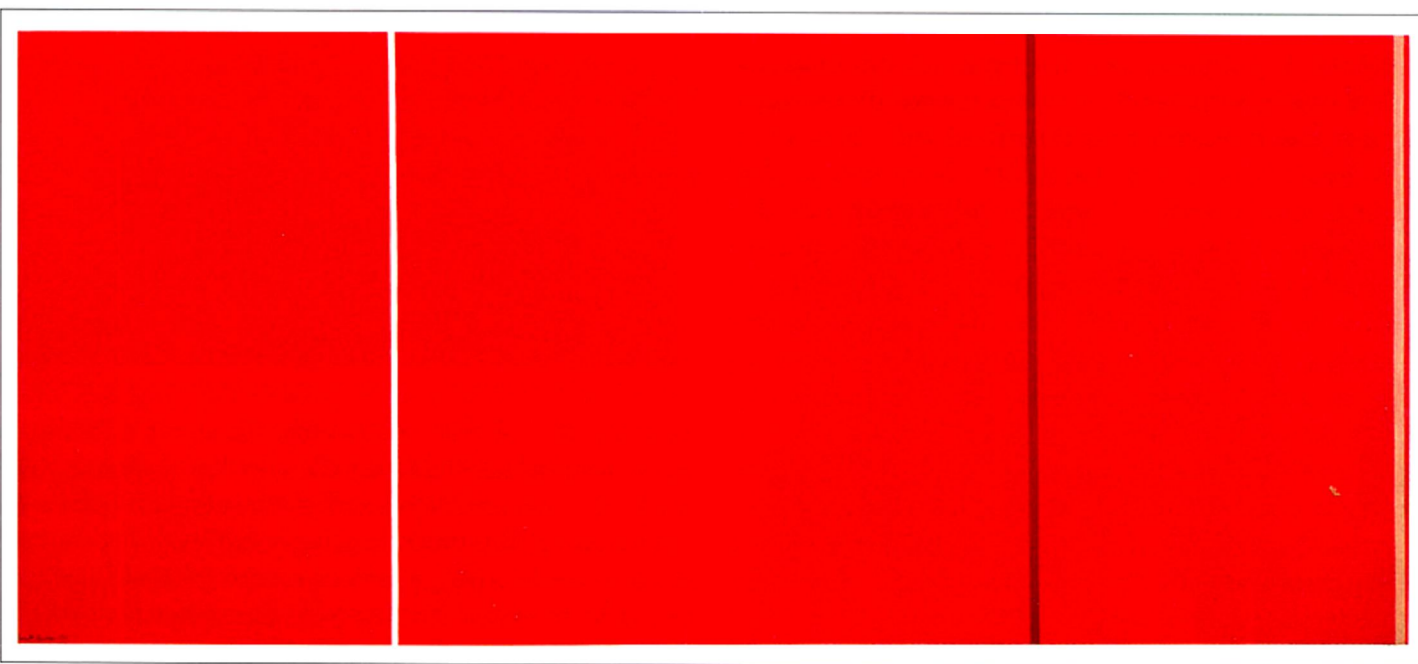
the awesome vistas of telescope and microscope, his pictures leaves us dazzled before the imponderables of galaxy and atom.

The fourth master of the Abstract Sublime, Barnett Newman, explores a realm of sublimity so perilous that it defies comparison with even the most adventurous Romantic explorations into sublime nature. Yet it is worth noting that in the 1940s, Newman, like Still, Rothko and Pollock, painted pictures with more literal references to an elemental nature; and that more recently, he has spoken of a strong desire to visit the tundra, so that he might have the sensation of being surrounded by four horizons in a total surrender to spatial infinity. In abstract terms, at least, some of his paintings of the

1950s already approach this sublime goal. In its all-embracing width (114 ¹/₂ inches), Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (fig. 6) puts us before a void as terrifying, if exhilarating, as the arctic emptiness of the tundra; and in its passionate reduction of pictorial means to a single hue (warm red) and a single kind of structural division (vertical) for some one hundred and forty-four square feet, it likewise achieves a simplicity as heroic and sublime as the protagonist of its title. Yet again, as with Still, Rothko and Pollock, such a rudimentary vocabulary creates bafflingly comp largest canvases by Newman, Still, Rothko and Pollock might well be interpreted as a post-World-



in the Turner establish, like the cattle in *Gordale Scar*, a poignant contrast between the infinite vastness of a pantheistic God and the infinite smallness of His creatures. In the abstract language of Rothko, such literal detail – a bridge of empathy between the real spectator and the presentation of a transcendental landscape – is no longer nec-





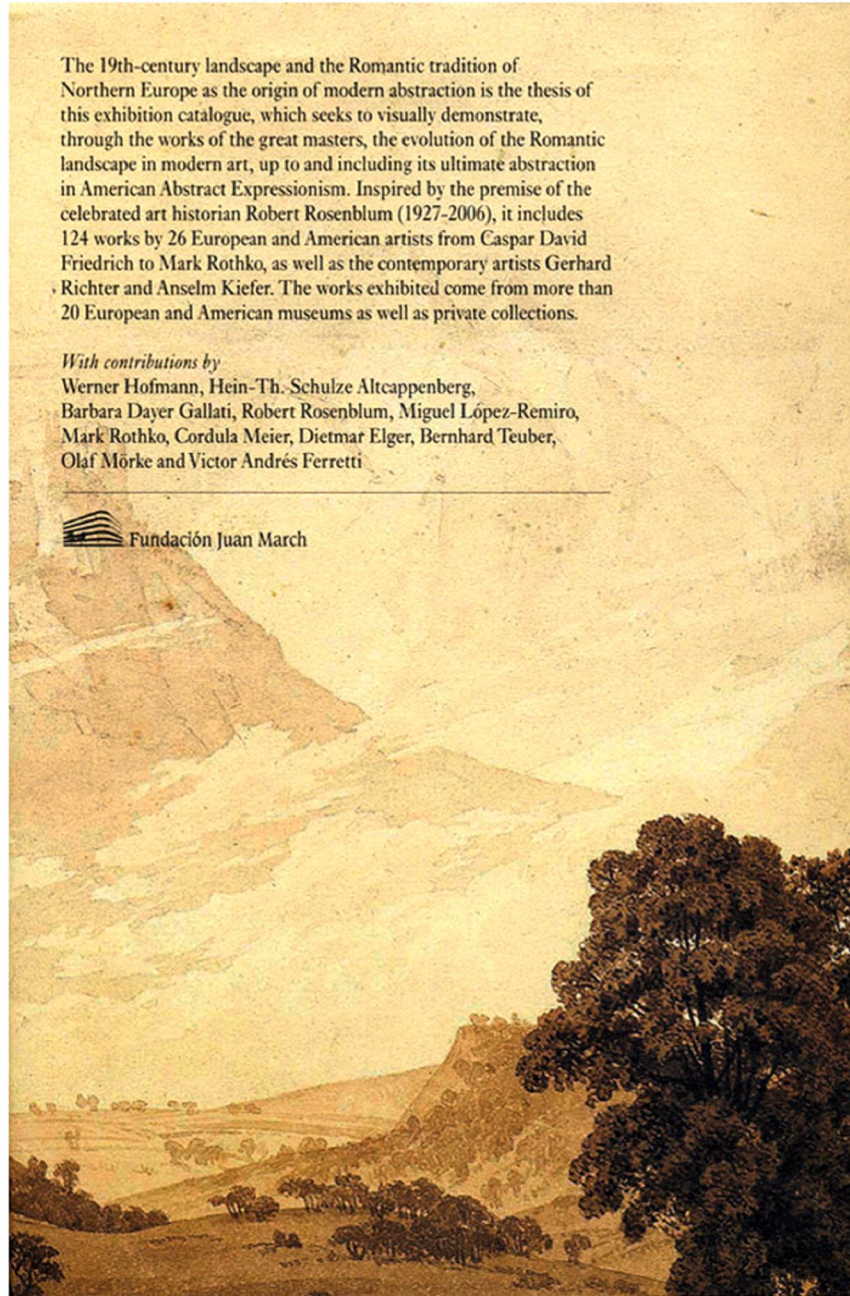
War-II myth of Genesis. During the Romantic era, the sublimities of nature gave proof of the divine; today, such supernatural experiences are conveyed through the abstract medium of paint alone. What used to be pantheism has now become a kind of “paint-theism.”

Much has been written about how these four masters of the Abstract Sublime have rejected the Cubist tradition and replaced its geometric vocabulary and intellectual structure with a new kind of space created by flattened, spreading expanses of light, color and place. Yet it should not be overlooked that this denial of the Cubist tradition is not only determined by formal needs, but also by emotional ones that, in the anxieties of the atomic age, suddenly seem to correspond with a Romantic tradition of the irrational and the awesome as well as with a Romantic vocabulary of boundless energies and limitless spaces. The line from the Romantic Sublime to the Abstract Sublime is broken and devious, for its tradition is more one of erratic, private feeling than submission to objective disciplines. If certain vestiges of sublime landscape painting linger in the later nineteenth century

in the popularized panoramic travelogues of Americans like Bierstadt and Church (with whom Dore Ashton has compared Still), the tradition was generally suppressed by the international domination of the French tradition, with its familiar values of reason, intellect and objectivity. At times, the counter-values of the Northern Romantic tradition have been partially reasserted (with a strong admixture of French pictorial discipline) by such masters as van Gogh, Ryder, Marc, Klee, Feininger, Mondrian; but its most spectacular manifestations – the sublimities of British and German Romantic landscape – have only been resurrected after 1945 in America, where the authority of Parisian painting has been challenged to an unprecedented degree. In its heroic search for a private myth to embody the sublime power of the supernatural, the art of Still, Rothko, Pollock and Newman should remind us once more that the disturbing heritage of the Romantics has not yet been exhausted.*

Fig. 9: Jackson Pollock. Number 1A, 1948, 1948
Oil and enamel on unprimed canvas
68 x 84 in. (172.7 x 264.2 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase (77.1950)

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The 19th-century landscape and the Romantic tradition of Northern Europe as the origin of modern abstraction is the thesis of this exhibition catalogue, which seeks to visually demonstrate, through the works of the great masters, the evolution of the Romantic landscape in modern art, up to and including its ultimate abstraction in American Abstract Expressionism. Inspired by the premise of the celebrated art historian Robert Rosenblum (1927-2006), it includes 124 works by 26 European and American artists from Caspar David Friedrich to Mark Rothko, as well as the contemporary artists Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer. The works exhibited come from more than 20 European and American museums as well as private collections.

With contributions by
Werner Hofmann, Hein-Th. Schulze Altcapenberg,
Barbara Dayer Gallati, Robert Rosenblum, Miguel López-Remiro,
Mark Rothko, Cordula Meier, Dietmar Elger, Bernhard Teuber,
Olaf Mörke and Victor Andrés Ferretti

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THE ABSTRACTION
OF LANDSCAPE
FROM NORTHERN
ROMANTICISM
TO ABSTRACT
EXPRESSIONISM

