

Shiva Ratri-India, 1991, from the series Religion and Death
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DEER BELIEVER

SOME NOTES ON MYTHS, RITUALS & ART

by Marcel Feil

A new myth arose, that of the artist as the metaphysical, spiritual creator of new realities.

American artist Barnett Newman is generally regarded as one of the leading figures of abstract expressionism. His oeuvre is impressive and includes many very large paintings and sculptures. Yet, there are no known photographs showing Newman as a typical artist, at work in his studio in a paint-spattered smock. On the contrary, in every portrait Newman is impeccably dressed in a suit, usually with a bowtie, presenting himself more as an intellectual, thinker and theoretician than as a creative artist. Newman was in fact also a keen and gifted writer who often wielded a polemical pen and did not shrink from presenting himself as the intellectual conscience of abstract expressionism. His essays were sharp and outspoken and, on occasion, they caused controversy. One of the most influential of them was published in 1947 with the title *The First Man was an Artist*. In a sense, it is a statement of principle, a poetic analysis of the creative urge. As the title suggests, Newman was convinced that the artistic act was the ultimate birthright of every human being. '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 his own helplessness before the void. [...] The myth came before the hunt. The purpose of man's first speech was an address to the unknowable. [...] Just as man's first speech was poetic before it became utilitarian, so man first built an idol of mud before he fashioned an ax. Man's hand traced the stick through the mud to make a line before he learned to throw the stick as a javelin.' (Barnett Newman, *The First Man was an Artist*, 1947)

Newman was not the most modest of men, and he certainly did not shrink from creating a carefully constructed image of himself, or mythologising his own artistic calling. But it is interesting that he connects art and the creative act with the development of self-consciousness, of an awareness of our own tragic existence. Instead of a long evolutionary process, Newman makes it seem as if this were a matter of an abrupt awakening, as if humanity suddenly became conscious of itself and its place in an empty, terrifying and unknown world. Consciousness of that tragic existence was for him the origin of art, the most human expression. It was fundamentally existential and therefore not

social or utilitarian. This was art as an expression of despair, and as both a confirmation and a combatting of one's own tragedy.

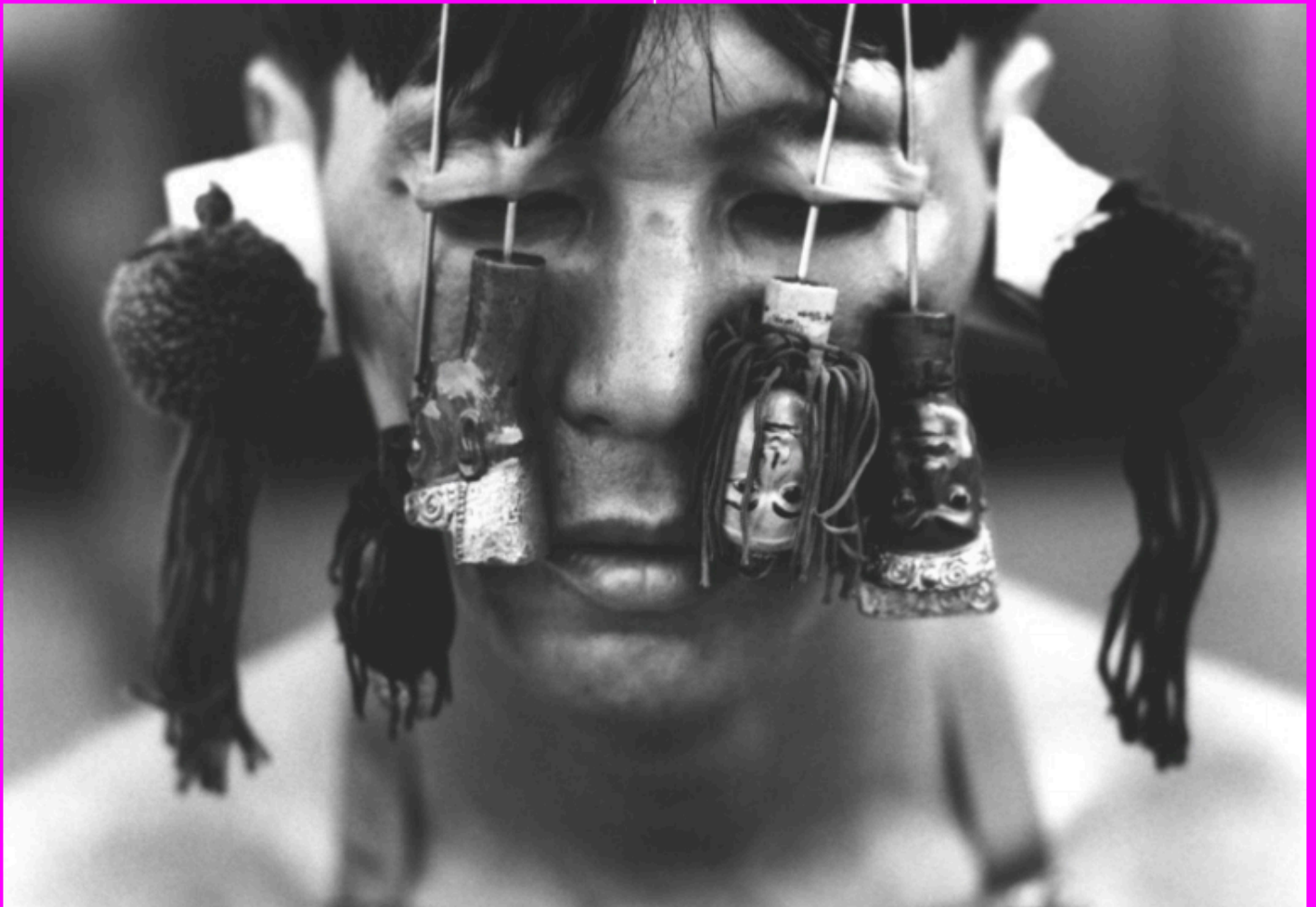
In many respects Newman was a child of his time. Written in 1947, the essay is typical of a period characterised by two immensely destructive world wars, the Holocaust and unfathomable mass murders, the dropping of two atomic bombs and the new reality of a nuclear age defined by the possibility of mass extermination. It was time for a new art, and Newman returned to what he believed to be the origin of art, one in which he recognised the tragic fate of the human species. After the First World War, within art it felt necessary to turn away from the modern age and the horrors it had inflicted. This resulted in Dadaism and – among the surrealists, for example – immense interest in the art of 'primitive' cultures. The war brought many European artists to the United States in the 1940s and they had a major influence on the post-war generation of American artists. In their early work (that of Newman, for instance, but also of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko) great interest can be seen in both *primitive art* and classical mythologies. This was a prelude to a specifically American mythology in which the artist was given an increasingly exalted status, especially when some American artists turned away from any attachment to visible reality, and even abstract art was exchanged for what they called 'the art of the abstract'. The creative act or 'action' of the artist was decisive, in their view. A new myth arose, that of the artist as the metaphysical, spiritual creator of new realities. The new artists were 'concerned with metaphysical implications, with the divine mysteries. These new painters have brought the artist back to his original, primitive role – the maker of gods,' as Newman put it in *Memorial Letter for Howard Putzel* (1945).

Primitive art (nowadays a loaded term) is often given its meaning and value within a larger mythology, frequently involving creation stories that relate the poetic tale of how the world and the things in it came to be, of how something was created out of nothing, and of the balance between creative and destructive forces. They tell us who we are and why we are, and what place we occupy in the universe. Often such mythologies are the basis for the organisation of a social group or a society, with specific behavioural codes and ethical rules. The

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famous Romanian religion historian Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), who devoted his life to studying the origin of religions, regarded every myth as ultimately a variation upon an archetypal creation story and, therefore, as cosmological. Myths became exemplary for every form of creation within a sacred society. 'The creation of the World being the pre-eminent instance of creation, the cosmology becomes the exemplary model for "creation" of every kind... Origin myths continue and complete the cosmogonic myth,' he wrote. It was an idea about the meaning of 'creation' that Newman would undoubtedly accept.

In Eliade's vision, the function of myths was to do a good deal more than explain how the world came into being. They offered the opportunity to return to a 'time before time', before the gods or their supernatural successors created the world. This pre-cosmic time is a holy time, and according to Eliade the ultimate aim of a religious person is to go beyond the natural, profane notions of space and time and enter the holy space of eternity. There the believer experiences the primal force in the form of a *hierophany* (from the Greek *hieros*, 'sacred' and *phainein* 'to bring to light'), a revelation of the holy that creates order in the chaos of the pre-world universe. But how do you enter that holy space? By means of myths, and a re-enactment of them.





Naturally it also helps to live everyday life, as far as possible, in accordance with the examples set by the holy, and to obey the rules and commandments that flow from that. But a far more powerful way is by means of the performance of specific periodic rituals. A religious ritual is not just the celebration of a mythical (and therefore religious) event, but above all an actual *re-experiencing* of it. While the ritual is being performed, the participants cast off their mundane identities and everyday concerns and come into contact with the gods, heroes, and mythical ancestors. The original creation takes place again and the cosmos is born anew. More than a reconfirmation of the cosmic order, specific ritual acts mark a return to the 'eternal time', a re-experiencing of the original creative act and an actual rebirth, the recreation of life, again and again.

Even in this profane age, countless rudimentary examples of this can still be found, if with a far less existential and cosmological character. We only have to think of baptism rituals in the Christian church, or initiation ceremonies in the army and in university fraternities and sororities. To become a full member of such a distinctive social group, a candidate first has to throw off the old identity, which must symbolically die. Then the novice has to go through all kinds of ordeals, as part of a ritual cleansing, before ultimately being symbolically

reborn, stronger, as a member of a social group that has its own powerful identity, with accompanying customs and traditions.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the rise of modern nation states in the mid-nineteenth century was accompanied by renewed attention to local or national mythologies and stories about the nation's founders. A country and its inhabitants is defined by commonalities: a shared language and religion, and a shared history that goes right back to the distant, often mythical, beginning. These foundations too have to be confirmed and re-experienced periodically. Hence national days and their sometimes dubious nationalistic associations that, with special costumes, celebrate the country's founding with marches and parades. Re-experiencing the past guarantees a healthy community for the future. The myth of the origin, with all its religious connotations and rules of behaviour, acts as a link between past, present and future, the conviction being that the abandonment of rituals ultimately imperils the future of the community.

One characteristic of the ritual is that it acts as a binding link between past and future, guaranteeing that access to a new era is achieved in the correct way. Important rituals and ceremonies are often rites of passage that have traditionally marked changes to a person's social or sexual status. The term *rites de passage* was introduced by the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep. They often take place around crucial events such as birth, puberty, marriage or death.

According to Van Gennep there are three phases to any rite of passage: separation, liminality (transition) and incorporation. He acknowledged that the three are not developed to the same degree in all rituals or in all peoples, but he did see a universal pattern. The first phase, separation, concerns symbolic behaviour in which the individual is divested of a social status that had previously been fixed. The old status is 'destroyed' in preparation for the new. During the middle phase, the 'traveller' is stripped of external manifestations of rank or role and enters a 'liminal' status in between former and future identities. This phase is often compared to a ritual death, or to a sojourn in the darkness of the womb in anticipation of birth. In the final phase the subject of the ritual crosses the threshold and re-enters society in a new social or religious role.

Rites of passage are typically rich in symbolism. The process of transformation is expressed in countless motifs that are disseminated geographically and culturally. Often there is a depiction of death and rebirth, in which initiates are first ritually 'killed' to liberate them from their former life, then treated as children in the phase of transition and finally made into adults in their new status. The ceremony as a whole also involves the successful withstanding of a number of ordeals, and entry into the subsequent phase is often symbolised by

a gateway. The new status is usually expressed in one or more changes to the body, perhaps circumcision, the removal of teeth, tattooing, or by means of special clothing and ornaments.

In post-war art too, we see a perfect example of an artistic calling that involved an initiation ritual, namely that of Joseph Beuys. The astonishing story about the origins of his work is fairly well known. In the Second World War he served as a radio technician in a Stuka dive-bomber. In March 1944, during one of his missions over Crimea, his plane was shot down. Beuys survived the crash but fell into a coma beneath the wreckage of the plane. The German search party had already given up by the time he was found, almost frozen to death, by nomadic Tartars, who smeared his body with animal fat and wrapped felt around him to keep him warm, thereby saving his life. Beuys woke from his coma in a German field hospital. His international trademark, a felt hat, covered the metal plate that was inserted in his skull. This personal 'myth' had a huge influence on Beuys's later work. He made so much use of the unconventional materials fat and felt that he was nicknamed a 'fat and felt artist'. It is not clear to what extent the myth about the Tartars saving his life is based on reality. It is clear, however, that Beuys consistently consolidated his role as a newborn, as a visionary, and the habitual wearing of the same emotionally charged clothing (felt hat, white shirt, workman's jerkin) contributed to his image as a modern shaman. The image was reinforced by Beuys' frequent public appearances and lessons, his *Aktionen* in which much use was made of themes that originated in his personal mythology and materials thought to possess a specific energy. He saw all this as part of a 'social sculpture', in which the healing power of art would come to the fore for a people who sought self-realisation and a sense of renewed hope for the future. The dividing line between life and art, and between fact and fiction, was often unclear and for him not always relevant.

The artist as teacher, as a shaman who has existential knowledge at his disposal and whose acts are essential for a healthy society that is in balance with itself and the cosmos, a seer who has insight into the past and the future and functions as a mediator between humanity and the gods, between life and death: it could hardly be any more modest. Yet it stands for a need for direction and interpretation that was not only understandable after a destructive war, especially in post-war Germany, but that may be characteristic of a largely secularised, disenchanted society that has taken leave of the great cosmological stories. Nevertheless, people are storytellers, and the need for stories remains. Stories that tell in a poetic, moving, merciless and ultimately consoling way, what it means to be human. Stories told by writers, composers, poets, painters. Is it not characteristic of the truly great works of art that they cannot be reduced to a straightforward reading or interpretation but escape

definition time and again? However diverse in form they may be, they are ultimately a manifestation of the mysterious, the magical, the incomprehensible nature of life – and of our consciousness of life, especially our own. The more we think we know, the greater the mystery.

The mystery, the not-knowing, also gives plenty of scope to charlatans, quacks and imposters who claim to have seen the light and exploit the all-too-human need for a footing and for certainty. In turbulent times especially, we often return to a supposed beginning of things and hark back to ancient myths and legends. Or we create our own personal myths, preferably custom made. In a time of 'fake news' in which facts can barely be distinguished from fiction, and powerful on-line identities and personalities can be constructed that sometimes have little to do with reality, we seem to be on the eve of a new kind of mythology. With new online heroes and their new kind of 'followers'. However individual the existential tragedy felt by Barnett Newman, he wanted not just to express it through his art but to share it with other tragic mortals. In that sharing lay his consolation and the task he set himself. There had to be an audience. There had to be communication. However artistic the primal scream, song only became art when there were listeners. Rhetoric, to some perhaps demagoguery, was not alien to him either, and this is true of any shaman, seer, priest, artist or charlatan. In that sense today's social media is old wine in new wineskins. We tell stories, as we have done for centuries, we seek an audience, we acquire followers, even believers. A group emerges, a community. And in that ancient dynamic we find ourselves, for better or worse. Again and again.