THE SUBLIME: A MODERN TROPE FOR LITERARY VALUE AND POETIC REFORM

by

MARIANNE GIORDANI

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2004

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

UMI Number: 3127872

Copyright 2004 by
Giordani, Marianne

All rights reserved.

INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI®

UMI Microform 3127872
Copyright 2004 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Copyright 2004

MARIANNE GIORDANI

All Rights Reserved

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

4.20.04
Date

Joan Richardson
Chair of Examining Committee

4.20.04
Date

Joan Richardson
Executive Officer

Joan Richardson
Blanford Parker
Joshua Wilner

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Abstract

THE SUBLIME: A MODERN TROPE FOR LITERARY VALUE

AND POETIC REFORM

by

Marianne Giordani

Advisor: Professor Joan Richardson

Longinus on the sublime describes the extraordinary event of cognitive transformation peculiar to literary discourse; his idea resembles but is not the same as the metaphysical threshold, described by Wordsworth and Kant, where imagination ends but the mind continues in transcendent self-reflection. I consider those ideas in relation to seminal English criticism at the turn of the18th century, which, I argue, adapted Longinus' model of literary conversion to the salvific narrative of Christian teleology and elaborated from it an epic persona of redeemed consciousness, whose natural and historical occasions for sublimity would yet be grounded in the literary, so far as nature and history were folded into the argument of revealed religion. For, even while conforming, in its natural descriptions of magnitude and force, to idioms of empirical psychology and natural science, the modern aesthetic of the sublime naturalized the Biblio-centric perspective. Indeed, the co-development of the sublime aesthetic and the modern self-image of redemption was first concentrated in theories of epic reform, which debated the formal, artistic compatibility of natural and revealed religions. Yet, as a universal criterion for literary value, the sublime transcended that schism to facilitate the progress of poetry from the heathen past to the regenerate present. Even so, and further, the fixed historical and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

psychological bifurcation of the fallen and the redeemed was reiterated in the breach which divided the Church, north and south, reformed and papist, a fault-line figured in the Alps, whence the sublime would be developed through Alpine imagery to describe the interior site of spiritual rupture and change: Chapter One is an extensive overview, theoretical, historical, literary; Chapter Two employs an ekphrastic model of sublimity, relevant to the controversy of epic machines and the marvelous; Chapter Two, in treating the modern unity of landscape and text, proves the aptness of Longinian rhetoric in contrast to Socratic dialogue: Chapter Four examines the arguments of reformation consciousness in "Ode to Fear," Clarissa, and Tom Jones, in terms of the flaw from which sublime self-abstraction issues; Chapter Five analyses the Victorian epic, Aurora Leigh, as a final attempt to write the poem of redemption which also redeems poetry—now from insipid modernity.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am profoundly grateful for the guidance of Joan Richardson, my wise and steadfast director, whose knowledge, penetration, and encouragement never failed me.

Family and friends have been very kind and helpful, but I would like to thank, above all, my dear parents, Bordina and Armondo Giordani, and sisters, Pauline and Roseanne, for their faithful, loving, and generous support; George Green, my constant and devoted companion, not only for his personal aid and reassurances, but because he first kindled my interest in the long eighteenth century and continued to bring me relevant topics and sources for consideration; Lauren Kozol, my friend and fellow graduate student, for her scholarly zeal, prudent counsel, and affectionate commiseration.

The English Department of The Graduate Center awarded me a doctoral fellowship I am honored and thankful to have received.

The English Department of John Jay College of Criminal Justice, where I taught for the duration of my graduate studies, not only accommodated me but provided an intense collegial environment of pedagogical responsibilities and a meaningful context for my dissertation work. What I learned there in honing my teaching skills came to bear upon the way I viewed the underlying purpose of my dissertation. In that regard, I am especially thankful to my colleague and friend, Peggy Escher, for our many frank and illuminating conversations.

I would like also to remember my mentor, the late John Potter, who recognized my vocation and taught me to see how I might actually pursue it.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE
An Overview: The Sublime in Theory, in History, and in Poetry.....1

CHAPTER TWO
Ekphrasis and the Marvelous.....102

CHAPTER THREE
The Soul in Action: From Dialogue to Allegory, from Text to Landscape.....182

CHAPTER FOUR
Flawed by Design: Self-Personifying Thresholds of the Sublime
in the Mid-Eighteenth-Century English Ode and Novel.....222

CHAPTER FIVE
Saving Poetry in Aurora Leigh: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's
Novel Approach to Biblical Ends.....314

WORKS CITED.....376

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

CHAPTER ONE

An Overview: The Sublime in Theory, in History, and in Poetry

Scholarly writing on the sublime during the last seventy-five years has consisted largely of historical narrative and analysis, a final summing up of the sublime from a retrospective, post-Kantian view. For, long before the turn of the twentieth century, the sublime had ceased as a critical or aesthetic term to galvanize fresh insights into the nature of literature, the arts, and affective-psychology, let alone theology, science, and travel. John Ruskin was the last aesthetician of major importance to address the sublime, and he did so only in order that he might better separate its legacy of equivocal notions and contradictory sentiments from his own theory of art as a science of nature. Today's scholar is more likely to launch his investigation or establish a theoretical perspective from some position already marked out by the historical view developed in the twentieth century, and, given the monumental scope of its topic he would not be blamed for including the sublime in its own eighteenth-century category of overwhelmingly enormous, vague, and obscure objects, terminally inconclusiveness. In so far as its discourse continues to proceed historically as an ever-expanding boundary of applications, which calls for subsequently more reductive definitions, and, in turn, provides for an even more inclusive category, the sublime borders on utter irrelevance, so than one might say with irony, it is a concept singularly distinguished by the inconclusiveness and irrelevance of its discourse.

As a critical theory the sublime seems to create itself as the object of its own understanding: Unlike the natural passions, such as anger, fear, pity, or even the thrilling

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

mixture of wonder, terror, and awe with which it was identified in the eighteenth century, the sublime was born from a literary disposition and refers in the context of writing and speeches to the enjoyment of some cognitive transformation which is peculiar to the art of verbal expression. In order to understand and explain the sublime one must take into account the critical disposition which invented and cultivated the passion for literary experience which it describes. It consists, therein, of the passion of criticism, itself—enjoying and explaining itself and, further, of doing so in terms which equate that passion with the force and magnitude of the natural world, universal Creation being the singular paradigm with which to compare the infinite variety and plenitude of which the enlightened mind feels itself capable. Hence the sublime is and has been under suspicion for being invented by and developed from a compulsion to explain the disposition of critical thought itself. Analytic philosophers, for instance, have persisted in questioning whether or not a theory of the sublime is even possible, whether the sublime could even be said to exist as a true object of understanding, and, if it does exist, whether or not it exists universally or only in the human experience of a unique people, culture, and historical period. [1]

---

[1] One might compare the sublime in aesthetic theory to phlogiston in combustion theory, the latter also having thrived in the eighteenth century, when, before the discovery of oxygen, combustion was attributed to the existence in combustible materials of an odorless, colorless, weightless, massless substance (phlogiston), which, during the process of combustion, escaped and left behind the ash or calx, which was considered to be the pure substance of combustible material. Phlogiston was an utter non-entity, existing in theory only, but chemists soon came to believe in its existence as if it were indeed a material substance. Even as phlogiston satisfied the need in chemistry for a causal explanation for combustion, it was the very non-existence of phlogiston which permitted it to thrive in the imagination of chemists. For, when faced with evidence disproving its physical existence, they simply remedied its theoretical features, which resulted in multiple varieties of potentially endless kinds of phlogiston.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

When the sublime was introduced into modern literary criticism by Nicolas Despreaux-Boileau in Traite du Sublime (1674), the critically popular vernacular resuscitation of Peri Hypsous, the ancient treatise attributed to Longinus, it referred to the divine-like achievement of which discursive art alone is capable, an order of excellence in which masterful elocution is inseparable from the ingenuity and passion of the intellect impelling its execution; but the sublime referred at the same time to the complementary experience in the reader or listener, who, especially in being jolted by and through a particularly effective passage in a composition, finds he is not only ecstatic, i.e. beside himself; but he is also exalted in a kind of self-reflection: The verbal idea effectively redounds in the expression of its author with the same force and magnitude with which the reader's own spirit appears to be expressing itself upon apprehending the idea. Hence, the sublime refers, in this context, both to the greatest power of which literary and oratorical art is capable and to the effect of that power, which surpasses persuasion and elegance, so far as the audience is transported beyond itself, and, above all, the sublime obtains in abstraction to the unity of the whole as realized in the particular.

Summarizing the Longinian-Bolevian idea, nearly a full century after the first publication of Traite du Sublime and at the conclusion of the seminal period of debate in France and England, Chevalier de Jaucourt writes in the Encyclopedie of 1765, "In brief, the sublime can be said to be that which lifts us above ourselves and which at the same time makes us aware of our exalted state" (LeHuray and Day 107).[2] Jaucourt's definition makes clear the paradoxical split in consciousness which attends the sublime, wherein

---

[2] LeHuray and Day cite the entry for "sublime" in Encyclopedie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonne des Sciences, des Arts et des Metiers, vol. 15 (Paris, 1765): 52.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

one's mind is divided between knowing oneself to be limited and knowing it in the moment of surpassing the limit. Because of its orientation in critical description and explanation, the sublime has never been defined simply as an emotion, but also as the kind of object which both manifests and arouses the emotion with which the sublime is identified. The sublime is presumed to be a universally subjective experience involving feelings of abjection and superiority, caused by an object to which the subject responds with a mixture of awe and terror, but that object is also an exalted reflection of the perceiving self, or of the self exalted as Mind. Hence, the sublime would lend itself to the aestheticization of Nature, generally, without specific reference to the singularity of literary excellence.

The indeterminate and contradictory aspects of the sublime aesthetic in modern discourse are partly an effect of Longinus' own philosophical intention, to provide literary criticism with a unifying theory, capable of discovering the principles and mechanisms upon which the most extraordinary heights of discursive thought and communication succeed. Hence, Longinus begins his treatise with a complaint against Caecilius, the rhetorician before him who also wrote on sublimity, but, according to Longinus, failed to establish a conceptual framework and to draw out useful principles from the myriad examples he provided. Longinus, a Greek rhetorician of either the first or the third century CE, construes his principle idea of rhetorical excellence, i.e. *hypsous*, from the exemplary writings of proven versifiers, orators, and prose-writers of the Greek canon, and the particular excellencies under discussion are understood to be inseparable from the works in which they appear, the works themselves being regarded as an inextricable part

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of the culture and society in which they were written. For, in his own time, Longinus is a modern on the side of the ancients, and nostalgia for the glory that was once Greece permeates the treatise on that count. *Hypsous*, which he defines as "a kind of height and conspicuous excellence in speeches and writing" (8-9), [3] refers to the astoundingly apt realization of original thought and feeling in great works of literary conception, which Longinus means to distinguish from the stylized pomp and elegance of speech that ceremoniously signals a dignified occasion and topic, but also, even especially, he means to distinguish it from the academic reification of sublime effects in a kind of poor and mediocre writing that pursues novelty, difficulty, and bombast at the expense of true sublimity.

When in "Essay on Criticism" Pope praises Longinus, "Whose own example strengthens all his laws;/And is himself the great Sublime he draws" (679-80), he is repeating a commonplace, original to Boileau's commentary decades before. Boileau finds the excellence of Longinus' treatise inseparable from the excellence of its author, an identification decidedly Longinian in principle, if one agrees that Longinus looks upon the noblest accomplishments of writing and oratory as feats of the soul, exemplary of virtue and honor and comparable to feats of martial valor, though the soul transcends through its peculiar vehicle in language the physical dimensions in which contesting demigods compete for fame. Insofar as Longinus means to conceptualize the exalted spiritual activity of which discursive genius is capable, not as determined from without, but as

---

[3] Unless otherwise noted, all excerpts from Peri Hypsous in English translation are from Longinus, On the Sublime, trans. John M. Crossett and James A. Arieti (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

reasoned from within the verbal composition which exhibits it—the resonant scope and intensity of such a composition being commensurate with the brilliance of the writer's or speaker's mind, or soul, and original to the occasion of its conception—*hypsous* refers to an order of excellence that is free in principle, not limited to conventional paradigms of loftiness. And upon surpassing such conventions, *hypsous* proves the extraordinary understanding of which the reader is capable as well.

Further, Longinus' point is that the exercise of such excellence, or *hypsous*, is itself the single reason that the greatest of the poets and the prose-writers become famous at all; for their achievement is so wonderfully stunning, that, by force of the power to affect an audience beyond the rhetorical skills of persuasive reasoning and elegant style, the soul of the reader (or hearer) is seized in order to be released to extraordinary elevations of feeling and comprehension. Sublimity of that kind, especially in civic discourse, Longinus maintains, issues naturally from five sources, the first being "a solid thrust of conception" (46), which suggests a powerful way of thinking, both firmly grounded and visionary—determined, sustained, and far-seeing in its breadth and purpose; the second, "an intense and enthusiastic emotion" (46), indicates a divine motive, or noble passion, which should not be mistaken for physical emotion or appetite, such as anger or pity, or lust for power. The first two sources of the sublime, in thought and in passion, run together, both being congenital to the disposition of the author and neither being productive of sublimity without the other. The remaining three sources all issue from a natural talent for verbal artistry but especially also require technical training. They consist of making figures of speech and thought; choosing words judiciously; and arranging them

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

effectively (47-50).

Boileau introduces Longinus' concept into literary criticism as an idea epitomizing the very purpose and value of literary art, and he influences, thereby, the sense in which modern readers afterward would come to recognize consummate sublimity in Longinus' explication of certain passages in the Greek canon, or in his figurative language for the sublime, wherein a natural metaphor, such as firestorm, deluge, lightening, or volcanic eruption, describes the genius of a particular author or work in terms which simultaneously convey the instinctively grounded, visceral response of readers to the spiritual force and magnitude of a sublime expression. Indeed, the striking and soaring passages of Longinus' criticism are inseparable from Longinus' subjective experience as both a reader of the passages he is analyzing and also a critic who is enjoying the explanation of his own responses to the passage. Longinus' philosophical aim is to discern, analyze, and explain the sublimity of some passage of discourse, but the sublime excerpts he examines become so enhanced in the activity of his explanation, that his enhancements can hardly be distinguished from the beauty of the excerpts. That effect, indeed, demonstrates an important thesis of his: Sublime writing confers sublimity, and so effectively that the voice of the author seems to the reader to be his own voice.

Hence, it is really not all that clear, given the subjective circumstances of Longinian sublimity, to what extent the reader of Longinus can distinguish the sublimity of Longinus' language from the sublimity in a Sapphic lyric or a Homeric simile, about which Longinus is writing an explication, nor determine the objectivity of Longinus' principle, thereby. Generally speaking, principles are reductive ideas and unify a wide range of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

various objects, which might otherwise seem to have little in common. Principles establish the framework for points of specificity, however, upon providing a common field from which to draw meaningful instead of random differences between objects, but principles can hardly be expected to specify the things themselves. However, the modern circumstances in which the sublime came to be introduced, as a principle of literary criticism, gave rise to the expectation that something more definite than the pronouncement of a feeling was owed to modern readers of Longinus, who were themselves interested in erecting a set of literary criteria for author and reader alike. In exasperation, Boileau would famously resort to a non-definition of the sublime, when, some thirty-five years after publishing Traite du Sublime and, either nettled by the difficulty of explaining its objective qualities or frustrated by the unyielding density of his opponents, he invokes a once fashionable adage of Renaissance criticism, saying of the sublime that its quality is "une certaine, je ne sais quoi" (qtd. in Brody 55). At its inception, the modern conceptualization of literary sublimity is formulated through the objectives of French neoclassicism, whose "attitude towards the mysteries of the literary effect and creative process" is characterized in Boileau, a "willing and faithful partner in what has been called his century's 'conspiracy to protect the ineffable" (Brody 56). If the ineffable refers not to the inexpressibleness of something in words but to the immanent silence of spatio-temporal paradigms about which words speak, then the sublime is of course unspeakable, for it stands as the universal configuration of excellence in discourse. Literary sublimity consists, in its particularity, as speech; but the elements cohere in some abstract pattern, as with anything perceived as formally coherent, in nature or art, in this

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

case, the literary or written composition, perceived as a mute structure of verbal movement and placement. Longinus in his function as a critical analyst of literary excellence hopes to describe and explain those silent ways in exceptional passages of writing, in which words relate to nature and to each other. His neo-classical appeal is perhaps the effect, in that regard, of his being like a mathematical discoverer of universal patterns, prepared to discover in the most effective kinds of writing and oratory unexpected patterns of literary consequence. In that context, as well, it should not be surprising that the Longinian-Bolevian sublime, though forged in rhetoric, should appeal in its day to the conflated perspectives of physical science, psychology, and literary criticism, given that its template is especially relevant to the modern theorist's concern, generally, with the tension between Nature and Scripture, alternately complementary and conflicting.

Among the moderns of the Baroque period who would find Longinus' definition far too vague and his reasoning circular, the most productive and important of those complainers was John Dennis, whose interpretation introduced, into the eighteenth-century discourse on the sublime, ideas of literary transformation informed by post-Reformation controversies of holy terror and conversion, which were already implicit in Boileau's Jansenist-like interpretation of sublimity in terms of sheer force and an utter usurpation of the reader's power to refuse it, as when, elaborately stressing the sense in which the reader or listener is said to be seized rather than persuaded, Boileau writes, "[Le sublime] ravit, il transporte, et produit en nous une certaine admiration, melee d'etonnement et de surprise....Il donne au discours une certaine vigeuer noble, une force invincible qui enleve l'ame de quinconque nous ecoute" (341-2).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The critical and philosophical cultivation of the sublime thereafter and its increasingly diffusive conceptualization involved as well the persistence with which its commentators characterized the sublime features of an object through the description of subjective feelings in response to it, so that Jaucourt's definition, quoted above, varies from an entry in the Dictionary of the French Academy, in 1694 (the same year that Boileau, still trying to clarify Longinus's principle, published Reflexion sur Longin, an additional commentary to his translation of two decades before). In the dictionary entry, "sublime" is merely a synonym for "lofty" or "exalted," in so far as it pertains to "spiritual matters that concern the intellect," so that one might refer to a virtuous action, an idea, a style, or a method of art and science as sublime, but would not refer to physical objects in nature as sublime (LeHuray and Day 106). The older definition precedes rather than follows decades of discourse in which some aspect of the sublime was continually in debate among artists, poets, theologians, critics, philosophers, adventurers, and the like. Hence, while it conveys nothing of either Longinian or natural sublimity, neither does it stress, as would Jaucourt's definition, the implicitly self-conscious superiority of sublime awareness, which the critical intellect especially enjoys in its moment of sublimity. For, it would be fair to say that by the time of Jaucourt's encyclopedia entry, and, certainly by the time of Kant's Third Critique only twenty five years later, the sublime is understood to be inseparable from the critical discourse in which the meaning of the term has been evolving, so that Kant himself could assert with confidence, in explicating the term "sublime" (in this instance with respect to objects of magnitude only and not also of might or force), that, insofar as our imaginative power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

sense is inadequate to the real idea of absolute totality which reason demands, and this inadequacy arouses within us the feeling that we have within us a supersensible power, one need only to think of the Sublime in order to know what it means: "Sublime is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense" (Critique of Judgment 106).

About the reason for its gradual broadening and diffusiveness, and in light of the growing tendency in modern philosophy during the eighteenth century to engage the sublime in discourses on affective and cognitive psychology, hence, to divorce the sublime from its literary-critical context and isolate its implicit subjectivity—and, further, to define it explicitly as an affect of the magnitude and might exhibited in raw nature—Glenn Most cites a remark by Kant, in which, according to Most, Kant appears to be mocking the very grounds in aesthetic philosophy and the philosophy of art from which Kant's own work had arisen:

> Indeed [writes Kant], who would want to call sublime such things as shapeless mountain masses piled on one another in wild disarray, wither their pyramids of ice, or the gloomy raging sea? But the mind feels elevated in its own judgment of itself when it contemplates these without concern for their form and abandons itself to the imagination and to a reason that has come to be connected with it...and finds all the might of the imagination still inadequate to reason's ideas. (qtd. in Most 113)

In those remarks, Kant appears as well to be implicating the sublime for the absence of artistic criteria which it fills. If, as Most puts it in reflecting the common view of its

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

evolution as a concept, the sublime celebrated its greatest triumph in Kant and Schiller, then the metaphysical enhancement of the sublime aesthetic is achieved at the cost of its inevitable diminishment and finally its disappearance as a productive category in literary criticism or the philosophy of art,

> for it was enlarged so vastly that it was enabled to leave high poetry, great paintings, and lofty mountains far behind it and come instead to denote fundamental aspects of the relation between man's embeddedness in the material world and his aspirations, never satisfied but never abandoned, to something beyond it. (Most 113)

By the time of Benedetto Croce's Aesthetic (1900), the sublime will have long ceased to occupy the critical center of speculation about the nature, meaning, and value of literature and art, and Croce would see fit to demote the sublime to just another affective disposition, one of many to which a work of art might appeal, quite apart from the criteria for judging the artistic merits of a work. When the sublime reached its zenith at the end of the eighteenth century, it was identified with the exquisite ambivalence of representations in nature and in art, which aroused the exalted emotions associated with religious feeling, and, relative to gothic-style manifestations of the terrible, the horrible, and the strange, it related to the ambivalence in Restoration poetics toward fiction and visual imagery, especially as pertaining to religious depiction.

The terminal abstractedness of thematic topoi identified with the sublime—infinitude, formlessness, obscurity, difficulty, ineffableness, dynamism, chaos, ecstasy, annihilation, uncanniness, and so on—tends, however, to undermine historical

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

periodization and national specificity and to strain instead toward "some kind of 'natural core' in sublime experience that is distinguishable from various personal or cultural elaborations and embroiderings" (Sircello 539). That strain, in turn, is destabilized by the reformulation and shift of emphasis brought to bear by each subsequent generation of argumentative, corrective, and reiterative commentary, not only within the period of its essential formulation during the eighteenth century; but as carried through in twentieth-century academic surveys of the sublime. Diffusive in meaning and application, the sublime has grown to accommodate an ever greater and diverse agglomeration of theoretical and historical elements, which necessitates the ever more efficient reduction of its principles to trans-historical and pan-cultural archetypes of the simplest and purest kinds. As the history of its idea and the idea of its history each emerges out of, subverts, and swallows the other in turn, "the sublime" must finally refer to the subject of its own variously conceptualized definitions, which, all too appropriately situates the sublime within the ontological and epistemological dilemmas of subjectivity out of which the sublime itself appears to have originated, as the condition of being "beside oneself." By means of locating and describing its points of de-stabilization, the self-conscious subject of the sublime procures a power of equilibrium between "being" and "becoming," which arises from the liberty to represent oneself, hence, to be something more than oneself, or, to be something other than oneself in the action of representing, or, finally, to be other than oneself as represented. It were as if, then, that the representing of oneself is not itself represented.

The problems of the sublime are implicit in the fact that in order to explain it one

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

must in some way resume the discourse, which, as social historians and theorists Andrew Ashfield and Peter deBolla recently have observed, involves delaying the possibility of defining it, for the concept develops according to a discourse that is both *on* and *of* its subject. Hence, even when at the turn of the nineteenth century Kant in his Third Critique and Wordsworth in "The Prelude" would appear, as Samuel Monk maintains, to sum up the century-long contribution of previous generations, a " 'final analysis' was never likely since the relation between sublime affectivity and its cause continued to resist precise formulation" (9). Here, Ashfield and deBolla describe the sense in which the concept has developed according to a discourse that is both *on* the sublime and *of* the sublime:

> The first [*on* the sublime] is not merely concerned with ascertaining the precise location of affects—it is also productive of them. In this sense...it attains the status of a technology and its appearance is coincident with a number of other discourses which similarly articulate technologies of explanation and understanding—such as economics, philology, or psychology. It creates the subject of aesthetics at the same time as it legislates the aesthetic subject; it is, in a very important sense, a technique of the subject....But, in order to function effectively as a technology of knowledge production it must become transformational, a discourse of the sublime. This is the most problematic aspect of the eighteenth century tradition since the boundaries between distinct discourses begin to lose their definition as the sublime tranforms both itself and its neighbouring discursive forms....If we take the technical discourses of instruction for

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> reading, or looking at landscape or oratorical performance, discourse legislating activities in which the sublime affect may well be encountered, we find that the discourse of the sublime infiltrates these neighbouring forms and transforms both itself and the host discourse. (6)

The "transformational" is an essential component of the sublime. The language just quoted (whose parasite-host metaphor owes much to the popular jargon of "chaos theory") is perhaps symptomatic of the self-abstracting creature it describes, but, I think it recognizes—even as it suffers from—an aesthetic whose pleasure is criticism, in the radical sense of crisis-making. The enjoyment is of an endlessly discerning self, which creates an infinite plurality from the negative proposition, *this* is not *that*. After all, Longinus was himself an exemplary critic of literary taste, and his explication on the sublime is driven by and organized through his pressing moral obligation to distinguish writing that is falsely sublime from that which is truly sublime. The very difficulty of defining what is meant by sublimity in writing and speeches is compensated for by the easier task of defining what is not. The false, which is merely showy, vapid, and ridiculous, fails to be sublime because it only reifies some idea of sublimity. Instead of imitating nature through the lessons of art, false sublimity attempts to reproduce the effects of true sublimity by imitating the effects themselves; whereas true sublimity in writing and speeches exceeds rhetoric because it is an accidental effect of the truth that the soul should soar upon recognizing it.

The sublime, as Ashfield and deBolla find it, stands with the activity of analysis, the breaking down of realized form, or beauty, into its dynamic components, and it

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

constitutes the ideal perspective from which one is able to *feel* powerful while incapable of *being* powerful, if, by powerful is meant being able to make good things—or beauty—in the world. Thereby, the sublime is a negation which eliminates the cultural, formal and technical grounds upon which the cultivated practice for realizing the implicit morality of language, art, science, philosophy, and politics depends. Where Schiller remarks upon the mixed feeling of shrinking and rapture that characterizes our perception of the sublime object, he observes how the very object that causes us to be painfully aware of our limitations is the same that irresistibly draws us toward it. And so, according to Schiller, it is through our ambivalent perception of the sublime object that we begin to discover that we are made of two, diametrically opposed natures, reason and sense, which are harmonized in the beautiful but discordant in the sublime: Through our feeling of the sublime, "We discover that the state of our minds is not necessarily determined by the state of our sensations, that the laws of nature are not necessarily our own, and that we possess a principle proper to ourselves that is independent of all sensuous affect" (198). The sharpening of the internal discord by means of sublime feeling and perception dramatically differentiates the physical individual and the moral individual, since, "it is precisely in the presence of objects that make the former only aware of his limitations that the latter is aware of his power and is infinitely exalted by the very same object that crushes the physical man to the ground" (200).

Hence, it would seem that grounds for a self-conflicting discourse on the sublime is made to appear immanent at every social and cultural front, where the physical and the moral are thrown into competing perspectives. So we should not be surprised, that, quite

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

apart from the eighteenth-century discourses about the sublime, every category of human activity, thought, and feeling can be reduced to its sublime side; and, as something like a diaspora of the sublime spreads—*the rhetorical sublime, the natural sublime, the egotistical sublime, the American sublime, the religious sublime, the feminist sublime, the technological sublime*—one finds the capacity from within for divisions and classifications seems endless.

Ashfield and deBolla divide the discourse *of* the sublime into three kinds, which might occur simultaneously but in fact would seem to parallel the historical sequence of its modern evolution. The first kind describes the qualities in objects, such as "large, distant, terrifying, of endless variety, indistinct, dignified," which summon up "notions of elevation and grandeur" (9). The second approach shifts attention from the external object to the affective response of the observer: It describes the mental processes of that response, distinguishing or relating it to other affective states, in sum, questioning how "the sublime take[s] us out of ourselves, constructing in the process a kind of ideal presence of self-stimulating affective experience" (9). The third approach "runs the risk of evacuating the object it sets out to investigate" by interrogating the previous two approaches. It proceeds by "diminish[ing] the importance of both qualities of external objects and affective reactions to them," while trying "to understand how the analytic produces its object of inquiry" (9). In this last approach the sublime becomes "an endlessly deferred point at which the work of analysis might finally come to an end." Ashfield and deBolla view this endless deferral as the inevitable "consequence of a properly transformational discourse" (10).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Here, we might turn to the bracing intelligence of Croce, who, following the example of Ruskin, included the sublime in his Aesthetic, only to make a point of ousting it, along with other of the "interminable" pseudo-aesthetic concepts in its category. Croce's aesthetic is not a science of feeling, in the tradition of Alexander Baumgarten's aesthetic science; and it does not characterize art in terms of moral sentiment, affective psychology, or as a foil to the disinterested "play" of imagination. It is specific, rather, to the formal problems of mimetic expression, with which Longinus was himself no less concerned and for which reason Longinus provided, with respect to the limited material capacities of verbal mediation, a careful and detailed analysis of elocutionary forms and techniques (much of it eliminated from Boileau's translation). The aesthetic of the sublime, however, in so far as in modern discourse it came to mean a kind of thrilling emotion, could refer to a kind of affective response which might be indifferent to whether its object is manmade or natural, and is, in any case, superfluous to the integrity of mimetic expression and form. "For the Aesthetic," which pertains in Croce to the philosophy of art and not to a science of feeling, "does not recognize the sympathetic or the antipathetic or their varieties but only the spiritual activity of representation," Croce maintains (88). Rather, it "pays attention always and only to the adequateness of the expression, that is to say, to beauty" (93). Beauty, then, is in the object.

But that was Longinus' point, as well, except that Longinus, who was not explaining Art in the abstract but literary art in particular, spoke to the utmost power of Logos: In speeches and writing, a noble subject matter was essential for sublimity since nothing less than great conceptions could provide the occasion for language to exercise

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the ultimate perfection of which it was capable. That which is sublime is that which creates its own context. Therein, the verbal action of the thought unfolds through a sequence so ingeniously arranged, colored, and timed that it creates the literary scene or landscape of its own climatic events, a field of spiritual activity in which to strike, with astonishing justice and clarity, a particular expression of thought, wherein the whole of the composition has suddenly come to bear with the full force and magnificence of its conception. Such is the "adequateness of the expression," as Longinus found it, in which the listener or reader participates no less than he observes, becoming, as it were "beside himself," i.e. ecstatic. For Longinus, the ecstasy of the reader is equally due to the readiness and ability of the reader to recognize divine truth as to the author's preparedness in turning his genius toward the expression of it. Even so, Croce's breathtaking dismissal of the "doctrine of the sympathetic" is, itself, nothing short of sublime, in the sense pursued by Longinus and recognized, from Boileau through Pound, in the principle of *le mot juste*. For it demonstrates the hawk-like ease, precision, and speed, of a point delivered to the quick from such a height as allows for breadth of comprehension to assure rightness of judgment. Croce is not denying the rhetorical, social, and historical materials, motives, and effects of artwork, so he is certainly not limiting artistic production to illustrations of a transcendent ideal of pure beauty, which itself would be a motive external to the "spiritual activity of representation." He is, however, determining the objective criteria for a philosophical inquiry, as was Longinus, who nevertheless equated the perfectly executed instance of a noble discourse with the reader's or listener's sense of being spiritually consumed in and raised by the force and grandeur of its genius.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Yet, as noted by Ashfield and deBolla, the sublime, in being made subject to "various technologies of a understanding and explanation," which have tried to pin down or to employ the sublime in the service of some philosophical, moral, or aesthetic purpose, has been the object no less than the product of its own discourse. To that I would add, the discourse of the sublime in the past seventy-five years has concerned primarily the "technology" of its historical representation, and, consequently, produced a narrative, the essential component of which is the emphasis on subjectivity.

Long after the sublime had ceased in the eighteenth century to galvanize theories of affective psychology and aesthetic sentiment, it was recuperated as an academic topic in the twentieth, amidst the flurry of scholarship excited by Arthur Oncken Lovejoy's new method of interdisciplinary historiography, which was fast gaining favor in mainstream liberal arts curricula during the 1920s and 30s. Hence, at the same time that Lovejoy's "History of Ideas" was rising to prominence from its central post at Johns Hopkins University, the sublime was beginning to be historically reconstructed as a pivotal concept in northwestern European discourse, from the Baroque period through the Romantic. It was during this period that students of literature reclaimed the sublime, in light of its relation to romantic developments, and Samuel Monk published his seminal history of eighteenth-century British discourse on the sublime, which served as an encyclopedic narrative of pre-romantic taste, and was meant especially to explain, as Monk puts it, "the slow and unconscious growth of English art away from the orderly garden of the Augustan age to the open fields (the jungle if you will) of the romantic period" (233). Monk's investigation fell in with the Zeitgeist-style exploration of unit-ideas, respective of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the cultural and historical periods, which endeavored to identify and distinguish one "ism" from another, and it especially enhanced the reorganization of ideas about classicism, romanticism, and modernism through an observation of their different perceptions of Nature, a favorite subject of Lovejoy.[4] One might wonder about the extent to which Monk's history of the sublime was determined by his retrospective purpose, so far as it was meant to provide a "useful vantage point from which to survey the change that overtook English art and theory in the pre-romantic period" (233-4). For, whether amenable to that objective or not, a variety of narrative strains could be construed from the documents of that era—treatises, journal entries, letters, poems, prefaces, and the like. And myriad formulations and references to ideas and feelings existed, which fell into the category "sublime," so far as they concerned perceptions of overwhelming force, insuperable magnitude, boundless extensions of natural space and time, and described the emotion which such ideas elicited, a contrary mix of astonishment, dread, and exhilaration, which alone fascinated its original commentators. Hence, drawing from a diverse range of intersecting topics—in literature, music, architecture, and painting, in gardening and travel, affective psychology and metaphysics, in sacred hermeneutics and theology, in the physical and natural sciences, social philosophy, historiography and anthropology—the twentieth-century historians' accounts of the sublime would proceed with conclusive and somewhat tidy narratives, featuring key figures, concepts, and trends, but with troublesome gaps and inconsistencies, nonetheless.

---

[4] George Boas and Arthur O. Lovejoy, Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity (1935); Arthur O. Lovejoy, The Revolt against Dualism: An Enquiry Concerning the Existence of Ideas.(1930; The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea (1936); Essays in the History of Ideas (1948).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Not the least of those discrepancies concerned parallel strains of discontinuous development to which the historians referred, respectively, as the "rhetorical sublime" and the "natural sublime."[5] The consummate expression in verbal art of noble and powerful ideas would remain exemplary of the so-called rhetorical sublime, but the exhilaration of the reader or the listener would stand, therein, to compare with the awed observer of physical nature, exalted by and exulting in the intimations of immortality imparted there. Further, the implicit relationship between art and genius in the rhetorical sublime would appear to collapse where instead the value of the natural imposes itself, so far as the natural must be indifferent to the problem of judgement, or taste, regarding the enjoyment of artistic representation: After all, the sublime in nature might be represented in

---

[5] In his review of Monk's book, R. S. Crane is first to emphasize the two different strains of development in eighteenth-century discourse for which Monk's book gives account, but he complains that Monk insufficiently distinguishes them, so Crane himself sharpens the distinction: Hence, one strain was "essentially a rhetorical approach," whose " 'Sublime' was in the main the 'Sublime' of Longinus, i.e. that quality difficult to define but easily detectable by sensitive minds familiar with the great masterpieces, which gives distinction to works of literature and plastic art." The procedure of writers in that strain "consisted of viewing works in terms of the mental powers—the genius, imagination, creative energy—of their authors and in determining their value by reference to the quality of the soul that shines through them or through particular passages or parts of them." The other strain, though it borrowed its vocabulary in part from Longinus, "sought the 'Sublime' not primarily in works of literature or plastic art but in natural objects of one kind or another, and more particularly in the states of mind which such objects have the power to induce in human spectators....[so that] their characteristic preoccupation was not compositions and authors but 'the pleasures of the imagination'—the varied responses of men's feelings to stimuli from the outer world; they were psychologists inquiring about the emotions, not critics investigating the sources of high excellence in art" (165-6). However, Crane, I believe, seeks from a viewpoint external to the discourses under discussion too sharp a distinction for the sake of historical and theoretical analysis. Those discourses, in my view, were not themselves so preoccupied with making a distinction between the rhetorical and the natural sublimes as they were with synthesizing, through the Sublime, the disparate elements of custom and theory, drawn variously from religion, culture, and science, toward a post-Reformation narrative of epic, universal significance.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

depictions whose appeal is limited to the viewer's pleasure in seeing the image of a magnificent thing in nature, but the image itself might not be sublime if the depiction is merely a conventional and mediocre rendering of no peculiarly impressive artistic power. Given the collapse of aesthetic norms into a confusion of nature and art, and despite the observation of an important distinction in modern histories of the sublime, between the sublimes of the rhetorical and of the natural, both the rhetorical and the natural are expressed in the English reception of Peri Hypsous at the turn of eighteenth-century, and its chapter on "greatness," which compares the effects of literary and natural grandeur, would frequently be quoted in paraphrase, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the ancient text, which soars in its description of the soul's gratitude for magnificent literary conceptions, employs in the comparison of literary and natural grandeur a turn of thought which means only to illustrate by analogy the natural nobility of the human soul: The reader's aspiring soul glories in being exalted through great writing, even as in the natural realm the body seeks to stretch the capacities of sensory perception to its physical limit, as when one is desperate to view such magnificent bodies as Etna and the Nile. Longinus did not imagine, where he illustrates the soul's inclination for boundlessness by noting it agreeable response to physical grandeur in nature, that such natural scenes were literally to be construed as equal to, or to be treated as substitutes for, the sublimity of literary genius; but, especially, he was not imagining that the arduous soul should terminate speech, the very vehicle of its divinity, while standing in awe before the mute vistas of created glory.

Joseph Addison, however, and others of the modern temperament who conflated

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the exalted soul of Longinian sublimity with the scientific adventurer's utter enthusiasm for the gloriously extended possibilities of the natural world, elaborated the analogy of nature in Longinus to an excess of hyperbole, at odds with the implicit point in Longinus, that, whereas the human inclination for divinity actually manifests itself in the sublime writings and speeches which are the soul's expression, the appeal of physical, external nature, at its most terrible and magnificent, is only a symptom of, and illustrates in allegory, the soul's natural inclination for divinity. Addison, who is taken with the influence upon thought of our visual-spatial sensations, considers the effects upon the imagination of vast and massive objects, and concludes they are objects of perception through which the soul is inspired to contemplate God. Indeed, the spectacular visual-spatial phenomena of nature suffice to mediate divinity for Addison, yet, one finds in Addison, that the sensual apprehension of such phenomena is not in itself capable of mediating divinity but must be anticipated as part of a journey, however imaginative and composed of literary and historical points of references. Likewise, in his travels through Italy Addison was indifferent to the splendid achievements of Italian painting and architecture but was desirous to be in the midst of those Mediterranean landscapes written about in classical literature, which had gripped his youthful imagination, as though his passage through modern Italy were only a shadow of his traveling mentally on a literary pilgrimage through the antique past.

II. The Sublime: A British Phenomena

Much of the currency of received wisdom on the sublime is traceable to Monk's

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

contribution, and he established the historical period of the sublime, with its beginning, in 1674, with the publication of Boileau's Traite du Sublime, its middle period in Edmund Burke's 1757 publication, A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful, and, finally, its full achievement by 1792 in Immanuel Kant's Critique of Judgment. Thus, the sublime would have begun in rhetoric as the concept for vehemence and grandeur, later to be illustrated in poetry, art, and nature by scenes of terrifying force, spatial vastness, and magnificent spectacle; then, it would follow that such qualities must be distinguished from and opposed to the calm and agreeable forms of harmony and proportion belonging to its counterpart in the beautiful; finally, the sublime would proceed from Burke's conclusion that its objects arise from the instinct for self-preservation, in contrast to those of the beautiful which arise from the instinct for sociability, and thereby conclude in the assertion of Kant, that, in contrast to the beautiful, whose comprehendible forms are commensurate with the unity of sense and intellect, the sublime constitutes the threshold where the sense-bound imagination ends but the transcendent intellect continues, now in self-reflection.

Monk's book accomplished its objective with sufficient scope and detail to establish the common overview for nearly a century afterward and to provide a map for those wishing to redirect or embellish some episode in the narrative without intending especially to alter or challenge Monk's overall scheme.[6] However, an alternative to Monk

---

[6] R.S. Crane anticipates the usefulness of Monk's contribution for the future of literary studies: Monk "makes no effort to show the effects of the critical theorizing he has studied on the contemporary production of works of art, but he has provided ample materials for any future historian of eighteenth-century verse or fiction who may be interested in tracing the responses of poets or novelists—made all too often at the expense of the integrity of their art—to the new taste for the "great" and the "terrible" in

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

has been raised from the socio-political perspective, with the potential for reawakening old charges that the sublime is indeed too abstract, vague, and protean to be more than a conceit for dramatically propping up philosophically insubstantial positions. Ashfield and deBolla, for example, find that Monk narrates a retrospective teleology of the sublime from the Kantian perspective and therefore skews the British discourse toward resolution in concepts of autonomous subjectivity which occupied only part of its discussion and debate during the eighteenth century. They are eager to disengage the British tradition from Kant's analytic of the sublime, without denying the value of Kant's aesthetic resolution of the tension between self-interest and the interest of the subject. Hence, while "the Kantian text proposes an elegant solution to this tension in the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgment," there is, in the British tradition, "a consistent refusal to relinquish the interconnections between aesthetic judgments and ethical conduct," so that, "the experiences we have in elevated states, precisely the affective register of the sublime, need not be divorced from those standards we invoke to govern our conduct, nor even transcend such ethical precepts, but in a concatenation of both realms, the aesthetic and the ethical, may be elevated to a form of ideal being"(3).

I would agree with Ashfield and deBolla that the formative British discourse, from John Dennis, through Joseph Addison and Edmund Burke, which preceded Kant and from which Kant drew, would be loathe to abandon art, especially poetry (Milton's epic

---

description and incident" (165). But to this I would add that even the most compelling of recent philosophical work on the sublime, such as that of Lap-Chuen Tsang, follows the historical pattern of intellectual development set forth by Monk, hence, as evolved through key concepts in Longinus, Burke, and Kant and representing, respectively, the combined fields of rhetoric and poetics; affective psychology and aesthetics; aesthetics and epistemology.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

accomplishment standing as exemplary), to an aesthetic of disinterested "play," but such disinterestedness in Kant's scheme belongs to the aesthetic of the beautiful, not to that of the sublime, which is compelled, rather, by consciousness of one's moral freedom and its singular duty; and neither were the intellectual pursuits of the British theorists identical with Kant, nor pertinent to the epistemological puzzles his own system created for itself. From John Dennis through William Wordsworth, the sublime is cultivated as the natural, human feeling for divinity, general and universal, on the one hand an apprehension which is to be distinguished from grasping the message of salvation, specific to revealed religion, but which speaks to the power of sensory images, nevertheless. For such images, however illusory and ephemeral, can temporarily heal the mortal rupture between body and soul, which is the appropriate objective of poetry. On the other hand, nature, as viewed from an Alpine summit (whose type stands for nature in principle—as force and magnitude, raw, exposed, deprived of all ornament and form) figures forth in the climbing excursions of Dennis, Thomas Gray, Wordsworth and others as a point of resolution identified with the end-time of the Apocalypse, an allegory both conclusive and comprehensive of Christian history, whose Word, in turn, is reconfigured in the Alpine crossing as the threshold between life and afterlife.

Monk concludes his book with Wordsworth's familiar description of descending the Simplon Pass, which shows, as no other expression has before or since, writes Monk, "the power of sublime scenery to evoke into consciousness the apperception of the infinite and to become an adequate symbol of the infinite"(232). One might add, however, the excerpt Monk quotes for illustration is embellished with themes from the Apocalypse, the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"adequate symbol of the infinite" here conflated with the biblical end-time. It is Scripture which give meaning to the sublime description of nature. Indeed, the sublimity of the Alps, as such, is Revelation naturalized. In sublime nature one not only exults in the majesty of the Creator but also reads the redeeming message of Christ, invisibly presented there in allegory. Notably, the "gloomy descent" along the Simplon Pass follows from the disorienting realization for the travelers, who just before had been eagerly but mistakenly pursuing a clearly marked path of ascent up the mountain. Upon being surprised and confused to discover that their progress lay rather in the obscure, descending path which had before eluded then, the speaker suddenly recognizes and relishes his soul's intuition for the infinite. Echoing the Psalmist he rejoices in "that Power" of thought, which, "in all the might of its endowments," enshrouds him as a cloud of unseeing and reveals to him his human purpose.

> [...] to my soul I say,
> 'I recognize thy glory': in such strength
> Of usurpation, in such visitings
> Of awful promise, when the light of sense
> Goes out in flashes that have shown to us
> the invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
> There harbours, whether we be young or old.
> Our destiny, our nature, and our home
> Is with infinitude, and only there; (VI. 592-605)[7]

---

[7] I quote throughout from only the 1805 version of The Prelude.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The travelers, now hurriedly turned back from their errant ascent, commence the slow and gloomy descent, whence the emblematic description to which Monk refers:

> [...] The immeasurable height
> Of woods decaying, never to be decay'd,
> The stationary blasts of water-falls,
> And everywhere along the hollow rent
> Winds thwarting winds, bewilder'd and forlorn,
> The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
> The rocks that mutter'd close upon our ears,
> Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
> As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
> And giddy prospects of the raving stream,
> The unfetter'd clouds, and region of the Heavens,
> Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
> Were all like workings of one mind, the features
> Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree,
> Characters of the great Apocalypse,
> The types and symbols of Eternity,
> Of first and last, and midst, and without end. (VI.624-40)

In its most sublime manifestation, nature represents the threshold of sense through which the mind redeems its purpose and is itself a type, not of the Creator's glory, generally, but of the specific, yet even more glorious marvel of Christ's grievous

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

incarnation and terrible sacrifice for the purpose of human redemption, which is not evident on the face of Creation but conveyed in Scripture.

Indeed, the classical Longinian-Bolevian principle of sublime elocution gives way in eighteenth-century discourse to metaphors of terror and grandeur in nature, which in themselves invoke the religious truths allegorized in Scripture, so one finds in the modern aesthetic of the sublime the element of pleasing dread which, as De Quincey would note, "is an idea altogether English in growth," and a concept for which "the Grecians had apparently no word" (quoted in Brody 97). The Judeo-Christian significance of sublimity for the modern reader is again made evident by De Quincey in the fact that, as one scholar of Boileau reminds us, De Quincey could only find one example of sublimity in Greek poetry, not stylistic but drawn from a work of literature, which was, in De Quincey's words, "the gigantic drama of the Prometheus crucified on Mount Elborous" (Brody 97).

Yet, as would be noted by Monk, Tuveson, Thorpe, Nicolson, Morris, and others who followed in the onrush of studies conducted from the 1930s through the 1970s, even as Longinus' thought was being evoked and explained by neo-classical poetasters in the initial reception of the Bolevian-Longinian treatise, the particularly literary orientation of the ancient author's perspective appeared to be dissolving into a broadly scientific approach, modeled upon the aesthetic psychology of pain and pleasure, further informed by religious sentiment as much as by cataclysmic breakthroughs in physical science. The classical conundrum of pain and pleasure posed the difficulty of explaining how, if pain is deprivation and the absence of pleasure, it were possible to receive pleasure from pain, under certain circumstances, and to enjoy things which are universally perceived to be ugly

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and pernicious in their objective qualities, and which normally provoke feelings of horror and dread. Such circumstances included, especially, the enjoyable representation of painful things in literature and the arts, a topic which Aristotle addressed in trying to explain the pleasures of tragic drama, and one which suggests how the profound mysteriousness of transformational thought is indeed at the center of the discourse on sublimity. Aristotle's influential solution accounted for the substitution of natural pain by the pleasure which mimesis itself provides, and, in the case of tragic drama, the audience is able to be enthralled by the dangers and sorrows rendered on stage because it knows the difference between reality and images, and, hence, knowing itself to be safe, enjoys an artful terror.

But scientific observation alone might itself turn pain into pleasure, and, one finds in antiquity numerous examples of the steady, noble gaze in ancient philosophy, which could turn fear and loathing into wonder and joy, not the least of which is found in Marcus Aurelius, whose Meditations were of profound influence during the eighteenth century, as anticipated in Jeremy Collier's translation of 1702, where one finds this especially rich example:

> This also thou must observe, that whatsoever it is that naturally doth happen to things natural, hath somewhat in itself that is pleasing and delightful: as a great loaf when it is baked, some parts of it cleave as it were, and part asunder, and make the crust of it rugged and unequal, and yet those parts of it, thought in some sort it be against the art and intention of the baking itself, that they are thus cleft and parted, which should have

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> been and were first made all even and uniform, they become it well nevertheless, and have a certain peculiar property, to stir the appetite. So figs are accounted fairest and ripest then, when they begin to shrink and wither as it were. So ripe olives, when they are next to putrefaction, then are they in their proper beauty. The hanging down of grapes—the brow of a lion, the froth of a foaming wild boar, and many other like things, though by themselves considered, they are far from any beauty, yet because they happen naturally, they are both comely, and delightful; so that if a man shall with a profound mind and apprehension, consider all things in the world, even among all those things which are but mere accessories and natural appendices as it were, there will scarce appear anything unto him, wherein he will not find matter of pleasure and delight. So will he behold with as much pleasure the true rictus of wild beasts, as those which the skillful painters and other artificers imitated. So will he be able to perceive the proper ripeness and beauty of old age, whether in man or woman: and whatsoever else it is that is beautiful and alluring whatsoever is, with chaste and continent eyes he will soon find out and discern. Those and many other things will he discern, not credible unto every one, but unto them only who are truly and familiarly acquainted, both with nature itself, and all natural things. (III. ii)

One finds in Aurelius' description of all that is normatively ugly and menacing in nature an analogue of the eighteenth-century aesthetic, the natural sublime, and, implicitly,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

its complementary opposite, the beautiful. Ruggedness, wildness, irregularity, decay, formlessness, accident and superfluity are repulsive to a sensibility cultivated in an appreciation for smoothness, refinement, and order; but beyond conventional apprehensions of ugliness and comeliness, which might be rooted in lowly fears, appetites, and illusions, one can perceive nature in the ultimate beauty of its argument, not by subjecting natural things to some rationalistic formula, but, through one's balanced apprehension of all of the movement and variety of life that is available to the senses.

Marjorie Nicolson, however, following Monk's classification of modern and ancient sublimity in terms of a distinction between the natural and the rhetorical, and, further, between English naturalism and French rationalism in the modern period, would argue that in contrast to a supposedly commonplace aversion to mountains in classical literature, the modern evolution of the sublime in external nature originated in the English love of nature and commitment to experimental testimony. Citing Henry More and Thomas Burnet, especially, as prototypical of two strains in the English aesthetic discourse, which came to be resolved in Burke's Enquiry by mid-eighteenth century, and was first developed, respectively, from Addison's popularization in essays on the pleasures of imagination and from John Dennis's published account of his original experience, dreadful but exhilarating, at the summit of an Alpine crossing, Nicolson credits the English for recognizing before other modern Europeans the appeal of mountains in the context of a forward looking era.

More's writings, for instance, gave witness to a meliorist-like glee in the possibilities of endless scientific exploration both within and beyond the limits of earthly

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

space, as framed by the Copernican model and confirmed by Galileo's telescope, hence externalizing the sublime imagination in terms of an infinitely extended theater of creation. (This in contrast to the French, Nicolson maintains, who loved to reduce nature to abstract and mathematical formulae and tended to envision the uncontainable vastness of astrophysical space as an inhuman wasteland of infinitely terrifying emptiness.) On the other hand, there is Burnet, a major influence on both Dennis and Addison, who provides in The Sacred Theory of the Earth (Latin 1681; English 1684) a syncretic explanation of geological phenomena, which, though based in biblical and classical authority, also documents in Burnet's admission of some visceral delight in the deprivation and peril of mountain fastnesses, a feeling which is distinctly unconventional, but also trendsetting, in that it departs from the unequivocal disapprobation for mountains expressed by many of the ancients, yet could not be classified with an appreciation for the beautiful. However, Nicolson, I believe, exaggerates the element of subjectivity involved in the English fascination with mountain scenery, explaining it as she does in terms of an inherent love of nature in the English and their freedom from ancient authority, as evident in English empirical science. For, if the modern notion of sublimity in external nature arises in conjunction with an unprecedented thrill over the mixed pleasures enjoyed in mountain scenery, the context for that enjoyment and especially the elaboration of a moral aesthetic from it, must be understood as consisting of more than the idealized subject of empirical observation and the freer practice of natural philosophy in general, so far as modern science would detach its methods and objectives from any limitations imposed upon it by Scriptural literalists.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

In accounting for the peculiarly modern development of the sublime aesthetic, one shouldn't forget that the coincidence of the sublime and mountain scenery is specific to a period of renewed English travel across the Alps to popish Italy, after the loosening of prohibitions begun in Elizabeth's reign. The magnificent extremities of irregularity and wildness of which mountains are the type, and the terrible difficulty and danger which mountains present to the traveler are relevant to the fact that mountains are natural borders, the place where a limit is erected which both tempts and resists one's crossing it. Wilderness, the condition of human struggle after the Fall, stands as the historical document of the Fall through which the redeemed pass in survival. The Alps, the grandest type of wilderness, and whose English travelers invent the effusions of "terrible joy," "agreeable horror," or "pleasing dread," which would became characteristic of sublime emotion, form the actual threshold, symbolic and natural, which divides northern Protestantism and southern Catholicism. The sublime terror of mountains is implicit in the Protestant's risk of returning to the historical site of the early Church through the present-time site of its corruption, and it is quite fitting that Calvin's retreat should have been Alpine.

The Biblical-historical and explicitly iconoclastic orientation of Protestant culture is galvanized in the Alpine crossing, with the modern-day English pilgrims enacting in actual history, and in typological terms, the Christian passage through sacrifice, death, and transfiguration. At the same time, as epitomized in the return to Italy, the sublime aesthetic dramatized a renewal for British artists and poets after the Restoration, a theme which continues well into the nineteenth century, peaking in the Romantic period with

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Samuel Rogers' long poetic celebration, Italy, (illustrated by Turner and the inspiration for Ruskin's own re-invention of the Christian past in aesthetic scenes of private recollection). The elaboration of sublime terror in terms of the tension between English Protestantism and Italian Roman-Catholicism continues in gothic romance, and self-consciously so in the Victorian period. Further, and apart from the appeal of the mild Mediterranean climate and beautiful countryside, the tours south of the Alps which were beginning in the period of the Restoration and motivated by cultural and material interests—whether in visiting the pagan sites of ancient literary and historical fame, in learning about Italian architecture, painting, and sculpture, or in procuring a fashionable art collection—were yet overlaid atop the customary religious incentives of the holy pilgrimages past. In addition, Augustine had long secured for the modern Christian humanist an imaginative parallel, in which the physically trying excursion of the pilgrim in a difficult terrain compares with the hard won joys of the reader who suffers the inherent obstacles of the sacred text. In respect of the pilgrim moving through a difficult terrain in apprehension of relief and reward, the ruggedly glorious Alps impart the sublime in terms essential to the dramatic character of the spectator-participant, a figure no less relevant to the rhetorical sublime of Longinus than to the natural sublime of the modern tourist. For the sublime terrain is not merely an object in view of the traveler but is the very path.

III. The Sublime: Greatness and Enthusiasm

In Modern Painters (1873), John Ruskin notes, in Volume I, Chapter III of the second section titled "Power," that readers might be surprised to find that his critical

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

categories of aesthetic theory (Power, Imitation, Truth, Beauty, and Relation) do not include the sublime, that he has even avoided until now the very words "sublime" and "sublimity." The exclusion is warranted, according to Ruskin, by the fact that "Sublimity is not a specific term." Indeed, as he continues to explain,

> Anything which elevates the mind is sublime, and elevation of the mind is produced by the contemplation of greatness of any kind; but chiefly, of course, by the greatness of the noblest things. Sublimity is, therefore, only another word for the effect of greatness upon the feelings. Greatness of matter, space, power, virtue or beauty, are thus all sublime; and there is perhaps no desirable quality of a work of art, which in its perfection is not, in some way or degree, sublime. (I.107)

Ruskin's definition of the sublime invokes the dimension of literary *hypsous* explained in Peri Hypsous, which pertains not to the explosive and crushing force—of movement, pressure, and velocity—identified by Longinus with an oratorical style, comparable to a volcanic effusion, of which an orator such as Demosthenes was exemplary; it pertains, rather, to the enormity of the speaker's or writer's conception, such as exemplified in the works of Homer and Plato. Greatness, as such, is identified with the unlimited power of intellectual vision, a magnificent pivot of radiating depth and breadth, whose grandeur is comparable in terms of natural phenomena to any uniformly impressive or massive singular entity—the absolutely immense—which occupies an infinitely vast extension of space and time. Therein, upon praising the sublime speech of great writers and orators of the past, Longinus reminds his reader that such authors are demigods who gained their reputations

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

because they appealed to the inherent desire of the human spirit, which, divine in nature, is to realize its fullest and most noble capacity, in the exercise of thoughts which exceed the temporal and spatial boundaries of physical existence. In a figure of comparison that explains literary grandeur by analogy to incomprehensibly large and unconquerable geophysical masses or to the infinite extensions of astrophysical time and space, Longinus means to convey the innateness of the human impulse for greatness, for, it is evident with or without the benefit of literary cultivation, that the mind shall always seek the reflection of its grandeur not only in the most excellent expression of the greatest thought, but also in the most powerful and majestic features of the earthly landscape and the surrounding cosmos.

Likewise, as Ruskin himself continues in this vein, he does not even first define what he means by "art" before in hyperbole he endeavors to define what is meant by "the greatest art," as if to say that art that is less than "greatest" is not worthy to be called "art"— and, of course, he is referring not only to painting but to all formal expressions of aesthetic enjoyment that satisfy the mind's natural affinity with greatness:

> [Thus]...art is greatest, which conveys to the mind of the spectator, by any means whatsoever, the greatest number of the greatest ideas, and I call an idea great in proportion as it is received by a higher faculty of the mind, and as it more fully occupies, and in occupying, exercises and exalts, the faculty by which it is received. (I.78-9)

Here, Ruskin declines the term "sublimity" in favor of "greatness," the latter being a noun which he appears to have retrieved from the early vocabularies of the Restoration

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

critics—Dryden, Shaftesbury, Addison, and others—who, unlike their contemporary theorist of the sublime, John Dennis (although they were continually paraphrasing Longinus without citing him as their source), favored "greatness" over "sublimity" or "the sublime," perhaps because they did not wish to invoke all of the connotations associated with Boileau's French translation of the Greek term, *hypsous*. Longinus' term refers not only to the bearing and effect of excellence in speech, so far as *hypsous* is equated with spiritual elevation and expansion; it refers also to the emotive force, or "vehemence," by means of which the reader or listener is suddenly transported from the mundane to the supernatural. *Sublime*, as the equivalent term for *hypsous,* would thus not only refer to the combined qualities of massiveness and loftiness, which constitute greatness and a metaphor for spiritual grandeur, but also to that astonishing blow of near stupefying force, which, in the post-Reformation environment of both England and France, must especially be read as comparable to the transforming impact of "grace irresistible," the divine authority against which human will stands helpless, as when the Holy Spirit strikes through its Word and ravishes the human soul.

The avoidance of reference to such spiritual dynamism—whether aesthetic or religious—by means of the term "great" instead of "sublime," deters as well the association of the sublime with the fanatical enthusiasm of religious reform. "Greatness," with the addition of "strangeness" and "novelty" as terms for conveying that crucial effect of surprise and confusion, on the one hand, astonished recognition, on the other, which Longinus included in his definition of sublimity, suffices instead to convey the influence of Longinus' treatise without appearing to sacrifice the formal integrity of literary custom

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and theory to the iconoclastic fury of religious desire. But, in fact, strangeness and novelty are inadequate to convey the redeeming power of astonishment implied by Longinus' sentiment of noble ecstasy, and, where they are mechanically applied toward the mere achievement of short-lived shock-effects, these ideas signify precisely the feeble aspirations against which Longinus warns in disparaging "false sublimity." For, beleaguered by deteriorating standards in verbal art and rhetoric, Longinus is endeavoring in Peri Hypsous to recuperate admiration for the truly sublime in literary accomplishment.

By mid-eighteenth century, "greatness" in the context of literary sublimity, refers not only to the noble and infinite capacities of Mind (or, sometimes, of Imagination as a faculty of Mind), relative to the immensity of physical space, but also to a glorious tradition of literary, scientific and political ideals and values; and, thus, it would prove to be a term ill-suited for the purposes of a materialist, psycho-physiological explanation for aesthetic experience. However "the sublime," proved to be a sufficiently flexible abstraction for naming a category of passions and ideals that might be reduced to a kind of dread-filled pleasure, discoverable at the perceived threshold of immanent annihilation, such as Milton imaged for Eve, when she bit into the forbidden fruit. The sublime's counterpart, "the beautiful," would name, therefore, the perceived recovery of the self in pleasing conformity with a sense of wholeness, balance, proportion, and harmony, which would be identified in practical and social terms with the tender sentiments of love, in aspect of the compassionate and protective fellow-feeling that characterizes social well-being as opposed to the awful, fearsome love identified with the remote and alien mind of the divine Creator. So even where the term "sublime," in its Longinian sense, to which

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Ruskin refers as its true philological sense, might alone suffice especially to denote ideas of greatness and power in art, with which Longinus and Ruskin are both concerned, Ruskin is loathe to invoke or fall back upon the conventional division of aesthetic sentiment into the sublime and the beautiful, categories that emerged during the eighteenth century not from a philosophy of art but from a natural science of the passions and whose modern originator is Thomas Hobbes.[8] Hobbes elaborates from the observations of Aristotle a doctrine of effects, whose physiology of pain and pleasure laid the foundation for a psychology of aesthetic response. Defined in tandem, the sublime and the beautiful, being counterparts to the psycho-physiological division of pain and pleasure, respectively, stand as a formula for aesthetic feeling that yet remains, even during Ruskin's own era, best represented in Edmund Burke's Enquiry. Contrary to the reductive principles of Burke's science, Ruskin's approach to nature, in relation to the interpretation of nature by art, is theological in spirit, so it is not surprising that Ruskin should find problematic the gothic notion of the sublime as an actual or depicted source of oppressively disgusting, painful, terrifying, and ferocious images, without resolve in transfiguring forms of divine perception. For abject fear is a notion insensible to true sublimity, or greatness, of Mind. The power of Mind, associated with the sublime, is instead that which defeats the crushing effects of brute force and incomprehensible fastnesses, and whose elevation is effected by the highest and the greatest manifestations of divine providence. In Burke's scheme, however, which resembles Hobbes' paradigm of aversion and appetite as derived from the pleasure-pain model, the sublime is an affect of the animal need to preserve one's life, and

---

[8]See Clarence De Witt Thorpe, The Aesthetic Theory of Thomas Hobbes (New York: Russell & Russell, 1940).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the beautiful is an affect of the same need to reproduce it sexually.

In his spiritual attitude toward the problems of aesthetic judgment Ruskin shares with the likes of John Milton, Henry More, Shaftesbury, and John Dennis—despite deviations in emphasis between deism and revealed religion—the Christian Platonist's identification of artistic perception with "enthusiasm," the spiritual passion of the individual soul, a divine "fury" not to be confused with the true inspiration of the Holy Spirit that compelled the Old Testament prophets and New Testament evangelists in their sacred writings, but to be distinguished, nevertheless, from the natural or vulgar passions with which Burke is primarily concerned and whose science, based upon the principles of Hobbes, Locke, and Hume, neither of these philosophers being concerned with the religious emotion of the sublime experience—which Dennis himself termed "enthusiasm"—whether in the context of religion, nature, or art.

In a remarkable passage, exemplifying Ruskin's view that the soul's divine sensibility bears a special relation to the particulars of natural observation, that the soul aspires in truth and beauty to impose a criteria for aesthetic excellence no less contingent upon the authority of nature than does science, Ruskin takes to task landscape painters, Claude Lorraine, Gaspar Poussin, and Salvator Rosa. Significantly, these are the very darlings of English appreciation for Baroque landscape painting, whose works were among the first to be categorized according to the sublime/beautiful continuum, with Poussin signifying—however, arguably—the exquisite uncomplicated pastoral ideal, imparting the formal regularities of the Beautiful, and with Claude and Salvator signifying the sinister, depraved, and terrifying imprecations underlying the obscure and erratic

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Sublime. [9] But Ruskin, whose book is premised upon a defense of the visually "obscure" landscapes of Turner, finds those painters guilty for failing to "convey the impression of nature into the mind of the spectator." Theirs in the accomplishment of those who by imitating visual data aim only to deceive, Ruskin declaims with peculiarly iconoclastic fervor. Yet in doing so they wildly disregard even the laws of nature by clogging the senses with "unimportant and feeble truths;" finally, the error is in their failing to exceed nature by means of the participation of the soul, which sees profoundly into and beyond the mere skein of appearances. Ruskin requires of art the difficult balance of allegorical signification and naturalistic verisimilitude—brought to bear by reading nature as a divine book, the meaning of that book being written on one's very soul—an ideal that is indeed consistent with the tradition of the sublime as descended from its ancient-modern originator, Longinus. Thus, Ruskin writes:

> A man accustomed to the strength and glory of God's mountains, with their soaring and radiant pinnacles, and surging sweeps of measureless distance, kingdoms in their valleys, and climates upon their crests, can scarcely but be angered when Salvator bids him stand still under some contemptible fragment of splintery crag, which an Alpine snow-wreath would smother in its first swell, with a stunted bush or two growing out of it, and a volume of manufactory smoke for a sky. A man accustomed to the grace and infinity of nature's foliage, with every vista a cathedral, and every bough a revelation, can scarcely but be angered when Poussin mocks

---

[9] See Elizabeth Wheeler Manwaring, Italian Landscape in Eighteenth-Century England (New York: Oxford University Press, 1925).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> him with a black round mass of impenetrable paint, diverging into feathers instead of leaves, and supported on a stick instead of a trunk. The fact is, there is one thing wanting in all the doing of these men, and that is the very virtue by which the work of human mind chiefly rises above that of Daguerreotype or Calotype, or any other mechanical means that ever have been or may be invented, Love. (I.141-2)

Indeed, the emotion that Ruskin seeks in art is nothing less than religious passion, whose "Love" is the selfless joy, of which Socrates, Paul, Augustine, and Ambrose were among the greatest instructors, carried over during the modern period into the experience of the natural world as divine communication. Ruskin thus continues,

> There is no evidence of their ever having gone to nature with any thirst, or received from her such emotion as could make them, even for an instant, lose sight of themselves; there is in them neither earnestness nor humility; there is no simple or honest record of any single truth; none of the plain words nor straight efforts that men speak and make when they once feel. (I.141)

As a theorist of art Ruskin examines the expressive and formal nature of artistically interpreted observation and experience, and while he is concerned with the inherent moral, social, scientific, psychological, metaphysical topics, his aim is to the side of any such mechanical science of psycho-physiological phenomena, as provided by Burke, that would reduce the rationale for art to a paradigm of the sensory-affective disposition, as stretched along a pain-pleasure continuum and hovered over by reflective images or "ideas" of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

corresponding stimuli equated with art.

Burke, of course, did not endeavor to write a theory of art but an "exact theory of the passions"—"passions" constituting the original motives of experience in nature, of the universally subjective sensations, emotions, and perceptions that he supposed determined such ideas as are judged by and reflected in art. Yet Burke himself hoped to arrive at some fixed or consistent principles upon which to base an argument of taste:

> I imagined it could only be from a diligent examination of our passions in our own breasts'; from a careful survey of the properties of things which we find by experience to influence those passions; and from a sober and attentive investigation of the laws of nature, by which those properties are capable of affecting the body, and thus of exciting our passions. If this could be done, it was imaged that the rules deducible from such an enquiry might be applied to the imaginative arts, and to whatever else they concerned, without much difficulty. (1)

Combined with the tendency of the materialist perspective to literalize or grotesquely reify metaphorical and allegorical ways of speaking about the experience of aesthetic reflection, the discourse of the sublime is marked by shifts of emphasis between categories of imaginative (intellectual) and visceral (physical) passion. Certainly, early speculation in modern discourse about the nature of sublimity turns from signifying the sudden rapture of the soul, moved by divine-like forces of communication in nature or art, to sensationalistic, neo-gothic terrors constituting the very pith and gist of material and worldly strife.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"I am fully prepared," Ruskin announces, "to allow of much ingenuity in Burke's theory of the sublime, as connected with self-preservation":

> There are few things so great as death; and there is perhaps nothing which banishes all littleness of thought and feeling in an equal degree with its contemplation. Everything, therefore, which in any way points to it, and, therefore, most dangers and powers over which we have little control, are in some degree sublime. But it is not the fear, observe, but the contemplation of death; not the instinctive shudder and struggle of self-preservation, but the deliberate measurement of the doom, which are really great or sublime in feeling. It is not while we shrink, but while we defy, that we receive or convey the highest conceptions of fate. There is no sublimity in the agony of terror [...]. A little reflection will easily convince any one, that so far from the feelings of self-preservation being necessary to the sublime, their greatest action is totally destructive of it; and that there are few feelings less capable of its perception that those of a coward. But the simple conception or idea of greatness of suffering or extent of destruction is sublime, whether there be any connection of that idea with ourselves or not. If we were placed beyond the reach of all peril or pain, the perception of these agencies in their influence on others would not be less sublime, not because peril or pain are sublime in their own nature, but because their contemplation, exciting compassion or fortitude, elevates the mind, and renders meanness of thought impossible. (I.108)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Ruskin returns to this topic where, in discussing the depiction of fear on the human face, he finds it necessary to distinguish abject terror from fear of the divine (the latter being the desirable sort that Calvin qualified as "voluntary fear"). Burke, stating famously that "terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime," and claiming of terror itself that "no passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning," accounts for the essential affinity of terror and the sublime in terms of the "astonishment" that distinguishes them both (53).

Since Burke's subject is not art but the natural passions from which works of art follow, it is not surprising that he should focus upon the base effect of astonishment at the expense of disinterested contemplation. Astonishment is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree, according to Burke, and terror is the most extreme state of astonishment:

> Astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case, 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. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. (53)

Burke's explanation especially suggests the influence of John Dennis' reading of Longinus, so far as, unlike the reiterations of Addison and Shaftesbury, for example, Dennis interprets Longinus as would a religious reformer, albeit moderate in his Calvinism. That means, too, that, unlike Burke, Dennis' inferences about the affinity of astonishment, terror, and the sublime follow from his identification of the sublime and divine power, in

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

aspect of God's destructive wrath over that which pertains to awe before the infinite dimension and variety of Creation. Dennis writes that the greatest poets, moved by the religious passion, or enthusiasm, which in Dennis' view is identical to Longinus' sublime emotion, convey to their readers "nothing but the Elation, and Vehemence, and Fury proceeding from the Great, and Terrible, and Horrible Ideas" (I.222) and create in them a passion, no less religious in nature, being, rather, "as Longinus tells us," of "Admiration and Surprize; a noble Pride, and a noble Vigour, and invincible Force, transporting the Soul from its ordinary Situation, and Transport, and a Fulness of Joy mingled with Astonishment" (I.223). Dennis's language excitedly stammers with disjunctive leaps and repetitions, as if in some effort to grasp and convey at once the paradoxical nature of sublime emotion. Likewise, Dennis reports having suffered "a delightful Horrour, a terrible Joy," upon crossing the Alps, saying of himself when dangerously perched at the side of a plunging escarpment, "at the same time that I was infinitely pleas'd, I trembled," (I.380) and "transporting Pleasures followed the sight of the *Alpes*, and what unusual transports think you were those, that were mingles with horrours, and sometimes almost with despair?" (I.381).

Indeed, Dennis was the first to observe, famously, such emotions as were aroused by a fantastic terrain that threatened his life at the same time astonishing him with entirely strange and new sensations of enjoyment, yet the affective experience resulted as well from his having in mind the very *meaning* of mountains, as put forth in Thomas Burnet's The Sacred Theory of the Earth, a meaning whose full sense he would grasp while both exalted in their midst and terrified of fatally slipping (I.381). Dennis, like Addison,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

favored Burnet's argument that Earth was originally created with a smooth surface and only later ruined, turned into a rubble of mountainous terrain, from damage inflicted by the Deluge. Dennis, as if to explain the two-fold character of the sublime, in terms of the difference between the astonishing impact of powerful speech upon the mind and that which results from the no less astonishing sensory impressions made by external nature—but also as if to categorize the rhetorical and the natural circumstances of sublimity according to a difference, respectively, between creative and destructive energies—views his psychological experience in the Alps as illustrative of the conflicting geological theories, ancient and modern, which are relevant to the differences between the Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian perspectives. The different theories are reducible to two opposed arguments. One theory reasons that mountains were created by God. The other argues that mountains are a rubble of ruined earth and invoke the inconceivable force of God's terrible wrath against his own Creation and especially against the presumptuous sinner:

> If these Hills were first made with the World, as has been a long time thought, and Nature design'd them only as a Mound to inclose her Garden *Italy*: Then we may well say of her what some affirm of great Wits, that her careless, irregular and boldest Strokes are most admirable. For the *Alpes* are works which she seems to have design'd, and executed too in Fury [...]. But, if these Mountains were not a Creation, but form'd by universal Destruction, when the Arch with a mighty flaw dissolv'd and fell in the vast Abyss (which surely is the best opinion) then are these Ruines of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the old World the greatest wonders of the New. (I.381)

The Alps, if indeed resulting from God's punishing wrath and signifying the destructive force of the Creator over his creation, stand as geophysical evidence of the Flood of Noah. But, while standing in his imagination with Dennis, amidst such mountains, and terrified at the brink of his own physical annihilation, the modern Christian might afford in a moment's reflection to grasp not only the totality of God's infinite power enraged, but through holy fear be lifted up in its gloriousness. The exalting terror of which the mountains are the emblem, a monumental heap of broken earth, whose motif is both falling and rising, reflects the predicament of the fallen sinner who, believing, lives in hope of being redeemed.

Likewise, in the following passage quoted from Modern Painters, Ruskin distinguishes the aesthetic contemplation of terrible objects from unredeemed terror; further, he distinguishes unredeemed terror from holy fear; further yet, he addresses the awful extremity of God's wrath in terms of its transfiguring power for the believer, and he does so in a sermon-like style whose thoroughness and virtuosity merits quotation *in extenso*. But for the sake of commentary I shall break up all but the conclusion of the passage. First, although Ruskin does not speak in terms of the sublime, he sets down an observation that is commonplace in the discourse of the sublime, where he simply refers to Aristotle's thoughts about whether tragedy might not please to the extent that dramatic fear is enjoyable precisely because the spectator is especially happy to know that no actual danger is threatening him, however vividly the spectator is experiencing the illusion of danger, as if it were real. Thus, about the expression of fear, Ruskin asserts:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> ...it is most necessary to make a distinction between the conception of power, destructiveness, or majesty, in matter, influence, or agent, and the actual fear of any of these, for it is possible to conceive of terribleness, without being in a position obnoxious to the danger of it, and so without fear, and this feeling arising from the contemplation of dreadfulness, ourselves being in safety, as of a stormy sea from the shore, is properly termed awe, and it is a most noble passion. (I.319)

That "noble passion," associated with aesthetic feeling is of course not "fear," which "mortal and extreme, may be felt respecting things ignoble, as the falling from a window, and without any conception of terribleness or majesty" (I.319). Nor is it to be equated with fear respecting "things sublime, as thunder, or storm of battle," for as Burke would agree, "the tendency" of such fear is "to destroy all power of contemplation of their majesty, and to freeze and shrink all the intellect into a shaking heap of clay" (I.319). But Ruskin's point is that actual fear, whatever its source, is a contemptible degradation of the mind, not only in contrast to the aesthetically removed contemplation of fear-provoking things, but, most importantly, in contrast to the religious fear, which, in truth, is not fear, per se, but a sign of grace, and, thereby, the very key of divine love and joyful exhilaration. Hence, he provides this interpretation of Psalm 29, from which Calvin abstracted the holy concept of voluntarily fearing God:

> And so among the children of God, while there is always that fearful and bowed apprehension of his majesty, and that sacred dread of all offence to him, which is called fear of God, yet of real and essential fear there is none

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> but the clinging of confidence to him, as their Rock, Fortress, and Deliverer, and perfect love, and casting out of fear, so that it is not possible that while the mind is rightly bent on him, there should be dread of anything either earthly or supernatural, and the more dreadful seems the height of his majesty, the less fear they feel that dwell in the shadow of it, ('Of whom shall I be afraid?') so that they are as David was, devoted to his fear; whereas, on the other hand, those who, if they may help it, never conceive of God, but thrust away all thought and memory of him, and in his real terribleness and omnipresence fear him not nor know him, yet are of real, acute, piercing, and ignoble fear haunted forever more; fear inconceiving and desperate that calls to the rocks, and hides in the dust; and hence the peculiar baseness attributed to it in all times, and among all nations, as of a passion atheistical, brutal, profane. (I.319-20)

Ruskin's negation of the sublime as an affect of fear, so far as it had come to be known through Burke's taxonomy, instead retrieves the sublime according to Longinus' conception, which enhances the identification of the soul and divine Logos. Beauty in the classical philosophical tradition stands as the very idea of universal creation, of spirit and matter united in formal perfection, indistinct from the vital Good—permanent, harmonious, just—and whose instrument is Logos, the perception of which strikes awe and joy, love and gratitude. So, we find in an ancient writing, spuriously attributed to Aristotle, a passage from the Orphic hymn that ends, "Zeus of the flashing bolt is the king and the ruler of all men,/ Hiding them all away, and again to the glad light of heaven/

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Bringing them back at his will, performing terrible marvels" (I.640). Further, finding the wisdom of that hymn echoed in Plato, Aristotle concludes his own meditation with this quotation from the Laws: "God, then, as the old story has it, holding the beginning and the end and the middle of all things that exist, proceeding by a straight path in the course of nature brings them to accomplishment; and with him ever follows Justice, the avenger of all that falls short of the Divine Law—let every man who is to become blessed and happy partake in this from the very first" (I.640).

Kant had been as adamant as Ruskin would be in characterizing the sublime as a kind of holy fear, or joyous reverence, which is alien to feelings of dread or of slavishness. In considering the sublime effect of mighty natural forces, against whose destructiveness the human feels powerless, and relative to the image of divine justice which such forces convey, Kant writes:

> A person who is actually afraid and finds cause for this in himself because he is conscious that with his reprehensible attitude he offends against a might whose will is at once irresistible and just is not at all in the frame of mind [needed] to admire divine greatness, which requires that we be attuned to quiet contemplation and that our judgment be completely free. Only if he is conscious that his attitude is sincere and pleasing to God, will these effects of might serve to arouse in the idea of God's sublimity, insofar as he recognizes in his own attitude a sublimity that conforms to God's will, and is thereby elevated above any fear of such natural effects, which he does not regard as outbursts of God's wrath. Even humility, as a strict

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> judging of our own defects which, when we are conscious that our own attitudes are good, could otherwise easily be cloaked with the frailty of human nature [as an excuse], is a sublime mental attunement, namely, voluntary subjection of ourselves to the pain of self-reprimand so as gradually to eradicate the cause of these defects. This alone is what intrinsically distinguishes religion from superstition. The latter establishes in the mind not a reverence for the sublime, but fear and dread of that being of superior might whose will the terrified person finds himself subject to without holding him in esteem; and this can obviously give rise to nothing but ingratiation and fawning, never to a religion based on good conduct. Hence, sublimity is contained not in any thing of nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of our superiority to nature within us, and thereby also to nature outside us (as far as it influences us). Whatever arouses this feeling in us, and this includes the might of nature that challenges our forces, is then (although improperly) called sublime. And it is only by presupposing this idea within us, and by referring to it, that we can arrive at the idea of the sublimity of that being who arouses deep respect in us, not just by his might as demonstrated in nature, but even more by the ability, with which we have been endowed, to judge nature without fear and to think of our vocation as being sublimely above nature. (Critique of Judgment 122-23)

For Kant the sublime is recognition, the returning to God, by command of one's

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

own moral vocation as a human being, which calls from beyond nature but through it, being identical with the transcendent mind of divine consciousness, hence evoked by ideas of incomprehensible magnitude, beyond perception, or by encounters with forces of irresistible power, as when natural calamity strikes, those being the mathematical and the dynamical sublime, respectively. But, unlike the twenty-first century, analytic philosopher, Lap-Chuen Tsang, who argues that Kant's theory is only one of many possible manifestations of thinking about the sublime, and that it happens to suit Kant's own agenda as an enlightened, European Christian of the late eighteenth century, I would maintain that Kant's thoughts are fundamentally impersonal, that they conclude a centuries-long discourse in Western theory, wherein the sublime would come to represent, uniquely, the very mystery of human and divine relations as peculiarly signified in the increasingly reductive universality of Christian sacrifice and conversion, the stoical strains and disinterested viewpoint of which Kant's aesthetic philosophy articulated most effectively.[10] Such a disposition retrieves in aesthetic terms the pure logic of the moral

---

[10] Tsang's theory of the sublime argues for a universally human principle of transcultural and trans-historical relevance. In choosing the broadest possible sense of what is meant by the sublime, he defines it as consisting in the contemplation of an object that evokes in the observer "an intensified awareness of a limit situation in life and of his self-realization in that awareness" (124). According to Tsang, the object can be anything as long as it evokes that kind of experience in the subject; likewise, the sublimities, limit-situations, and self-realizations are unlimited in kind and on equal footing as to their qualitative and moral value, not any one kind being greater or smaller, better or worse, and so on (124). In this context Tsang views Kant's theory of the sublime as a peculiar articulation of just one of the subspecies of the sublime which are possible in human experience, with Kant's own theory happening to articulate Kant's own, peculiar experience of the sublime in terms of the philosophical and cultural tradition he inherits: "Kant, taking man as rational and free, ...believes that the sublime vocation of man is to realize himself as a free and rational being in co-existence with God, the supreme being of reason and freedom, reason and freedom being evaluative terms of his transcendental idealism. This understanding falls short of the general structure of the sublime in its

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

imperative upon which Calvin's idea of election depends. If the believer in redemption performs good works with the expectation of eternal reward, but he does not also believe it is possible for him to be damned even though he follows morally in the path of Christ, then not only is the absolute authority of God nullified, but his identification with and voluntary fear of that authority is degraded accordingly.

In so far as the sublime in modern discourse seems a term which readily turns in upon itself and reverses meanings, it is symptomatic of the rift in modern consciousness, between natural and revealed sources of transcendent reflection, and of ambivalence about the merit of visual images, especially for devotional contemplation. So one might argue, that, from its inception at the turn of the eighteenth century, the sublime stands for the self-divided condition of reformed Christianity; or, put another way, that the sublime is a theory of aesthetic emotion that in itself organizes, in terms distinct from the perfection of objective beauty, the interior threshold, or fault line, which is the point of conversion, a fulcrum, constituting the only authentic self of redeemed consciousness, as it looks both forward to salvation and back to original sin.

IV. Prescription for Plainness

> Go then thou mightiest in thy Father's Might,
>
> Ascend my Chariot, guide the rapid Wheels,
>
> That shake Heaven's Basis, bring forth all my War,

---

manifold instantiation in human existence [as I delineate above]. However, we may observe in conclusion that Kant's theory remains unsurpassed as an autobiographical statement of his experience of the sublime as philosopher and as a man" (143-4).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

My Bow and Thunder, my Almighty Arms. (Paradise Lost, VI.710-713)

An elevated style imitates not greatness but awe before the idea of greatness. That is the gist of John Dennis' commentary on the lines quoted above, in which he faults Milton, however sympathetically, for making God speak about his own power "with a great Spirit," as if God were himself rapt in admiration and terror before the image of himself. Indeed, Milton's mistake is almost unavoidable, Dennis maintains, for it arises from the true "Spirit of Poetry," or "Poetical Enthusiasm," which, for Dennis, is identical with the theory of the sublime, as put forth by Longinus, and is constituted of "nothing but that Admiration and Terror, and the rest of those Enthusiastical Passions which are produced by their proper Ideas, and which are to hold proportion with their Ideas, as their Ideas must with their Objects" (I.353). But Milton's poetical narrator, in being appropriately overwhelmed by the utterly splendid object of his vision, has at the same time failed to "hold proportion," i.e., to harmonize the elements of his representation, where, in his attempt to represent God's expression of himself in view of himself, he instead conveys the impression of grandeur received from his own, the poet's, necessarily humble viewpoint. The Deity's speech in Milton's conception registers its perceived object as one of a magnitude grossly incommensurate with the viewpoint of the divine speaker with which it is identical, for it is scaled, rather, to convey in reverse the relatively narrow capacity and lowly position of the human viewpoint, for which the divine object must appear singularly magnificent and mighty. As Dennis sees it, Milton's error is less a problem of distortion than one of misrepresentation, however, in that the poet fails to imitate truthfully, objectively, what the poet claims to be imitating in that passage, which is

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

God's expression of himself. However, since the passage instead accurately represents something it does not propose to be imitating—namely, the merely human perspective of the poet-narrator, seized with awe, in perception of God's might—it is faulted by Dennis not for lacking poetical passion, with which, on the contrary, it seems to abound, but for its injudicious reversal of the contrary viewpoints, divine and human. Ironically, though, that discrepant shifting of perspectives yet results from the poet's genuine fury, his true genius, or "enthusiastical" passion, so that the imbalance and confusion against which Dennis complains is of a dynamic exchange, as sublime as it is inevitable. In rendering the divine perspective in human terms, the shift renders, *de facto*, the human perspective in terms divine, hence, manifesting a profoundly unstable, perpetually inverting perspective on a scale of monumental disproportion:

> ...for 'tis the Admiration and the Terror that make the Spirit in the preceding Verses; and it is impossible to conceive the Ideas without feeling the Passions: so that *Milton*, while he was rapt with Admiration, and moved with Terror by the Ideas which he had conceiv'd, shifts Persons insensibly, and forgetting who speaks, expresses himself with those passions which indeed are proper enough in the poet, but never can be so in the Deity. For neither his Bow, nor his Almighty Arms, his Thunder, nor the rapid Wheels that shake Heaven's Basis, can be in the least admirable or terrible to the Divinity. (I.353)

One must wonder whether Dennis' commentary on Milton's having shifted persons "insensibly" might allude—itself, insensibly, perhaps—to Longinus' famous observation,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

that one of the effects of the sublime in speeches and writing is the listener's or reader's mistaken sense of being, himself, the speaker of the words that are affecting him. For, upon being so consumed in their effectiveness, the listener or reader seems to feel, that those words are really issuing from himself, that the very thing they are conveying to him he himself is describing from his sense of experiencing it directly through those same words. Longinus tries himself to describe the experience of being outside oneself and becoming like another through the effectiveness of that other's verbally mediated imagination, of being at one not with oneself alone but with the thoughts of another, through those words which the other uses so powerfully to express those thoughts.

As a critic interested in the interrelation of poetical invention and religious thought, Dennis attempts to distinguish the poetical spirit in Milton's religious poem from the documentary religiousness of the poem's obligation, as a cultural product consistent with the epic materials of human history, as told from the salvific perspective of Christian faith. After all, Dennis' announced purpose as a literary theorist in search of critical principles is to demonstrate, that religious thought is essential to making great poetry, religion being "absolutely necessary to raise it [i.e., poetry] to the greatest exaltation of which so Nobel an Art is capable," likewise, that poetical inventions are required by religion "in order to its making more forcible Impressions upon the Minds of Men" (I.325). But it seems especially important to note here that Dennis sets out with this purpose for a reason peculiar to the British period of Restoration in which he writes: He intends both to defend and to reform the theater, as he had begun to do in his essay, "The Usefulness of the Stage." In trying to establish generally a ground for poetry criticism, he builds from his

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

earlier argument for the moral and civic value of English drama, having hoped in that essay to strike a sensible balance between attacks against the stage from puritanical iconoclasts on the one hand and the exploitation of the stage by licentious exhibitionists on the other. Dennis' credo is of course consistent with the Horatian rule that art should entertain as well as instruct, but, further, by way of Aristotle's teaching—that poetry was born from religion and ritual, and, as such, that drama is the origin of the other poetical genres—he believes that theatrical entertainment is peculiar among the literary arts, in that it sets the stage, so to speak, for the other poetical genres, lyric and epic, to follow and to flourish at the height of their capacities. Great literary activity of every kind, in Dennis' view, grounds the improvement of learning and the maintenance of political liberty. Dramatic entertainment in England, not only restored but elevated, is key to the vitality of English society because dramatic art appeals to visceral pleasures which are inseparable from the critical self-reflection, individual and national, which the theater fosters in preparing for greater achievement in the arts and sciences, generally, and in drawing together a community of spectator-participants.

In such a context as Dennis' defense of theater, the problem of establishing a reliable point of view in any passage of Milton's epic poetry might be relevant to that of depicting stage personae as speakers holding forth from within the bounds of their objective characterizations. But, insofar as the elevated stage of Dennis' ideal theater conforms to a self-consciously if diffusively Christian perspective, whose view of Christ's redemptive sacrifice is situated historically in the living processes of martyrdom, the matter of decorum in historical poetry relates to interpreting divine accommodation and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

condescension both in Holy Writ and in Jesus Christ, as these are the epic agents of mankind's universal salvation, whereas the poet and his audience are themselves pilgrims in the Providential landscape. Milton's conflation of divine and human perspectives in the brief passage from Paradise Lost discussed above indeed errs insofar as it confuses the way men perceive divinity with the way divinity might reasonably be supposed to perceive itself. And, of course, the very effort to speak for God in a Christian poem is problematical, given that God has already spoken for himself in the person of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, as well as in the person of Jesus Christ, as recorded in the New. The modern reader of Scripture might permit a leeway of judgment in pagan epic which he would not permit in the Christian narrative, since the speeches of the heathen gods could only be pure poetical make-believe, at worst conceived and inspired by Satan, hence, requiring a somewhat different criterion for detecting false notes in the correlations of probability and decorum. But, in view of Milton's error, as Dennis analyses it, the poet's failure of decorum results from an excess of poetical enthusiasm, religious in essence, and thereby surpassing vulgar perception and ordinary judgment. Hence, the error conflates the divine and the human through an exchange of opposed qualities and perspectives—a conversion by means of metaphor, tropes and figuration—which, in principle at least, is consistent with the strategy of accommodation in the word of Scripture as well as in Christ's flesh, the astonishment and terror of the poet being represented in the speeches of God , hence, God's speech representing emotions which only a human being could suffer.

But, one might consider further how the ambivalence of the sublime in literary

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

criticism, which Dennis' critique of Milton illustrates, is born upon by cliches of accommodation/condescension in Protestant hermeneutics, and the anxiety of interpretation for the faithful reader of Scripture, whose knowledge of God and of himself is exercised in balancing prideful certainty and abject doubt, hence, in achieving between those poles a perspective which transcends them.

Indeed, in necessarily failing to imagine the indifference of the divine to itself, the poet's style of transport in view of the almighty machine he describes reflects his passion in projecting only what he is able to imagine—loftiness being a style born not from those who awe but from those who are awed—however, it would appear that one principle of objective representation has been violated in order that a different one be satisfied, a principle no less just in the measure of its value and proportion, but one which raises a problem concerning the balance of judgment and passion in poetry, further, a principle which raises the question of whether poetry about the divine, which does not itself pretend to speak in the voice of the Holy Spirit, is in some sense sacred anyway. Moreover, there is the question of whether the prophets of the Bible, who, unlike Milton and other poets of post-biblical Christianity, are believed to have been the amanuenses of the Holy Spirit, should also be regarded as poets. One might argue in the fashion of Stanley Fish and say, that, in the very poem in which Milton has invoked the Holy Spirit for his muse, he proves by virtue of his inability to speak about divine things from the perspective of divinity that the Holy Spirit is indeed out of his poetical reach, that he is a poet but not a prophet such as Moses was. Hence, in being poetically enthused as a man in nature, compelled to balance the forces of spirit and matter within himself, instead of being a divinely inspired

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

vehicle, a mere *vates*, Milton is indeed not able, as Moses was, to speak for God in words as plain as the *fiat lux* in Genesis, to which Longinus and then Boileau famously point as being perfectly sublime, "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." In consisting of the exemplary proportion with which Deity speaks, the expression conveys in right measure the ease with which Deity executes his own power and the immediacy with which matter responds in conforming to his will.

However, in poetically imitating the prophet of the Hebrew tradition while also mimicking the heathen conventions of poetical invocation, Milton effectively, perhaps deliberately, cuts down to size the role of the poet, and himself as that poet, in the modern, post-miraculous and post-biblical age, revealing himself to be not a holy seer, as was Homer in the eyes of heathen antiquity, nor as Moses truly was; but, he may also be exposing the modern poet's self-consciously artful pretension to the role of seer in order to show the superior position in which the common Christian finds himself, a new man, living amidst the community of Grace and in the Word, the need for priests and prophets having passed. Yet, insofar as poetry itself remains and is to be distinguished from religious writing, poetry might serve in the Christian world to emphasize the new, improved status of the modern poet, who, distinguished from the ancient by virtue of the Grace visited upon humanity through Christ's love, is here defining what it means for the human spirit to be inspired poetically by sacred thoughts, and whose legitimately religious insight neither contradicts nor presumes the authority of Scripture, much as the advocates of true philosophy championed their science by arguing its compatibility with biblical truths.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Dennis, an enlightened Christian who regarded poetry as an entirely natural, human activity, requiring both talent and cultivation, disdained the idea of divine inspiration in any literal sense of its meaning. As Dennis seems to say, Milton's poetical persona, as it turns out, is sublimely inventive for failing to prove himself a prophet upon successfully proving himself a poet, the sublime in modern poetry being, indeed, limited to the temporal realm of the imagination, though reaching at the extreme limit of that realm. By the "Great Spirit" with which he infused the speech of Deity, Milton shows what glorious heights of sense and understanding the earthbound poet yet achieves in the spirit of religious contemplation.

Indeed, in that passage of Paradise Lost which Dennis criticizes for the poet's insensible shifting of human and divine persons through the very mediation of poetry, God is commanding his own divine Son, who is now being called to action against Satan and who shall subsequently become human in order to offer himself as a mortal sacrifice, in substitution for man, hence, in order to reverse the ways of death and turn human destiny back toward God. If we read that passage as Dennis has, but also through Kant's explanation of moral religion in terms of the difference between duty and grace, and, further, in light of Kant's understanding of the relation between duty and the sublime (as opposed to grace and the beautiful), then the ill-proportioned substitution of human and divine viewpoints against which Dennis finds fault in Milton's poem may be seen to demonstrate the almighty command, which is the vocation, or divine calling, to which the sublime poet of the Christian era is internally bound in his nature as a human being. Kant writes, that a moral religion is one "to be cast not in dogmas and observances, but in the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

heart's disposition to observe all human duties as divine commands" (Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason 98). Hence, he identifies the sublime with the concept of duty (rather than of grace) insofar as duty gratifies an abstraction which transcends pleasure, or that it answers to its own necessity with a different kind of pleasure, consisting of an intellectual and moral enjoyment which exceeds the satisfaction of natural desires and inclinations; yet, it would appear in the following passage that gracefulness, which Kant proposes as the opposite of duty, can only be delivered through that utter commitment to necessity, of which the sacrifice of God as man, is exemplary. Ernst Cassirer summarizes this idea in terms of morality, which, "insofar as it is founded on the concept of man as a being who is free, but for that very reason binding himself by his reason to unconditional laws, neither requires the idea of another being superior to him to know his duty, nor any motive for observing the law except the law itself" (324). Kant, himself, writes in this vein:

> I am unable to associate *gracefulness* and the *concept of duty*, by reason of its very dignity. For the concept of duty includes unconditional necessitation, to which gracefulness stands in direct contradiction. The majesty of the law, (like the law on Sinai) instills awe (not dread, which repels; and also not fascination, which invites familiarity) and this awe rouses respect of the subject toward his master, except that in this case, since the master lies in us, it rouses a feeling of the sublimity of our own vocation that enraptures us more than any beauty. (48n)

Similarly, Kant writes in the Third Critique of the relatively less important concept of the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

sublime in nature, when compared with that of the beautiful in nature, the latter being commensurate with our apprehension of the laws to which nature conforms in satisfying itself, but the former, being analogical in its reflection of absolute magnitude and might, stands rather for the transcendency of Mind, i.e., of that human purposiveness, whose moral law and destiny consist of those divine commands which are superior to nature. "Independent natural beauty reveals to us a technic of nature," an objective principle of forms and appearances by means of which the purposeless mechanism of nature is construed and applied for the purposes of art.

> However, in what we usually call sublime in nature there is such an utter lack of anything leading to particular objective principles and to forms of nature conforming to them, that it is rather in its chaos that nature most arouses our ideas of the sublime, or in its wildest and most ruleless disarray and devastation, provided it displays magnitude and might. This shows that the concept of the sublime in nature is not nearly as important and rich in implications as that of the beautiful in nature, and that this concept indicates nothing purposive whatever in nature itself but only in what *use* we can make of our intuitions of nature so that we can feel a purposiveness within ourselves and in the way of thinking that introduces sublimity into our presentation of nature. (Critique of Judgment 99-100)

In his Third Critique, Kant has entered the discourse on sublimity at a historical point well past the period in which the task of the philosopher and critic was to distinguish characteristics of the sublime and the beautiful in nature. Instead, upon treating the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

problem of aesthetic value, he is attempting, as Dennis did in the historical beginning of that discourse (relative to the problems of literary value and criticism) to define and to analyze the pleasure, i.e., the "liking," which the so-called sublime in nature arouses, and in terms no less relevant to the problem of transcendent spirituality than Dennis' attempt to reconcile the Longinian concept with that of Christian poetry. In describing the ambivalent aesthetic of the sublime idea, Kant writes, "the object is apprehended as sublime with a pleasure that is possible only by means of a displeasure" (117). The pleasure comes from being made conscious of an unlimited ability in oneself (reason) which would not have been discovered had one not also experienced (with displeasure) the limited ability of oneself in another aspect (sense).

> The feeling that is beyond our ability to attain to an idea *that is a law for us* is RESPECT. Now the ideas of comprehending every appearance that may be given us in the intuition of a whole is an idea enjoined on us by a law of reason, which knows no other determinate measure that is valid for everyone and unchanging than the absolute whole. But our imagination, even in its greatest effort to do what is demanded of it and comprehend a a given object in a whole of intuition (and hence to exhibit the idea of reason), proves its own limits and inadequacy, and yet at the same time proves its vocation to [obey] a law, namely, to make itself adequate to that idea. Hence the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation. But by a certain subreption (in which respect for the object is substituted for respect for the idea of humanity within our[selves, as]

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> subjects[s]) this respect is accorded an object of nature that, as it were, makes intuitable for us the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive powers over the greatest power of sensibility. (Critique of Judgment 114)

But how might we identify the problem of sublimity in poetry (poetry's language being "part of nature, part of us" as Wallace Stevens put it), with respect to such a concept of duty as Kant provides, insofar as the highest poetry aspires to but does not equal the divinity of Scripture? Cassirer's commentary on Kant's concept of duty provides an insight:

> Religion is for Kant, "knowledge of our duties as divine commands." Here, too, the concept of duty stands at center; but contemplation of its origin and the basis of its validity takes another direction from what was the case in the foundation of ethics. Instead of regarding the concept of duty purely as to its meaning and what it commands, we here join the substance of the demand with the idea of a supreme being, which we think as the creator of the moral law. Such a change is humanly inevitable, for every idea, even the highest such as that of freedom, can be grasped by man only in an image and by "schematization." We always require a certain analogy with nature to make the supersensible properties conceivable to us, and cannot avoid this "schematism of the analogy." (382)

In light of those ideas with which Kant concludes a century of discourse on the sublime, let us return again to the beginning of that discourse, with Dennis' critique of Milton's

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

own subreption, so to speak, which Dennis finds, indeed, displeasurable, by virtue of those disproportionately conflated perspectives, human and divine, which at the same time prove the enthusiasm of Milton's poetical spirit.

By means of an application curiously analogical, the very problem which Dennis treats—of the poet's imaginative perspective displacing the blindness of divinity to the splendor of itself—reminds Dennis (I.517n) of Pascal's argument in his Proofs of Jesus Christ (Sections 797-99) in which the plainness of Jesus's manner of speaking about divine things stands as proof of his divinity. Pascal writes, "Jesus Christ said great things so simply, that it seems as though He had not thought them great; and yet so clearly that we easily see what He thought of them. This clearness, joined to this simplicity, is wonderful" (Sec. 797). Pascal's position is shared by his contemporary, Boileau, whose translation of Peri Hypsous was informed by it, and for which reason Longinus approval of the plain style in Genesis was celebrated, and for whom the sublime, or "the marvelous," in poetical discourse would come to stand for the divine-like expression of perfectly unified thought and expression, hence, the modern criterion of *le mot juste*, by means of whose simple and direct force the noblest of ideas is made immediately apprehensible to sense and reason. Such a criterion, particularly regarding epic decorum, was hewn amidst fashionable controversies in both France and England during the period of Restoration. The plain diction and humble imagery of ancient texts, biblical and pagan alike, would stand for an ideal which contrasted sharply against a glutted taste for effete, self-consciously elegant technicalities and effects. Pascal's equation of divinity and plainness implicitly identifies lowliness and mortality with verbal extravagance, and, in the context of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Dennis' criticism, challenges the use of elevated diction to render the speech of Deity in epic poetry. Since the divine cannot be impressed by its own splendor, in order for gods and demigods to be rendered in character, it must first be admitted that their gloriousness, which must be extraordinary to others, can only be mundane to themselves. Divine manners would best be rendered without any of the pompousness that belies the inferior perspectives of those who are in awe of the divine. Instead, divinity should exhibit the same easy manner, simple yet dignified, as would those of an ordinary human being at home in the natural surroundings of his own mortality. Dennis, impressed with Pascal's argument and taken with its illustration by a point of reverse analogy, paraphrases Pascal's hypothetical example of how a "Peasant...or an ordinary Man," who had been carried into the palace of a great mogul and shown there "all his Riches, Pomp, and Power," would describe what he saw, in contrast to the way the mogul would himself speak of them:

> ...this Peasant at his return would certainly speak of these things in extravagant terms, in terms that would sufficiently declare his Transport. But if the Mogul himself was to speak of them, he who had been always used to them, would speak without any Emotion. So, says, Monseiur *Paschal*, if any one else had deliver'd any thing concerning the Glories of the Kingdom of Heaven, he would certainly have done it with Transport, nay tho he had been a Fanatick or an Impostor: for let those Divine Ideas come how they will, 'tis impossible for man to think of them without being ravish'd by them. But our Saviour, who was God, and who consequently had been used to them from all Eternity, spoke of them unconcern'd.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

(I.353).

Here is something of a dilemma concerning style for the poet of noble ideas. For the appropriate poetical rendering of the divine, according to Pascal's observation, would appear to collapse the natural, hierarchical relation of humanity and divinity, at least at the rhetorical level; for, if the poet is to render divine beings in terms which are natural to their circumstances, he must assume or at least pretend to assume the perspective of divinity over that of one who is awed by divinity. On the other hand, the poet shall succeed in rendering divinity, in terms of divine indifference to itself, by merely imitating the simple if dignified manner of ordinary human behavior. The upshot is, that gods would appear to behave as men and men to behave as gods. Hence, in rendering the divine according to a style of dignified simplicity which is no less common to the human than to the divine, the poet risks losing the advantage of a rhetorical distinction, and might then fail to inspire the terrible wonder of which divinity—and poetry—alone are capable. Unlike Dennis, whose literary-critical subject was the rendering of divinity in poetry, Pascal was writing from an ironic religious perspective about the least spectacular evidence of God in the humanity of Jesus—i.e., his plain style. But, even though one might question the literary truth of Pascal's remarks on miscalculated decorum, the miraculous inversions of high and low which he describes in terms of relative viewpoints, concerning the equally divine and human nature of Jesus, may help frame a similar irony regarding the sublime in general.

V. Absolutely Relative

Unlike Beauty, Goodness, and Truth, ideas of consummate Being which are

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

absolute in principle, the Sublime conceptualizes relative value in absolute terms. Force and magnitude, for instance, to which the eighteenth-century discourses on the sublime conventionally referred, are ideas that pertain to relations of comparison, whose scale measures lesser and greater degrees of intensity, extension, amplitude, endurance, and so on. As conceived from the perspective of an inferior capacity, which gauges its powers of resistence and comprehension against superior ones, the Sublime materializes as absolute force and magnitude just where the inferior discovers the utmost limit of its own capacity. At such a limit, the very scale of comparison, with its plurality of relative forces and magnitudes, is obliterated, and an impassible gulf divides the greater from greatness itself. This is what Kant means when he speaks of the sublime as transcendent thought, i.e., pure abstraction emerging at the limit of sense. The inferior now compensates for its inability to exceed the utmost limit of its powers by conceptualizing what is beyond itself in terms of consummate force and magnitude. Hence, the Sublime initiates the apprehension of greatness, by which the inferior defines itself, at the same time as the inferior exceeds itself in doing so. This ambivalence, whereby consummate superiority is mirrored in inferior aspiration, speaks of the transfiguring awareness from below of the part coming into consciousness as a function of the whole, that is, of the total scale of Being as imagined from the particular itself. Likewise, the sublime identification of Deity and infinitude is radically situated in the limited subjectivity of the lesser in view of the greater, the modern philosophical development of which may be traced to Anselm's premise for the existence of God, which Descartes would appropriate centuries later, namely, that Deity might be defined first of all as the greatest conception of which the human mind is capable.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The sublime, as Kant would recognize, however, is a point of convergence between the sensible and supersensible, and dramatically so, in that it conceptualizes the trembling, mortal approach to supreme being, wherein the inferior resolves to be elevated in relation to the superior—for the sake of all that is beautiful, good, and true. So, as it bears upon the acute self-consciousness of the human in relation to the divine, the sublime is manifestly historical, its point of reference being the condition of mutability and loss. The sublime stands as a metafigure, thereby, for the transforming occasion of a thought or perception, in which Beauty, Goodness, and Truth may be utterly, immediately apprehended, in their essences, as substantive ideas; however, as the Sublime does not originate in the divine but in the discourse *on* the divine, in which divinity explains itself to the fallen, conducted from the position of humility, in which the aspirations of the fallen are pronounced, it reflects the cultivated perspective, in respect of a critical disposition, which, struggling to define itself through such controversies of absolute and relative value as those which would discern what is beautiful, good, and true, likewise, struggles to decipher its core predicaments within the commotions of self-division, contradiction, mutability, and annihilation.

For the Sublime, as it would come to be described in terms of experience and to be theorized in terms of what experience means or proves universally, is a legacy of fallible perfection, of the freedom of will which is proven in the Fall and in the work of Redemption. Let us remember the pronouncement of Milton's Eve's, having just eaten of the tree and beginning to soar with self-importance through one error of sensation after another:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> [...] Experience, next to thee I owe,
> Best guide; not following thee, I had remained
> In ignorance, thou openest wisdom's way,
> And giv'st access, though secret she retire.
> And I perhaps am secret [...]. (IX.807-811)

In denoting how the human and the divine are realized in terms of one another, the Sublime does not exist absolutely but actually—as something that indeed happens, in the privacy of personal consciousness but which exemplifies the general inclination of the human to apprehend divine purpose. In denoting a brink, wherein the human and the divine think each other into being, the sublime might indeed be regarded as a theory of peculiar relevance as to whether and toward what end the sciences and the arts are perceived to mediate Beauty, Goodness, and Truth.

The renewed interest in the sublime aesthetic during recent decades has been driven largely by a preoccupation with modernity, hence, with tracing by means of the sublime a genealogy of the modern character, from the beginning of the Enlightenment in post-Reformation Europe, through various positivist and romantic counter-developments, so, insofar as the sublime can be said to have originated and developed in circumstances peculiar to those in which modernity itself arose, its seminal discourses might explain the uniquely modern disposition reflected in them. Yet the sublime even or especially when reduced to its principle ideas of magnitude and force, is typically elusive since the stability of its aesthetic formulation would have to be premised upon a common or universal value, which endures against shifts in cultural and theoretical emphasis, from period to period

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and according to different thematic and philosophical frameworks. However, not unlike the sublime object itself, which, in art or in nature escapes the formal criteria of intellectual or physical beauty, the aesthetic disposition of the sublime seems to function in its retrospective, academic formulations as a koan of self-reflective subjectivity, ultimately signifying the infinite and eternal nothingness of consciousness itself. On the one hand, the sublime aesthetic would develop in psycho-physiological terms as an appeal to the raw and ceaseless vigor of an adventurous, extravagant, and irregular dynamic, typical of Nature in its changeable element more than in its immutable laws. In that sense, the sublime would appear to deviate from the ideal of intellectual beauty and the rational harmonies of the cosmic order. However, in being cultivated from empirical psychology, the sublime would also complicate the mere, ephemeral pursuit of sensual pleasure with its feeling for deprivation, pain, and horror. For, therein, being separated from worldly things the terrorized soul might begin to cure itself. Indeed, the philosophy of the sublime aesthetic is a synthesis of strains drawn from Epicurean, Platonic, and Aristotelian psychology, from Roman stoicism, Judeo-Christian teleology, Longinian rhetoric as well as from Augustinian doctrinal and exegetical principles. But were it not for the peculiar circumstances of reformed Christianity during the period of Restoration, such strains, along with other influences, would not combine effectively toward a groundwork for a discourse on the sublime in eighteenth century criticism and psychology. It seems to me, that if one is searching for a prototype of the sublime aesthetic in modern discourse, one need only to read the crucial passages in Paradise Lost, which describe the first parents' transgression as the process whereby the imaginative elements of sensation, appetite, and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

desire combine in creating an image of reasoning, which, failing to engage the judicial intellect, instead stupefies and amazes it. As the particulars of Milton's psychological explanation of the Fall are turned through the fulcrum of logical antinomy and error, so too the reader is thrust, with a tumult of exhilaration and dread, into the deadly void of reason without wisdom, from which the fall appears to have arisen and into which Milton's unhappy pair plummet. Indeed, Milton's characterization of Original Sin is vortex-like, as if riveted to the sinuousness of the serpent's shape and movement, a dynamic confusion of rising and falling, expanding and shrinking, whence false logic presumes a reversal of fortune through the mind's self-wounding: Thus a newly fallen Eve, cast in feverish delusion, means to persuade Adam with the same arguments, founded in experience and reasoning, by which her inferior, the talking snake, persuaded her, the transgression being of an event both "Strange/ [...] and wonderful to hear":

> This tree is not what as we are told, a tree
> Of danger tasted, nor to evil unknown
> Opening the way, but of divine effect
> To open eyes, and make them gods who taste;
> And hath been tasted such: the serpent wise
> Or not restrained as we, or not obeying,
> Hath eaten of the fruit, and is become,
> Not dead, as we are threatened, but thenceforth
> Endued with human voice and human sense,
> Reasoning to admiration, and with me

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Persuasively hath so prevailed, that I

Have also tasted, and have also found

The effects to correspond, opener my eyes,

Dim erst, dilated spirits, ampler heart,

And growing up to godhead; which for thee

Chiefly I sought [...].

[. . . . .]

Thus Eve with continence blithe her story told;

But in her cheek distemper flushing glowed.

On the other side, Adam, soon as he heard

The fatal trespass done by Eve, amazed,

Astonied stood and blank, while horror chill

Ran through his veins, and all his joints relaxed. (IX. 861-878, 886-891)

The "astonied" consciousness of the sublime aesthetic is an effect of sin; it is rooted in mortality, not in the divine, and it derives from the mind's self-wounding as a condition grounded in terms which are relevant to but quite distinct from the unmitigated nobility set forth in the ancient Peri Hypsous, whence pagan immortality consists only in the fame which is spread and preserved in language. Milton's depiction of the Fall identifies the anguished root of the sublime aesthetic, wherein the struggle is to surrender in love and trust to God's will against the conviction of one's own limited view of justice, thus, to concede that a law which appears especially repulsive or absurd to one's natural sense of well-being might yet be the source of one's well-being, its rational beauty evident

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

only to the divine eye, which alone sees comprehensively, providentially. True reason (as Kant would have it), which is a moral condition insofar as the free being binds himself by his reason to unconditional laws (as represented in the interdiction against eating of the tree of knowledge), here stands in contrast to the false reason of Satan's sophistical argument, conceived in violation of the interdiction and resulting in the substitution of freedom by disconnection, the first parents and their progeny released into exile, as wanderers in the wilderness, until such a time as the birth and sacrifice of the god-man, a paradox of gracefulness and dutifulness, which is reflected in the co-relation of the sublime and the beautiful. Neither one of the aesthetic dispositions—of the sublime or of the beautiful—is adequate unto itself, each an aspect of the broken world, which the theorist, the historian, the poet strives to repair. Likewise, none of those aspirants can achieve the ultimate point of view which is beyond the sublime and the beautiful, being able only to stand in one while perceiving the other, hence, always changing positions accordingly. However, the successful articulation of an elegant paradigm in which these opposed and convertible aspects of aesthetic experience appear to be distinguished and are continually turned stands, rather, in place of the repair which cannot be effected by human sense or reason. It is, thereby, constructed as a monument of faith in the ultimate wisdom of Providence, whose end the free being cannot imagine in sensuous ideas, but to whose purpose he is rapturously bound and with which he is rationally, i.e., abstractly, attuned.

VI. The Sublime: Historical or Theoretical

The two-hundred year discourse of the sublime in modern criticism, philosophy,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and the arts had been discontinued for at least three generations when twentieth-century scholars began to conduct an historical survey and to establish retrospective points of analysis and interpretation, which would spur subsequent generations to resume the discourse, though now from a belated position and askew from the urgencies driving its original formulations. So any current discourse, whether *of* or *on* the sublime, would have to be self-aware about the difference in kind between its own static concept (derived, as it would be, from the historical restoration of the sublime) and the active thinking of those in the past whose works would now comprise a virtual museum of the sublime, to be variously arranged and ransacked. The historical gap in discourses is especially relevant when we consider how, from this side of the difference between the living discourse, long past, with Ruskin's Modern Painters constituting its last gasp, and retrospective versions of it, the sublime might be reduced theoretically to a formula adequate to the variety and range of its topics and yet not be adequately represented in that formula. For instance, analytic philosopher Lap-Chuen Tsang defines the experience of the sublime as the intensified awareness of "the subject's self-realization at his life-limit"(98) and Guy Sircello, who also writes from analytic philosophy, classifies as sublime any discourse expressive of some experience whose theme is ultimately one of "epistemological transcendence" (542). (Again, as I argue above, one might consider the relation of the sublime to the Fall in terms of how we know what we know, the guilty, self-imposed deaths of critical consciousness, associated with separation from and transgression against the divine, being the means by which knowledge is acquired). Any such formulas as those (such as Tsang's and Sircello's) constructed from a summary of the historical discourse,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

might still not identify principles which dominated important intersections of thought in the living discourse on the sublime while it was still in progress, nor ideas that any one of the original participants were especially striving to describe, explain, or argue. So, one might ask what is to be gained in formulating a merely academic theory of the sublime, which, firstly, both exceeds and is irrelevant to the circumstances from which its living discourse emerged and continued to evolve and, secondly, is one that seems, for having grounded itself in a historically defunct discourse, to avert with canny circumspection current difficulties in reconciling the freedoms of aesthetic and moral judgement?

While I think it is possible, and worthwhile, to construe a reasonable theory of the sublime from the variously descriptive, thematic, and philosophical materials elaborated under its rubric, I believe the most compelling reason for doing so now is to understand not the sublime, per se, but the perspectives and interests of those involved in thinking through its original formulations. One might then begin to pry away or to penetrate some of the academic jargon and gain a clearer sense of the concerns which informed the discourse of the sublime, hence, gaining the advantage of a more accurate historical framework and being better able to judge the aptness of the term, "sublime," for characterizing similar or different constellations in present-day thought.

Thus, my view is that even though the experience of the sublime, in the broadest sense possible, can be identified archetypally as the portal under which, figuratively speaking, the human begins to re-meet the divine, a reasonable theory of the sublime should not exceed the limited cultural and historical context in which the participants of its original discourse, especially at the time of its inception in the late seventeenth through

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

early eighteenth centuries, labored to conceive its meaning and without which no discourse of the sublime can be said to have existed. For, given its transcendent points of relevance, the discourse on the sublime from the Baroque through the Romantic periods in northern Europe and along its American frontiers is peculiar to a narrative of individual free will and moral responsibility which, arguably, need not be essential to ideas of magnitude and might in other cultural periods and traditions. For that reason, a current study of the sublime in the context of its original formulations, as I see it, should be concerned with those discourses which occurred when the term "sublime" was being peculiarly applied to ideas that were being critically defined and argued, as if the logical and moral structure of an entire civilization depended upon it.

Therefore, though I am not aiming to theorize the sublime in terms metaphysical but to reconsider some aspects of its discourse in light of how it bore upon modern concepts of literary purpose and value, I am aware of having to affect some bold generalizations. However, instead of isolating the sublime as a theory in aesthetic psychology or literary criticism, hence, instead of exaggerating by force of definition its conceptual integrity at the expense of the concerns its original discourses were being formulated to illustrate, I maintain that the vagueness or indefiniteness of the sublime, with which its original formulators grappled, might be recognized as essential to its function not as a philosophical concept but as an imaginative conceit, an allegorical figure, if you will. For, I propose that the sublime object, be it identified with a lyrical passage of Paradise Lost, or the impenetrable envelopment of starry space, or the savage dignity of an Alpine escarpment, arose from within and in configuration of the bifurcated consciousness of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Reformation history, relative to the literary conceptualization of Providence as epic narrative, whence the self-divided consciousness embeds itself, and much as the Church functions historically as a teleology of the spirit, which yet must unfold temporally, in terms both literal and allegorical.

More than a century after Boileau introduces the term, "sublime," into a critical discourse on "the marvelous" in epic poetry, Kant is the first theorist of the sublime for whom it is obvious that the miraculousness of divine intervention in the person of Jesus Christ is of central significance to its modern aesthetic. Crucifixion, as Tsang notes, constitutes for Kant the sublime in essence; being "the ultimate manifestation of the moral law in defiance of the natural and social order," the Crucifixion "transports him to realize the practical aspects of his rational capacity and the goodness of God at the uttermost" (142). And, as Tsang further clarifies it, " The passage in characterization of God as the negation of all that is humanly knowable and practicable, articulates a depiction of the beyond from within possible human experience, an ideal Kant considers it his sublime vocation to realize in his philosophical enterprise" (142).

For Kant is positioned to recognize at the end of the syncretic discourse in which the aesthetic would come to bear, as an abstraction of universal subjectivity, that the sublime speaks to the curing of the individual soul only so far as there exists an epic soul, whose destiny is contingent upon the narrative of freedom, its progressive teleology transfixed in the permanent breach between the fallen and the redeemed, whence stands the bipartite structure of divine accommodation and condescension, of religions natural and revealed, dispensations old and new, ministries corrupt and reformed.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Yet, even as the modern epic of redemption grounds itself in the historical events of divine intervention, as manifested both in the word and in the flesh, the historical world follows after the Fall as a mere shadow, a figuring forth. In their transgression, as Milton's depiction would argue, Adam and Eve break off the vital continuum in Eden of their self-guided maturity from lesser to greater beings, and so they become instead transfixed at the limit which sin itself created, having now to call out from its brink across an abyss, in sublime leaps of transcendent realization. The post-lapsarian void which history fills is a progress of substitutions for the link with divinity, which was lost. Likewise, in the eighteenth-century discourse of the aesthetic, the sublime object would emerge in substituting the image of Crucifixion with a philosophical vocabulary of religious deliverance, the principles of Crucifixion being, as Kant would argue, both represented in and central to the idea of the sublime. As a paradigm of redemptive rupture and the divided self reconfigured in atonement, the Crucifixion would continue to turn in its allegorical function as a sublime mode of substitution and reversal, but now through a secularized framework of Enlightenment-era revisions in politics, science, and the arts.

Hence, I follow the example of Samuel Monk in narrowing the arena of the sublime to British letters in the long eighteenth entury, but, though I also begin with Boileau's Traite du Sublime in 1674, I agree with Marjorie Nicolson that the beginning of the discourse should be recognized as including contributions which appear in England prior to or aside from the influence of Boileau. However, I am less interested in Nicolson's focus upon the rapturous enthusiasm displayed by English philosophers, men such as Thomas Burnet and Henry More, who, contrary to the French scorn for the vast

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and the chaotic, as Nicolson would argue, enjoyed contemplating the natural order in terms of temporal and spatial boundlessness, the latter being suggested by unprecedented empirical discoveries in astronomy, physics, and geology. Rather, I am more intent upon the sublime effort of the epic storyteller to write an enlightened narrative in which is synthesized both the biblical and the modern, ecclesiastical and national, from a perspective which not only writes from the side of Christian redemption but from the Protestant reformer's side of the profound schism which distinguishes his epic scheme from one which might be conceived from a Roman Catholic as well as from a heathen perspective.

The Protestant poet of the North, altogether pious in his approval of empirical science and the rational pursuit of natural laws, in the spirit of classical liberty, free from the dangers of papal tyranny, is able to incorporate the physical universe of the New Science, yet must do so in the wake of devastating wars, the Thirty Years War in Germany and the Civil War in England; in respect of the increasing power of money and a luxury economy founded upon expanding trade and colonization; and, eventually, in aspect of a titular restoration of the crown, in terms of the continuing conflict between a divided parliamentary body and a royal head. From 1650 through the Glorious Revolution, such were the concerns framing the perspectives of Davenant, Cowper, Milton, Dryden, Blackwell and others, who at the time were conceiving of epic poems, amidst the controversies in epic theory about which the French and English alike were concerned and into which Boileau introduced Longinus' treatise. The English discourses which follow Boileau are prepared for, to a great degree, by the problem of how to write

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

heroic verse for modern Christian readers, for whom, as Bacon had urged and Milton would show, the marvels of the New Science could be incorporated into the secular literary representation of Providential history not only without blasphemy against Scripture but with greater praise for the Creator.

Even so, the strains of cultural and ethnical variety and of political and ecclesiastical conflict within Christianity pressed for a unifying narrative. Though the physics be Newtonian, the poetics be Aristotelian, and the politics be Lockean, the modern epic is the biblical narrative of mankind fallen by means of itself and redeemed through the love of Christ, a story framed by these historical events: The Creation, Original Sin and the Expulsion from Eden, the Nativity, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ, the Second Coming, the Resurrection of the Saints and the advent of New Jerusalem. Yet the arena of topics for the sublime broadens in reflection of the warfare within the Church and between Protestant and Catholic centers of power, as is evident during the Restoration, when, with the increased frequency of travel to Roman Catholic Italy, a cultural pilgrimage of the kind that Milton, a few decades earlier, was among the first to enjoy, is fast becoming the norm for the English Protestant while also fraught with the significance of a holy pilgrimage. If I may reiterate in this context, for the sake of focus, some earlier observations in this chapter regarding the modern traveler's perception of the Alps, it would appear that the traveled landscape serves as the scene or stage in which the modern, albeit secularized, pilgrim performs dramatically at various levels of legendary and allegorical significance. For, not only is he visiting the historical sites of his most beloved Greco-Roman heathens, hero and poet alike, whose literary sublimities inform the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

cultivation of his own poetic speech and imagination; at the same time he is visiting the corrupt site of the fallen Church, resplendent in its decaying beauty, despotic orientalisms, superstitious rituals, and idolatrous iconography.

The developing identification of mountain scenery with the aesthetic of the sublime begins during this period, as well, but the Alps particularly shall stand as a figure for the sublime, which becomes a point of focus in the larger discourse and should, I believe, be noted with less regard to the candid impression of savage grandeur in the Alpine traveler's experience than to the literary, historical, and ecclesiastical significance of that particular mountain chain. For, as I mention earlier, the Alps constitute the absolute boundary in nature between the Protestant north and the Roman Catholic south. Hence, it turns out to be the one geological boundary which is being most emphatically defined in the year of the Glorious Revolution, with James II fleeing and William of Orange ascending: For, John Dennis,[11] the first critic after Boileau's translation to apply Longinus' notion of the sublime to a modern theory of poetry, composes the letter that shall stand for the archetypal description of the Alpine crossing in terms which establish the sublime aesthetic as a type of spiritual conversion and revelation, hence the physical universe and the plight of the soul are conflated to epic proportions. In light of the new philosophical and scientific perspectives developed from Bacon, through Galileo, Newton, and Locke, this appears especially appropriate. Indeed, the earliest discourses on sublimity among such

---

[11] Early twentieth-century historians of the sublime aesthetic, while just beginning to trace the origin of romantic English writing about mountain scenery to sources prior to Wordsworth, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers, were yet hesitant to claim a causal link between Dennis' original experience in the Alps and his seminal theorizing on the sublime: See Clarence De Witt Thorpe, "Two Augustans Cross the Alps: Dennis and Addison on Mountain Scenery," SP, XXXII (1935): 463-482.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

writers as Dennis, Dryden, and Addison, are primarily concerned with reconciling the classical hero and the Christian martyr. Abstractly speaking, that concern is configured formally in writings that divide while attempting to mediate such opposites as visual and verbal expression, historical fiction and literary history, lyrical texture and narrative argument. Roughly, those categories are the topics I elaborate in the following chapters, through a reconsideration of the sublime in literary criticism and aesthetics, from the late seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries. .

My position is, that, as a turn of thought, a conceit—or figure or trope—the sublime arose to configure the void in Reformation psychology, where the historically fallen and the historically redeemed are pressed to unite but are ever divided, and, thereby, the sublime stands as an ambivalent posture representing the reciprocal opposition of forces, alternately superior and inferior, which could be explained, even resolved, differently among the various discourses in philosophy, poetry, and criticism. While I agree there is a meaningful difference between Longinus' theory of literary *hypsous* in the first or third century and those of the sublime in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, I do not maintain that the difference consists, as has been argued by Monk and Nicolson, in a categorical division between the rhetorical sublime and the natural sublime. In such a division of categories, Longinus—himself a modern of the classical period, who most likely is writing in the century of St. Paul, and whose treatise is a synthesis of Platonic and Aristotelian strains—continues in the modern era of the Baroque period as the source of affective literature and criticism, shaped additionally by the habits and expectations of Protestant readers, who are themselves working to relate in a unified narrative of epic

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

scope, the disconnected strains of Scripture, Greco-Roman literature, and vernacular legend and fable. The natural sublime, on the other hand, develops from the synthesis of empirical traditions in physical science and aesthetic psychology, with ancient roots, but as elaborated during the period of Enlightenment, in Locke through Kant, and from the so-called sublime of external nature, which began with Dennis and peaked with Burke. As I shall argue, the important difference between the ancient and the modern occurs not where the natural departs from the rhetorical, but, within the rhetorical, where the modern has separated the sublimity of heroic discourse from the sublimity of Holy Writ. It seems to me, that the rhetorical framework of sublimity provided by Longinus appeals in the modern period to an allegorical approach to nature, apropos Christian teleology—epic and biblical. Hence, the important difference is that which already exists between Longinus and his modern translators, the most influential of the latter being Boileau, though both Longinus and Boileau are critics concerned only with the sublime in literary composition, even though each also conceives of the sublime as a principle which operates at large and constitutes excellence in the absolute, hence, as that which constitutes the epitome of noble magnificence and power. However, Longinus, unlike Boileau, could conceive of sublimity in speeches and writing as identical with the ascendancy of the soul, whose nature is one with the divine Logos, and he was not troubled, as would be the modern Christian poets, with how to mediate the seeming divinity of which language is capable, whether in heathen or secular literatures, and the incarnate divinity of Holy Writ.

On the one hand, in so far as the sublime presumes the autonomy of mind, or soul, which is fundamental to the Platonic tradition, the sublime in Longinus's Peri Hypsous is

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the same in principle as that of the modern discourse which began with the appropriation of Longinus in the seventeenth century. That is the case even though the modern idea would differ from the ancient most broadly in conforming to the teleology of Christian history and in a post-Reformation culture for which the epic schism between the fallen and the redeemed, once cast in the division of natural and revealed religions, would be reconfigured in the split within the aging Church between its corrupt Papist regimes and its revitalizing Protestant martyrdoms. Even as the Old Testament books would be accommodated typologically and transfigured into the New, so too the sublime as conceived in Longinus' cultural collective of literary demigods, from Homer through Demosthenes, literary men whose marvels of verbal artistry are perceived by Longinus to effect the consummate unity with divine Logos, would lend itself in post-Reformation modernity to the collective body of those redeemed in Christ, the glories of classical literature being a secular type of the glorious revelation in Scripture and the ecstasies of the ancient soul in poetry a type of the true salvation of the Spirit. Even as the discourse of the sublime unfolds from Boileau through Kant, in drawing the wisdom of the ancients from literary analysis, empirical psychology, physical science, and the metaphysics of cultural reproduction, the concept of the sublime would evolve by accommodating the divine Logos of Longinian rhetorical ascendency to the Christian Logos of biblical history.

The experience of the sublime, then, might be said to press upon the resemblance between poetic excellence and religious joy, only to heighten the distinction between them. For what the sublime of modern discourse promises is possible to reconcile in theory, it does not itself reconcile, or else it would be religion. Rather, the sublime object for the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

modern critic, philosopher, poet, or artist, teleologically framed by the narrative of redemption, reflects but does not deliver the promise of consummate divinity. Indeed, in its venues of empirical psychology, literary theory, and aesthetics, the sublime describes the fulcrum of turns between aspects sensible and supersensible, and, much that is unpleasant, frightening, disturbing, and so on, which is not described by Longinus as sublime, is indeed the case with the sublime in its modern turn.

VII. The Fallacy of the Distinction between Sublimes, Rhetorical and Natural

I begin by questioning two prevalent tendencies of speculation in current thinking about the sublime. Briefly, one tendency, as already discussed above, persists in discovering from a historical perspective a universal theory of the sublime, which somehow transcends the historical discourse, but, against the likelihood that no such theory is possible, which qualifies the validity or non-validity of the sublime as more than merely stipulativel in definition. The other tendency works from the academic division of the sublime into the two types, rhetorical and the natural, as grounds for distinguishing the peculiarly modern aesthetic in philosophical ("natural") as opposed to literary ("rhetorical") ideas. Each tendency follows from the historical resuscitation of the sublime begun in the last century, whence the interest in rethinking the sublime arose primarily among scholars of the Romantic period who discovered early evidence of a romantic groundswell in wide-ranging philosophical and cultural discourses from the late seventeenth through the mid-eighteenth century. Both tendencies accept the historical account provided in the interest of tracing a modern romantic development as the premise

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

for an uber-Sublime, which, though it might serve the dissemination of current philosophical or cultural agendas, contributes little toward understanding the moral and creative pressures which came to bear, for over a century, in the congealing of the sublime as a relevant, contemporary concept—from the time of Boileau's Traite du Sublime, and John Dennis' theory of poetic reform, through Burke's taxonomy of natural passions, to Kant's negation of the aesthetic object and Wordsworth's biblically resonant, Alpine pronouncements of the sublime in nature.

The question both of accuracy and relevance, as put to the problem of defining sublimity in a post-sublime discourse has been raised by analytic philosopher Paul Crowther, who, little more than a decade ago remarks upon the recent surge of critical and artistic interest in the aesthetic of Kant, especially. Crowther, whose focus upon the Kantian sublime in the context of analytic philosophy departs from the norm and anticipates the forays of Tsang and Sircello, mentioned above, notes the usual disdain with which analytic philosophers have approached Kant's theory of the sublime, in contrast to the alacrity of their approach to his theory of the beautiful.[12] Crowther sees the philosophical aversion to the sublime as conforming to the taste of contemporary, modern sensibilities at the time, and so he is astonished at the sudden "transformation of sensibility," among philosophers working in traditions other than analytic, along with writers in various other disciplines, primarily poststructuralist and postmodernist in outlook, who have lately "asserted the cultural centrality of the sublime—and, in particular Kant's version of it" (2). Though heartened by the renewed interest in the Kantian

---

[12] See Paul Guyer, Kant and the Claims of Taste (London; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

aesthetic, Crowther is wary of the fashionable context for that assertion about the sublime. And, indeed, it may now be fair to say, that the pendulum has already been swinging in the opposite direction, since Crowther's remarks, toward renewed confidence in the aesthetics of beauty at the expense of the sublime, and, again, from quarters other than analytic philosophy, which is only now catching up with the shift in postmodern sensibility; for, certainly, structural linguistics and psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and avant-garde modernist and postmodernist art hardly any longer command center stage in making claims to cultural centrality.

Crowther's observation, however, remains relevant in principle, in that he points to the difficulty of establishing the significance of the sublime in terms which fairly distinguish concerns at the turn of the eighteenth century, when the formative discourse of the sublime appears to have reached its peak of cogency, from concerns at the turn of the twenty-first, for which the sublime, viewed in retrospection, obtains largely as an academic vehicle for legitimating the politically cultivated prejudices and sensibilities of the post-Marxian, post-Freudian crisis of confidence in the Enlightenment compromise between religion and science. For confirmation of this, one need only consult the most current encyclopedia survey, "Sublime: The Sublime from Burke to the Present," by Frances Ferguson, [13] in which the synopses of contributions to the discourse by Derrida and Lyotard stand out as peculiarly relevant. Hence, Derrida

> aims at suggesting that we might want to extend the claims made for

---

[13] Also see Ferguson's own contribution, both on and of the sublime, Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation (London; New York: Routledge,1992).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> aesthetic judgement in the Third Critique to our more general understanding of language, which Derrida wants to detach from the Kantian emphasis on intentionality in the process of arguing that written language does not so much produce evidence of a conscious author as militate toward a sense of the superfluousness of such an author (as a written message implies for him the disposability of its maker). (330)

Lyotard, however, "who examines the importance of the avant-garde" but whose aim is to undermine Jurgen Habermas'

> commitment to consensus as an appropriate goal,...attacks the "task which academicism had assigned to realism: to preserve various consciousness from doubt," and instead defends the project of a sublime avant-garde art that is "perpetually flushing out artifices of presentation that make it possible to subordinate thought to the gaze and to turn it away from the unpresentable." (331)

Crowther observes, upon citing Derrida, deMan, Hertz, Wieskel, Marvick, and Lyotard,[14]

---

[14] Jacques Derrida, The Truth in Painting, trans. G. Bennington (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1987); Paul deMan, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," in G. Schapiro and A. Sica (eds.), Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects (University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, 1984); Neil Hertz, "The Notion of Blockage in the Literature of the Sublime," in G. Hartmann (ed.), Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1978); Thomas Weiskel, The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1976); Louis W. Marvick, Mallarme and the Sublime (State University of New York Press: Albany, 1986); Jean Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 1984).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Kant's theory is put to use on the basis of, or in the service of, some much broader set of theoretical interests. There is little or no attempt to consider it in the context of possible tensions and distortions forced upon it by the broader philosophical position embodied in Kant's ethics and aesthetics[...]. [Hence] our understanding of both Kant and the status of sublimity as an aesthetic concept remain substantially incomplete. (2-3)

Crowther is sensitive to the fact that at the same time as our current theorists posture the centrality of Kant's theory at the turn of the twenty-first century, their intention is to theorize the sublime beyond the point at which Kant reduced it, hence, to speculate about what the sublime might have or should have been had Kant himself speculated from our present circumstances. Curiously, in such a light, it would appear that Kant is installed by means of allegorical conjecture, as a rhetorical figure, to give the appearance of authority to a discourse which argues for the absence of authority.

Even so, the appropriation of the Kantian sublime by writers engaged in the current bifurcation of absolutist and relativist thinking, relevant to the continuing controversies of Enlightenment progress in the post-revolutionary, post-war era of technological and capital globalization, provoked a rethinking of the political and aesthetic problems peculiar to developments in the twentieth century in relation to their roots in the discourses of the seventeenth century. The thinkers whom Crowther cites are precisely those to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for attempting to re-engage the disciplines of philosophy, history, and language on a grand scale of comprehension, entirely appropriate to *the* sublime narrative of epic purpose, out of which the so-called aesthetic emerged, if

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

only to become resolved in the Kantian notion of "purposiveness without purpose" and its simultaneous suggestion and refusal of illusion. Further, I should make clear at this point, that I recognize, especially in deMan's and Wieskel's conceptualizations of the sublime, in terms of the proverbial "gap" of meaning and intention (which is elaborated in structural linguistics and in the rhetoric of allegory, respectively) a model similar to my idea of the sublime, in terms of the permanent breach in historical consciousness, whose gap, however, constitutes the power of conversion by means of which the destinies of the heathen and the redeemed can never unite, a dilemma which is foremost in the critical framework of modern epic theory, into which the sublime was first introduced, and, whence, the reformed Christian perceives himself, allegorically, in the tradition of Augustine, as a literary participant-spectator in the living narrative of fall and redemption in which he is both living and rehearsing for life.

But, to continue, I am here less concerned with post-structuralist and postmodernist agendas than with the analytic objective of philosophers intent upon construing the sublime in purely conceptual terms as an absolute principle. Though no rigorous discussion of the sublime can proceed without definitions, an uber-definition must blur the distinctively historical and contingent identifications upon which, in my view, the relevance of the sublime depends. The conceit of the analytic endeavor is one in which the philosopher stands at the edge of history to survey a chaos of various materials collected under the rubric of the sublime, whence the assertion is made that the very term "sublime" is so diffusively applied in both "ordinary and critical discourse as to make any philosophical definition of it to seem unwarrantably stipulative" (Crowther 2);

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

nevertheless, the very persistence of the discourse despite the problem of competing definitions would seem to suggest some unifying structure has yet to be revealed and clarified. But, contrary to itself, insofar as the historians of the sublime have already laid out a chronology of the discourse in terms of its major texts, which are now set in place before the philosopher and from which he expects to draw the core principle, the philosopher's stance is resolved in the truth of the historical narrative, not in the existence of a principle which the narrative explains and unravels, and one ends up with a "true" but somewhat insipid abstraction, which refers to the history of the discourse but does not bear upon points of traction within that discourse, since at no point in the discourse could any contributor refine the thoughts of previous contributors in terms of some future perspective beyond his own time. So, neither does the abstraction from history, into which the history itself then disappears, provide an adequate image of the absolute principle, should such principle a really exist. Indeed, the issue of whether a universal theory of the sublime is tenable did not—because it could not—instigate a discourse of the sublime; rather, it could have only arisen as it did at the conclusion of one.

My primary objection to the universal homogenization of the discourses of the sublime for the sake of philosophical consistency is that it leads to the smoothing over of a religious distinction between the ancient and the modern discourses, which I believe is crucial to maintain. The particular distinction I mean is twofold: First, in appropriating the rhetoric of Longinus, in particular, the modern discourse self-consciously, if abstractly, asserts its sense of departure from the past in terms of the difference between natural and revealed religion, but at the same time as it obviates their reunification on aesthetic

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

grounds, in forms of literary redemption, so that the religious sensibility in classical poetry might be resolved toward Christian ends. Second, while the concept of the soul is essential to the discourses of both, the Judeo-Chistian narrative of fall and redemption, of divine wrath and mercy, and of the reciprocities of word and flesh in sacred revelation inform the modern discourse of the sublime in ways which could not have been relevant to Longinus. Yet, the development of the sublime from Longinus is peculiarly relevant to the matter of why and how the sublime in the modern comes to signify the threshold between itself and the ancient. Like Plato, whom he emulates, Longinus in Peri Hypsous would provide a common ground in feelings of religious aspiration, but unlike Plato, who eschewed rhetoric and the written text, or, rather, who argued for the reform of rhetoric according to the principles of philosophy, Longinus' appeal to modern spirituality in terms of rhetoric and literature engages the textual proclivities of reformed religion; hence, it distinguishes the unity of author and reader (or speaker and listener) in terms which propitiously conform to the biblical framework of modern Christianity in the period of Dennis through Kant. Plato's dialogical love, which the modern recognizes as a heathen prototype of Christian love, is yet too specific and labor-intensive in its exclusively intellectual cure of the soul, but Longinus' religious sentiment is just vague enough, and in its glorying of the Greek national canon of great authors (Plato among them, of course) he elevates the literary imagination to a function of noble and epic seriousness. Longinus endeavors to translate Plato's concept of dialogical communion between lovers of wisdom (as the means through which the soul is freed from the body) into the philosophically reformed, rhetorical principle of sublimity, which appeals in writings and speeches to the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

passive imagination of the reader, but by means of which the reader's soul is likewise raised and expanded, in a way which the modern-day commentators perceived as similar to but supplementing rather than competing against the cure of soul through Holy Writ. For Longinus, the sublime in writings and speeches constitutes the vehicle of the soul in ecstasy, but for the modern Christian, who indeed recognizes the approach of the divine in the Logos-embodiment of Homer or Sappho or Demosthenes, the sublimity of discourse is not the threshold to immortal and eternal life, but a foretaste in the sensible of the divine, so that in itself the height of literariness might represent and inspire but not constitute the freedom of the soul.

For instance, premised in the supersensible, the Kantian aesthetic of the sublime in terms both mathematical and dynamical "proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense" (Critique of Judgment 106), an idea to which Longinus need not have prescribed in defining the effective magnitude and might of literary sublimity, for Longinus' notion is adequate both to the power of imagination, whose internalization of sense as memory and anticipation yet exceeds nature, and to the will to surrender to the superiority of a great author; whereas Kant means to convey the sense in which, if we think of the mind's vocation as being sublimely above nature and the free soul as limitless by definition, then the sublime, which concentrates and clarifies our moral predisposition, appeals by virtue of its resistence to the interest of sense and is finally resolved in the utter negation of the aesthetic object:

> ...Hence, the sublime must always have reference to our *way of thinking*, i.e., to maxims directed to providing the intellectual [side in us] and our

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> rational ideas with supremacy over sensibility. We need not worry that the feeling of the sublime will lose [something] if it is exhibited in such an abstract way as this, which is wholly negative as regards the sensible. For though the imagination finds nothing beyond the sensible that could support it, this very removal of its barriers also makes it feel unbounded, so that its separation [from the sensible] is an exhibition of the infinite; and though an exhibition of the infinite can as such never be more than merely negative, it still expands the soul. (134-35)

By questioning the historically contingent properties of the sublime, however, in favor of arguing the conditions in which a theory of the sublime is possible, the analytic philosopher risks losing the conceptual framework—be it narrative, philosophical, or religious—of an entire era of modern thought, which, I think it is fair to say, Kant's "version" of the sublime epitomizes.

Psalm 19, which supports the preeminence of Scripture, remains in the period of Enlightenment the most powerful and influential expression of how differently yet harmoniously Nature and Scripture must each be read. Galileo had himself interpreted the Psalm to show how the discoveries of true philosophy are already figured into the language of Holy Writ.[15] As a source for eighteenth-century expressions of sublimity in external nature, Psalm 19 establishes a divine purpose for science, which is to know God

---

[15] See Galileo's letter to the Grand Duchess Christina (1615) for his most thoroughly stated position on biblical hermeneutics and physical science, in which Galileo maintains the essential identity of the two Books (Scripture and Nature) and maintains, with Augustine and Thomas, the absolute truth of Scripture against the certain fallibility of its interpreters.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

through his Creation, but, as if anticipating the deist argument for nature as a source equal to Scripture, it asserts further that God's plan for salvation can only be conveyed verbally through his sacred Word. Cosmic clarity is explicitly identified with the mute glory of heavenly rotations, its silent conversation a reciprocity of contrasts which permeates everything natural and penetrates the senses. Isaac Watts' version of Psalm 19, which glories in Creation only to stress more emphatically the ascendency of Holy Writ, conveys the conflicting strains in modern discourse between the authorities of natural and revealed religion. In terms of nature alone, Watts' interpretation preserves the "rolling sun, the changing light,/ And night and day" as evidence of the Creator's glory, to be enjoyed by all persons of every epoch; however, nature's glory, in terms of the gospel Word, is turned from its transparent message for the sake of making verbal sense of a spiritual truth that is essentially invisible. God's glory is conveyed in the physical sun, moon, and stars which shine on all, but his justice and grace are revealed in "the blest volume Thou hast writ":

> Nor shall Thy spreading gospel rest
> Till through the world Thy truth has run
> Till Christ has all the nations blest,
> That see the light or feel the sun.
> Great Sun of Righteousness, arise,
> Bless the dark world with heavenly light:
> Thy gospel makes the simple wise;
> Thy laws are pure, Thy judgments right.
> Thy noblest wonders here we view,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

In souls renewed, and sins forgiven;

Lord, cleanse my sins, my soul renew,

And make Thy word my guide to heaven.

The image of the actual sun fades from Watts' hymn in order for the idea of the sun to be posited instead as a metaphor for Christ, the sun's heavenly race around the earth standing rather as an allegory of Christ's spiritual mission, the revelation of which is conveyed in Scripture, and only there. The intention, implicit in Scripture, to make history both within and distinct from the natural temporal-spatial order, is characteristic of the Creator's autonomy and of the human identification with His freedom. Yet the terms of salvation, which, exceeding the natural order, are made explicit not in Nature but in Scripture, can only speak sense within the narrative framework already provided by Scripture, so that Nature is configured allegorically and "read" as part of Scripture.

I examine this further in Chapters Two and Three, where I apply an ekphrastic model for sublime transformation, to amplify the sense in which debates about epic machinery and the marvelous galvanized questions of literary value and poetic reform in terms of salvific teleology; and, regarding the modern compatibility of landscape and text, I stress the aptness of Longinian rhetoric in contrast to Socratic dialogue. Chapter Four describes the arguments of Reformation consciousness in the odes of Collins, in Clarissa, and in Tom Jones, with a view to the embedded flaw or fault-line, of which I spoke earlier, from which sublime self-abstraction arises as personified allegory. In Chapter Five, I show that Aurora Leigh, a peculiarly Victorian allegory of epic, if not itself a sublime poem, arises at the very edge of the faded tradition of modern Christianized epic, to write with zeal a poem of redemption which hopes to redeem poetry—now from insipid modernity.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

CHAPTER TWO

Ekphrasis and the Marvelous

> There he depicted a fallow land, soft and rich for being plowed three times,
> with many plowmen wheeling their oxen back and forth across it.
> Whenever the plowmen reached the ends of the furrows, at the open edge of the deep field,
> a man brought honey-sweet wine in a flask and handed it to them.
> After they drank, the plowmen turned back into the furrows and then
> Returned again, now eagerly hastening from the other side, thirsty for refreshment.
> The earth appeared black behind them, as befitted plowed loam,
> though in fact it was gold: In that was the marvel! (Iliad, XVIII.541-9)

Upon being revived amidst seventeenth-century debates in England and France over the progress and reform of epic poetry, Peri Hypsous contributed its psychological perspective to contemporary reassessments of "the marvelous" in epic convention, at a time when the question of epic machines went directly to the iconoclastic severity of revealed religion. At the onset of its modern discourse, the sublime was conflated with the marvelous in a shift of focus away from the visualization of divine personae in epic action and toward the soul-ravishing effects, peculiar to language, itself, which might be executed in any dignified work of elevated thought, whether in poem, hymn, sermon, treatise, history, or court oration.

Ekphrasis serves in this chapter to illustrate the pictorial-spatial and verbal-temporal aspects of the sublime aesthetic as it begins to develop alongside efforts to reconcile reformed religion and the marvelous. It is the minor literary genre in which works of visual art are explained poetically, the mute object being verbally drawn out; or, as denoted by the Greek work "ekphradzein," which means "to speak out, tell, or describe fully," the poet, by means of ekphrasis, "tells in full" what is signified by the visual form of representation, making explicit what the visual can only suggest or imply. In variously

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

praising, describing, and explaining the visual-spatial artifact, ekphrastic speech proceeds with the assumption that language is necessary for revealing what the material object can only hint about itself and about the context for its meaning but cannot bring to cognitive and emotional completion, not only because such completion can only be effected through the verbalization of narrative and logical reasoning; but, at the same time, in breaking the monolithic silence of the image, ekphrasis foregrounds the spectator and his subjective view. The private, spiritual life of the spectator is revealed, expressed, and communicated not by his viewing the image but by his verbal reiteration of the image in his view. Hence, insofar as ekphrasis proceeds implicitly as an act of self-reflection turned outward, the ekphrastic speaker explains the spectacle before him, in relation to himself, while also appealing, through the significance of words, to a community of spectator-listeners which materializes through his very speech. In turn, he increases the range and complexity of self-explanation among the members of that community. By virtue of his verbal explanation of a visual image, in words that alternately supplement, break down, and rebuild the visual autonomy of the spectacle, the articulate spectator eclipses for himself and for others the very boundaries of sight. Likewise, a simple speech in praise of a picture transcends the picture even as it expresses the wonderful effects of the picture. For, ekphrastic speech is able to become sublime in describing a source of awe that its own words transcend.

The description of Achilles' shield in Iliad famously epitomizes ekphrasis, but, in addition, I can think of no more effective emblem of the sublime, in terms of ekphrastic description, than the remarkable passage, quoted above, in which the illusion of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

verisimilitude in the tilling-scene, tooled into the shield, is pointed to by the narrator as being a marvel, in and of itself; that is, Hephaestus' naturalistic rendering in gold of the tilled earth is being admired for the success of its illusion at the same time as it is being fashioned by the poet into an allegory for mimetic art, in essence, marvelous. Thereby the skill of naturalistic, aesthetic representation is shown to be manifestly as wonderful in its execution and effect as is the astonishing intervention of divine machinery, of which the shield itself is an emblem. Moreover, and especially for my purpose here, the poet's perceiving of aesthetic mediation in the shield as a feat of wonder, immanently divine, renders possible a discourse of the sublime in which the ennobling force and magnitude of which verbal art is capable comes to be recognized as an effect in the spiritual life of the speaker-hearer, which compares with the divine intervention in the action of the epic plot. Insofar as the discourse of sublime rhetoric foregrounds the epic union of speaker and hearer, the action reported in the narrative is identical with the action of the soul ascending—as a speaking purpose—through the narrative. Language, as it comes to be shaped in the epic argument of the narrative, is also presumed to be superior to the historical action represented in the epic since the events of history are only made present through the action of speech. As regards the tilling scene, the narrator briefly engages the reader in a discourse of the sublime through his interpolated comment upon the admirable effect of the divine artist's rendering of the scene. It is a discourse which presumes the condescension of the divine in history, but only through the participation of speaker and hearer in the report of *logos* can the soul ascend through history, invigorated and expanded in epic mimesis.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

As a paradigm of the marvelous, the aesthetic illusion noted by the narrator (who is also not only the speaker with whom we identify the poet but speaks here as if a witness to the event he narrates) is by extension equated with the depiction of the cosmos rendered throughout the shield—the astonished narrator, seeming suddenly to be struck by the whole of what is happening at the forge of Hephaestus, just where, in the divine artificer's depiction in gold of a plowed field, earth and gold appear to be converted, one into the other. Here is a figure of alchemical transformation through which the narrator marvels at a different sort of realization: the paradox in which a mind perceives as real what it knows simultaneously to be an illusion. The perception of black loam reflected in the bright surface astonishes at the very moment that the medium—the malleable gold—is conveyed to the foreground of the depiction, not only without ruining the illusion but as if to increase its effect, the discrepancy between the perception and the reality being most intensely confirmed, where most fiercely and boldly leapt, because the contrast is sharpest: gold and soil are veritable opposites of the same kind, one the extreme of the other, being contrary in nearly every aspect of their physical, cultural, and semantic properties. The effectiveness of the passage, which strikes in the narrator's unexpectedly interpolated comment upon the aesthetic experience itself—the marvel of verisimilitude—as if to transfer dramatically to the audience the effect of his own realization, is exercised in joining the aesthetic likeness between gold and soil to symbolic ideas that the narrator—as poet—himself determines and controls apart from the artisanship of the shield. For instance, in commenting that the gold appears black where the black earth would be, the narrator conjures a figurative comparison of earth with gold, which draws from and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

further embellishes the theme of wealth and goodness already evident in the precious curing and perfecting of the soil by the plowers. The fallow land—soft and rich—is indeed like the forger's gold, the dirt being the very medium of the farmer's own transforming toil and prefiguring the bounty anticipated by the plowmen who prepare it toward that end, an end manifested in the flasks of wine that await at the edge of the furrows, which is the replenishment that both turns the plowmen back and inspires haste in their return, again and again. Here, the tilling scene is conceived, in the narration itself, as a cycle of earthly perfection stamped into the gold surface of the shield, but, more, as if to compress into the scene the wonderful comprehensiveness of the spectacle depicted on the shield overall—the imitated cosmos in the round, in turn, imitating the lens of divine perception. Likewise, conversion together with stability, implicit in the forging of the terrible shield and its universe in miniature, are here made explicit, rhetorically, as well; for the tilling scene occurs midpoint in the sequence of scenes which together compose the spectacle of human and divine activities tooled throughout the circular mass of various metals. Yet even that choice on the poet's part is concealed, for he is, after all, supposed to be depicting the shield not as a complete thing but as a thing in the process of being made, thereby turning what would otherwise be, as Lessing notes, a tedious depiction of a physical object into "the living picture of an action" (68). At the same time each scene as poetically described reveals more of what is there than could be materially depicted in the visual artist's medium. Yet, further, even as the narrator, in describing the tilling-scene and the others, exceeds the material limits of the artisan's medium through embellishments that evoke a range of sensuous and intellectual ideas, impossible to render on the shield,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the narrative sequence does not itself refer to all of what is depicted there since no mortal is permitted to view the shield in totality. The divine forger's picture of the universe issues from a view whose immortal scope exceeds both the visual and the imaginative capacity of the human narrator, but the poet's descriptive, story-telling medium elaborates the static scenes with sympathetic impressions, which exceed what is possible to depict upon any visual surface, even while the verbal description is at the same time so exacting in visual reference as to inspire replicas of the shield by artists working from a mental visualization which they are certain matches that of the poet's original vision (67). Returning to the evidence of the tilling scene, however, we see that in the compression, conversion, and transference of opposed properties—the humble, mortal loam elevated and perfected into gold, which is the substance of its divine image, and, likewise, gold, itself unchangeable and perfect, yet seeming to turn to soil, and debased in being turned back into the earth from which it came by virtue of its utility as the medium of aesthetic reflection—the artistic rendering inspires awe for what it makes possible to see as if real, and, more, for seeming to grasp instantly, through the appearance of things, what is necessary and universal about them. The collapse of contraries, the confusion into likeness of unalike things, is astonishing for the breadth of vision into which it instantly resolves, signified by Hephaestus' magnificent conception on the whole, of variety unified in simplicity and of force set into action by purpose.

George Chapman, in praise of Homer's invention, against the commentary of Scaliger and other critics who complain that the poet's description of the shield so irrationally exceeds the material limits of the visual medium that the shield cannot be

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

pictured as an actual rendering, invites "all sorts of men learned to be judicial beholders of this more than Artificiall and no lesse than Divine Rapture, than which none can be imagined more full of soule and humaine extraction: for what is here prefigurde by our miraculous Artist but the universall world, which being so spatious and almost unmeasurable, one circlet of a Shield representes and imbraceth?" (543). But after briefly summarizing the range of heavenly and earthly scenes described by the poet as depicted on the shield, Chapman reports a curious consequence of the poet's description: Some ancients believed that the narrator was not describing a static tableau but one composed of moving figures (the plowers, for instance, actually going back and forth across the field, and so on, with respect to other scenes). The entire depiction of the shield is "so lively proposde" writes Chapman that "many in times past have believed that all these thinges have in them a kind of voluntarie motion, even as the Tripods of Vulcan and that Daedalian Venus *autokineteos*" (543). Though Chapman appears taken aback by the erroneous reading, he uses it to support his argument that the poet indeed has conjured up for the mind's eye a vividly realized image. Clearly, though, his point is undermined rather than supported by such a reading. For, if the shield's tableaus appear in the imagination as depictions literally alive with movement, hasn't the poet failed to be clear on simple points of fact? Is the object physically moving or still? Moreover, Chapman commits a peculiar violation of commonsense logic upon reasoning that the emotionally moving description of a still object is cause for perceiving a physically moving object instead. What is one to make of this sort of literalism?

Yet Chapman's own illogical use of the example seems to have leapt out

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

intuitively in the service of some unstated point about the paradoxical nature of description, for such is the faith upon which description depends, that words indeed are united to the things to which they refer, when, in fact, the illusion depends for its vividness upon the independence of words, their freedom from things, and upon the internal vitality of language itself. Though it might be erroneous to perceive the shield as ornamented with physically moving figures, Chapman understands there are no sufficient grounds for disputing it, further, that even as a misconstrual of what the poet intends the reader to envision (sculpted, life-like tableaus representing the full ranges of life's arenas and activities, not a demonically inspirited frieze of metal figurines set in actual motion across the surface of the shield), such a reading might, ironically, be said to prove the poet's skill for vital description, since the conviction that the shield's surface actually moves at least speaks of the experience of a vividly impressed image. Thus Chapman concedes, "nor can I be resolv'd that their opinions be sufficiently refuted by Aristonicus, for so are all things here described by our divinest Poet, as if they consisted not of hard and solid mettals but of a truely living and moving soule" (543).

Only certain knowledge of the poet's intention could decide the matter, though not explain away the unintended reading. For the confusion also proves, confirming the dread of iconophobia, how easily even the most noble kinds of mimetic representation trigger the idolatrous imagination. Either the shield is a praiseworthy aesthetic image, a sublime representation of nature, marveled at for its extraordinary concept and execution, or it is a living fetish, a monstrous creature of supernatural magic, marveled at for its strangeness. Either the poet imagines himself to be looking at a static tableau of true-to-life renderings

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

to which he responds with lively impressions of thought and feeling, which, conveyed to the reader in poetical description, supercede the visual representation, dramatizing and embellishing it with emotional vitality; or the poet imagines himself to be looking at a fabulously animated idol, here, a depiction of the cosmos teaming with miniature live-action figures, such as only a demon could devise, and thereby a marvel to behold. If the latter, the description is hardly more than the report of something strange, so that neither the shield-maker nor the poet could be praised for raising in the reader's minds a mimetic reflection "which none can be imagined more full of soule and humaine extraction;" rather, the reader is perhaps thrilled by and entertained to see in his mind, as if real, a monstrous oddity such as he would never see in nature.

The mere possibility, though generally unallowed, that Achilles' shield is meant to be perceived as an animated fetish, of course, flies in the face of my own explication of the tilling scene. For my point in the explication is that the poet's marveling at the artist's skillful depiction in that scene occasions the recognition that mimesis, where most extraordinary, appeals to the enjoyment of illusion as a form of utmost truth, as evident in the poet-narrator's wise conjecture, based upon experience and knowledge, of the particular thoughts, feelings, and expressions of the general figures, or types, depiction throughout the shield. (Indeed, as Lessing admits, in order to visualize from a verbal depiction one must already have seen something of the kind of thing being described [62], also a point made by John Dennis regarding epic descriptions of supernatural machinery.) On the one hand, so far as the shield is utterly fictional, the tension between visual and verbal representation is entirely determined by the poet's inventiveness, there being no

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

such shield in reality for the reader to see for himself and compare. On the other hand, according to the Aristotelian poetic with which Chapman would have been familiar, the historical grounds of epic poetry demand that the poet's imagination be tempered by the agreed upon facts of legend, common beliefs, and conventions, which would include such customs as that of shield-making and ornamentation. Thus Chapman feels compelled to explain that the shield, composed of gold, silver, brass, and tin, is a depiction of the universe, with Zodiacal components represented symbolically by each metal, respectively, fire, air, earth, and water. But, as Chapman indicates, there is really no single point of reference provided either within or outside the poem with which to deny that the shield is not a magically animated surface, crowded with live-action figures; quite the contrary, the divine circumstances of the shield's forging already permits the possibility of its occultness, for, indeed, as a factory of idols, Hephaestus's forge is a paradigm of the supernatural machine in epic poetry, and the shield of Achilles, as paradoxical image-text, becomes emblematic of the marvelous in a context which permits, on the one hand, a breathtaking vision of mimetic insight, on the other hand, the uncanny thrill before an impenetrable icon of superstitious magic. These two perspectives are incompatible and reflect, though they may not be identical with, the opposition and tension in poetic imagery between *enargeia* (vividness) and *phantasia* (visibility) and, thus, respectively, between vividly expressed ideas made brilliantly present to the mind of the reader, but not necessarily present as mental pictures (and whose images might even elude visual depiction), and visual ideas, which, instead, easily appear to the so-called mind's eye by means of words limited to the instrumental task of visualization, though both are

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

allegorical, if by allegory one means, generally, the fictional presence of an absence.

Tasso, reiterating classical principles in his Discourses on the Art of Poetry, distinguishes the persuasive from the poetic, by granting to the latter the power of mimesis. The persuader, by means of reasoning and flattery, endeavors to gain the listener's voluntary consent; whereas the poet, by means of verisimilitude in fictional representation, endeavors "to trick his readers with the appearance of truth." For the poet's skill is such, that, "He must not merely persuade them [readers] that the things he has written are true; he must also suggest them to their senses in such a way that they do not believe that they are reading but, rather, that they are present and they see and hear them" (101). This echoes Longinus's thought on "visualizations" or *phantasiai*, mental pictures which are produced "when as a result of enthusiasm and emotion, you think you are gazing at what you are describing and you set it in the sight of those who hear you" (87). Likewise, Quintilian's sense of *enargeia* as the vivacity of description, which "makes us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene" (VI.ii.32: 435). But Longinus notes the different purposes of visualization in oratory (or prose) and poetry, the object of oratory being to present things clearly but that of poetry being to astound and enthrall (87). Remarking on Longinus' distinction, Lessing bemoans modern carelessness on this point, as it has resulted in a tendency to think that vivacity or *enargeia* should mean a literal correspondence between the visually life-like and the verbally imagined:

> What we call poetic pictures, the ancients, as we learn from Longinus, called 'phantasiae;' and what we call illusion in such pictures, they named 'enargia.' It was therefore said by someone, as Plutarch tells us...that

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> poetic 'phantasiae' were, on account of their 'enargia' waking dreams....I wish that our modern books on poetry had used this nomenclature, and avoided the word picture altogether. We should thus have been spared a multitude of doubtful rules, whose chief foundation is the coincidence of an arbitrary term. No one would then have thought of confining poetic conceptions within the limits of a material picture. But the moment these conceptions were called a poetic picture, the foundation for the error was laid. (229)

Burke had already argued (against the poetics of verbal picture-making in his own day) from the obvious point, that, insofar as the medium of poetry is not pictorial, sublimity in poetry is not an effect of the poet having drawn a vivid mental picture in words but quite the opposite. Whatever the use to which it is put, language remains visually obscure because words unlike pictures do not resemble the ideas to which they refer, and in being indeterminate language is naturally sublime. Verbal liveliness is an effect of words being free of visual sense at the same time as they are charged with emotion, the very meanings of words having been learned in association with the expressions of a community and inseparably from the vital passions of the persons uttering them. Indeed, unlike painting the business of poetry and rhetoric is "to affect sympathy rather than imitation" since words do not refer to things so much as "to the effect of things on the mind of the speaker, or of others" (157). Burke gives the example of two men born blind, a poet and a scientist, each of whom can speak about spatial-visual phenomena with vividness, energy, and originality, not because they have ever seen but because they have

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

experienced in language the effect of such phenomena. But more to the point is Burke's oblique allusion to the traditional controversy over depictions of divine machinery in Christian epic poetry, given that Scripture refrains from visualizations in effecting the believability of its divine ideas,

> ...there being many things of a very affecting nature, which can seldom occur in the reality, but the words which represent them often do; and thus they have an opportunity of making a deep impression and taking root in the mind, whilst the idea of the reality was transient; and to some perhaps never really occurred in any shape, to whom it is notwithstanding very affecting, as war, death, famine, etc. Besides, many ideas have never been at all presented to the senses of any men but by words, as God, angels, devils, heaven and hell, all of which have however a great influence over the passions....In painting we may represent any fine figure we please; but we never can give it those enlivening touches which it may receive from words. To represent an angel in a picture, you can only draw a beautiful young man with wings; but what painting can furnish out any thing so grand as the addition of one word, 'the angel of the *Lord*?' It is true I have no clear idea, but these words affect the mind more than the sensible image did, which is all I contend for." (158-9)

Hence, Burke continues to argue the innate sublimity of language, in its capacity to present ideas which "are not presentable but by language." Wondering whether such ideas "may properly be called ideas which present no distinct image to the mind," Burke

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

concedes that it is difficult to conceive "how words can move the passions which belong to real objects, without representing those objects clearly," and he resolves that the difficulty lay in our not having sufficiently distinguished "in our observations upon language, between a clear expression, and a strong expression" (159).

Burke's adjectives, "clear" and "strong," are comparable, respectively, to *enargeia* (vividness) and *energeia* (vigor), even as regards the tendency to confuse the different way in which each applies to rhetorical vivacity, though they are not precisely equivalent to Burke's meaning. The first term, being more readily identified with pictorial imagery, is also associated with illusory presence, but the second is relevant to the material and kinetic properties of speech, hence, to the immediacy of words as spoken in the conviction of their meaning. Further, these pairings, which balance the visual-conceptual and the expressive-emotional components of verbal power may be compared, though again not precisely, with the distinction in Longinus' sublime rhetoric, between the magnitude of comprehension and the force of passion, for which the Latin *grandis* and *vehemens* suffice, to a degree; further, the ideas are similar though not identical to Kant's two categories of the sublime, mathematical and dynamic, which he conceived in his refashioning of the rhetorical in terms of the aesthetic.[1]

W. J. T. Mitchell tells us, that, beyond the restricted sense in which I have been using the term, "ekphrasis" has come to apply generally to any verbal representation, whether prosaic or poetic, of any visual representation, and, then, in its broadest

---

[1] For the distinction between as well as the confusion of *enargeia* and *energeia*, see Jean Hagstrum, The Sister Arts (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 11-12.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

application, to any verbal representation which intends to bring into mental view any real or imagined visual object, whether it be of a significant or non-referential kind. According to Mitchell, ekphrasis, as such, has been made "paradigmatic of a fundamental tendency in all linguistic expression," which is to "make us see." But in order to accept this, we would have to agree with Mitchell's premise that sight is the singular metaphor for verbal understanding, logically relating the narrower practice of poetry as the sister art which verbalizes, via the description of a significant pictorial object, thoughts which exceed the limits of visual experience. In keeping with his premise, Mitchell coins the phrase "ekphrastic hope" for denoting the effort to overcome in metaphor and imagination the commonsense perception that a verbal representation may refer to, describe, or invoke a visual object but can never actually bring its visual presence into view. (The commonsense view pertains to the indifference with which we comfortably rely upon verbal descriptions, confident that we are communicating an adequate sense of what the absent visual object looks like.) However, as Mitchell asserts, the hope of overcoming the ekphrastic impossibility, of conjuring the actual presence of the object, is so burdened by the want of its desire as to be followed by "ekphrasitic fear":

> [Ekphrastic fear] is the resistence or counterdesire that occurs when we sense that the difference between verbal and visual representation might collapse and the figurative, imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually....the moment in aesthetics when the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative rather than[...]a natural fact that can be relied upon [....] It would be easy

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> to show its place in a wide range of literary theorizing, from the Marxist hostility to modernist experiments with literary space, to deconstructionist efforts to overcome 'formalism' and 'closure,' to the anxieties of Protestant poetics with the temptation of "imagery," to the romantic tradition's obsession with a poetics of voice, invisibility, and blindness. All the goals of 'ekphrastic hope,' of achieving vision, iconicity, or a 'still moment' of plastic presence through language become, from this point of view, sinister and dangerous. All the utopian aspirations of 'ekphrastic hope'—that the mute image be endowed with a voice, or made dynamic and active, or actually come into view, or (conversely) that poetic language might be 'stilled,' made iconic, or 'frozen' into a static, spatial array—all these aspirations begin to look idolatrous and fetishistic. And the utopian figures of the image and its textual rendering as transparent windows onto reality are supplanted by the notion of the image as a deceitful illusion, a magical technique that threatens to fixate the poet and the listener. (154-6)

However, it seems that the supposed broadening of the term "ekphrasis," to which Mitchell refers, has resulted in a narrower meaning than defines the poetic description of visual art, so far as such description need not rest upon "ekphrastic hope" at all, since its pleasure is to verbalize (explain, interpret, clarify, enliven) the impressions conveyed by a visual representation at the same time as describing the features which convey them. Such description can as easily be performed in the presence of the object, as not, since the basic motive in this case is not to visualize an absent or invisible object but to perceive what can

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

be seen, to present what is invisible in one's perception of the visible, to understand, and to express the understanding in a verbal paraphrase. In contrast, Mitchell's ekphrasis is reducible to the practice of conjuring, even though the verbal conjuring of a thing or its image need not, at all, be a description of it, as, for instance, the recitation of a magical incantation, which verbally imitates what is perceived to be the natural process by which a form is believed to come into being, or, instead, there is the imperative voice, which simply expresses a command: Let there be light!

The Reformation paradigm of ekphrasis is, I shall maintain, the relation of sacred Scripture to natural Creation, and the modern aesthetic of the sublime in external nature is founded upon it. We read in Calvin's Institutes, for instance, that in our purpose to know God, "we ought not to rack our brains...but rather, we should contemplate him in his works....whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates himself." We are called, thereby, not to a knowledge which, "content with empty speculation, merely flits in the brain, but that which will be sound and fruitful if we duly perceive it, and if it takes root in the heart. For the Lord manifests himself by his powers, the force of which we feel in ourselves and the benefits of which we enjoy." The sensory-affective perception of God through his work is "the most perfect way of seeking God, better than "if we were to imagine a God of whom no perception came through to us." Of course, that is exactly the kind of God Calvin means, one who cannot be perceived except through the images and actions he makes, even as dry speculation about the essence of God is pointless, his essence being that which "we ought more to adore than to search out." In an argument that is very relevant to the point at which the sublime and the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

marvelous in modern epic theory merge, Calvin continues, "It is also fitting, therefore, for us to pursue this particular search for God, which may so hold our mental powers suspended in wonderment as at the same time to stir us deeply...because, disheartened by his greatness, we cannot grasp him, we ought to gaze upon his works, that we may be restored by his goodness." Such knowledge arouses worship and awakens and encourages, in the midst of our miseries in this life, hope of the future life. Finally, we are to admit, says Calvin, "in God's individual works—but especially in them as a whole—that God's powers are actually represented as in a painting," by which, "the whole of mankind is invited and attracted to recognition of him, and from this to true and complete happiness"(I.v.9-10:61-2).

However, because in sin we are prone to vanity, dullness, error, forgetfulness, and confusion, the glory of creation is often laid waste as the source of God's truth. Thereby, "although the Lord represents both himself and his everlasting Kingdom in the mirror of his works with very great clarity, such is our stupidity that we grow increasingly dull toward so manifest testimonies, and they flow away without profiting us" (I.v.11:63). Or, no sooner do we "rashly grasp a conception of some sort of divinity," than "straightway we fall back into the ravings or evil imaginings of our flesh, and corrupt by our vanity the pure truth of God," (I.v.11:63). Thus, we erect superstitious nature-cults that worship God's creation (instead of God) and "raise up in his stead dreams and specters of our own brains, and attribute to anything else than the true source the praise of righteousness, wisdom, goodness, and power" (I.v.15:69). Thus, "though the invisible deity is made manifest in such spectacles [as the worlds of God's creation]...we have not the eyes to see

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

this unless they be illumined by the inner revelation of God through faith" (I.v.14:68). Likewise, Calvin elsewhere characterizes the poorly guided spiritual wisdom of the ancients as tainted by a "certain giddy imagination," and he appropriates the classical metaphor of the thunderbolt to show the ineptness of the philosopher's vision of God through nature:

> Certainly, I do not deny that one can read competent and apt statements about God here and there in the philosophers....But they saw things in such a way that their seeing did not direct them to the truth, much less enable them to attain it! They are like a traveler passing through a field at night who in a momentary lightening flash sees far and wide, but the sight vanishes so swiftly that he is plunged again into the darkness of the night before he can take even a step—let alone be directed on his way by its help. (II. ii.18:277)

Sacred scripture, as Calvin asserts, is thus needed as a guide and teacher in order for us to know it is God whom we are seeing when we look at creation, even though what there is to be known of God is made plain from the creation of the universe:

> That brightness which is borne in upon the eyes of all men both in heaven and on earth is more than enough to withdraw all support from men's ingratitude—Just as God, to involve the human race in the same guilt, sets forth to all without exception his presence portrayed in his creatures. Despite this, it is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe. It was not in vain, then, that he

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> added the light of his Word by which to become known unto salvation; and he regarded as worthy of this privilege those whom he pleased to gather more closely and intimately to himself (I.vi.1:69-70)....God has provided the assistance of the Word for the sake of all those to whom he has been pleased to give useful instruction because he foresaw that his likeness imprinted upon the most beautiful form of the universe would be insufficiently effective. (I.vi.3:72)

Indeed, the ekphrastic occasion, in which the powers of verbalization and visualization meet, points to discrepancies in mediation that give rise to the kinds of confusion between true representation and false presentation that support the argument against images in religious devotion, but which, paradoxically, cannot be avoided merely by iconoclastic practices. As a case in point, let us return to the Shield of Achilles, now as the conventional type of heroic furniture, a configuration of divine sanction and protection, and compare it, first to Aeneas's shield, then to Prince Arthur's shield in Spenser's The Faerie Queene. Lessing, commenting upon the dramatic effects of Homer's having depicted the shield not as a finished thing but as a thing in process, concludes that our perception of the shield once it is finished is informed by never having lost sight of the divine artificer, whom we see at the beginning in his preparations for the work, and then while at work toward its completion, so, when the shield is complete, "we are amazed at the work, but it is with the believing amazement of an eye-witness who has seen it in the making" (68).

Virgil, also begins his description of the Shield of Aeneas with a scene that shows

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the artificer preparing his forge, but, abruptly, the next scene is of the finished shield being delivered by Venus to Aeneas and set against the trunk of a tree. Only after being looked at and handled by the hero is the shield described, in a manner so "frigid and tedious" Lessing complains, "that all the poetic ornament which Virgil could give it was needed to prevent us finding it unendurable" (69). What appears on the shield are prophesies, which, as Lessing reasons, "could not well admit being shown in execution," because they "could not have been uttered by the god in our presence as plainly as the poet afterwards expounds them," prophesies, as such, demanding "an obscurer language, in which the actual names of persons yet-to-be may not fitly be pronounced" (68). Further, the description is not Aeneas', though it is he who is looking at the figures on the shield, and, ignorant of their significance, might be able to "rejoice in the mere figures." Rather, while the progress of the action is at a standstill, the poet uses this occasion of the shield's description to perform as "a witty courtier...trimming up his matter with every kind of flattering allusion," so that the Shield of Aeneas is consequently "a sheer interpolation, simply and only intended to flatter the national pride of the Romans" (69). In contrast, the Shield of Achilles is intrinsic to the action of the narrative, for "a shield had to be made, and as the needful thing never comes bare and without grace from the hands of divinity, the Shield had also to be embellished" (69). Whereas "Homer lets Vulcan elaborate ornaments because he is to make a Shield that is worthy of himself," Virgil instead "appears to let him make the Shield for the sake of its ornaments, considering them important enough to be particularly described, after the Shield itself has long been finished" (69). Lessing's distinction between Homer's and Virgil's visualizations is meant

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

to illustrate the difference between the aesthetically sound visualization of a poetic object and the intrinsically unaesthetic management of poetical images for pedantic and rhetorical purposes.

The iconoclastic Spenser, on the other hand, avoids ekphrasis altogether by choosing to have the surface for his Shield of Prince Arthur appear blank. Nevertheless, the shield is a magical object, empowered to rout entire armies when unveiled. Thus, it alludes to the legend of Galahad, whose shield was obtained from King Evelake. When in battle the king would cover the shield with a cloth, but in moments of great peril he would uncover it so that "hys enemyes saw the vigoure of a man on the crosse, wherethorow they were all discomfite" (qtd. in Leslie, Fierce Warres 24). Upon erasing the image of the crucified god-man from Prince Arthur's shield, if, indeed, the shield can be said to imitate that of Galahad, Spenser rewrites the literary convention of the shield in its descent from both romantic and Homeric sources, but he has not removed the superstition associated with the worship of the cross, so despised then by the Protestant, nor removed the spirit of idolatry which the miraculous shield itself embodies, though it may be unadorned. As one critic notes, the magical power of Prince Arthur's shield is "associated precisely with the tradition of sacred imagery that generated a violent reaction in Spenser's contemporaries" and represents the very error that Calvin warns against, "In one of his most powerful denunciations, leading to the condemnation of the whole of the Roman Catholic cult of the visual, that 'The root of their error is not believing that they can create divinity, but rather thinking that they can harness divine power through visual representation'" (Leslie, "Art and Spenser" 107).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

However, the blankness of Prince Arthur's shield also relates the power of divinity to the perpetual innocence and candor of spiritual newness, the shield being, thus, a paradigm of the Christian soul that is consistent with the idea conveyed by the material of which this shield is made: Carved from a block of diamond, Prince Arthur's shield is as impregnable as it is both radiant and transparent. In Spenser's time, an age of highly developed heraldic symbolism, the shield of knighthood is meant to be perceived as the emblem of knighthood itself, while the symbols of its device are meant to be "read" and decoded. In stark contrast to the subtle and complex language of such heraldry, the clean slate of Arthur's blank shield, as one scholar suggests, might yet very well be meant to stand in the poem as a message, so far as its blankness might allude not only to Sir Galahad's appropriated shield, but also to the medieval tradition in which young knights shall appear unmarked by any device, until after performing and surviving the first remarkable deed, being initiated, thus, through and beyond its moment of danger: In Sidney's *New Arcadia*, for instance, the tradition of the blank shield is conveyed by the young Corinthian noblemen who arrives without any device and, instead, is "all in white like a new knight" (Leslie, "Fierce Warres"14). It is fitting then that Arthur, who is also himself a new knight, should carry a blank shield signifying, on the one hand, his inexperience and immaturity. On the other hand, for the writers of romance, "the bearing of a blank shield implied no lack of dignity....On the contrary, the simplicity of a shield was taken, in retrospect, to be a sign of honour and antiquity" associated with the "unblemished chivalry and national success" of the other-worldly past, when, as recorded by Geoffrey of Monmouth, "Britain exalted as to so high a pitch of dignity as that it did

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

surpass all other kingdoms in riches, in luxury of adornment, and in courteous wit of them that dwelt therein, [so that w]hatsoever knight in the land was of renown for his prowess did wear his clothes and his arms all of one same colour"(15). Such significant blankness, it seems, would characterize the virtuous indifference of courage and duty comported in a demeanor that stands in contrast against the very wealth and ease of pleasure that come by means of it.

The tension within fictional materials between invisible truth and visible fallacy is relevant to the opposition which informs the literary debate over epic progress into which the theory of the sublime is first introduced by Boileau and from which the sublime continues, for the duration of the following century, to be cultivated as an ideal of both poetry and art. From the perspective of the post-Reformation poet in Britain for whom the iconoclasm of the revolutionary era continues to endure in principle if not in overt violence against artistic imagery in general and religious art in particular, the debate in France, led by anti-Jesuit and Jansenist inspired opponents to *le chretien merveilleux,* would stir up familiar questions as to why, whether, and how epic poetry should represent the historical and religious materials of Christianity. The Christian myth about poetry's origins, as descended from Justin Martyr in the first century (First Apology liv-lx), reiterated by Augustine (City of God, XVIII.xxxii; On Christian Doctrine IV.vi), then by Calvin (Institutes I.viii.3) and by Milton in Paradise Regained (IV.331-341), holds that Hebrew was the original language of humanity, its writing subsequently imitated by demons who inspired the Greek classics and Mithraic legends in order to confound belief in Scripture. According to Justin, Satan anticipated, that, by a relativistic argument based

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

upon the association and comparison of biblical and the pagan stories, the prophesy of redemption through Christ in the Old Testament would seem no better than "mere marvelous tales, like the things which were said by the poets" (53). Thus, the artistry of classical eloquence is also accounted for in terms of Satan's intention to deceive; whereas, in contrast, the crude and plain manner of Scripture shows its divine origin, unworldly and truthful. Calvin explains:

> But our hearts are more firmly grounded when we reflect that we are captivated with admiration for Scripture more by grandeur of subjects than by grace of language. For it was also not without God's extraordinary providence that the sublime mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven came to be expressed largely in mean and lowly words, lest, if they had been adorned with more shining eloquence, the impious world scoffingly have claimed that its power is in the eloquence alone. Now since such uncultivated and almost rude simplicity inspires greater reverence for itself than any eloquence, what ought one to conclude except that the force of the truth of Sacred Scripture is manifestly too powerful to need the art of words? Therefore the apostle rightly contends that the faith of the Corinthians was founded 'upon God's power, not upon human wisdom' [I Cor. 2:5] because his own preaching among them commended itself 'not in persuasive words of human wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and of might' [ch.2: 4.p.] For truth is cleared of all doubt when, not sustained by external props, it serves as its own support. (I.viii.1:82)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The peculiar power of Scripture exceeds human art, and, however the classical masters of discourse allure, delight, move, and "enrapture in wonderful measure," the affects of their vigor fade when compared to the deep impression of Holy Writ, for "in spite of yourself, so deeply will it affect you, so penetrate your heart, so fix itself in your very marrow" (I. viii.1:82). Though Calvin concedes that the Bible, indeed, contains examples of refined and decorated speech, he asserts that the eloquence of some prophets, such as David and Isaiah, was only to show that the Holy Spirit could choose artful persuasion over the rude and unrefined style of its rustic herdsmen.

Aristotle in Poetics mentions that poetry was rooted in and sprung to greatness through religion, the innate passion for divinity perfectly realized in literary forms, the ethical ideal of which gave unity, shape, and recognition to otherwise scattered, obscure, and unintelligible orders of experience. But, given the premise of revealed religion, instead, what could the Christian poet's emulation of the pagan epic accomplish without seeming superfluous at best, blasphemous at worst? Even if eliminating as accidental the heathen content of classical epic poetry and constructing its Christian variant according to a purely abstract model of generic principles and components, these would include the essential themes of universal history, national destiny, and divine intervention. Since, for the modern poet, such themes would consist of a religious view of salvation profoundly and self-consciously incompatible with the pagan cosmos, again, sacred Scripture provides sufficiently and perfectly what epic fiction need not explain nor elaborate. Samuel Johnson expresses as much in his criticism of Abraham Cowley's Davideis:

> Sacred History has been always read with submissive reverence, and an

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> imagination over-awed and controlled. We have been accustomed to acquiesce in the nakedness and simplicity of the authentick narrative, and to repose on its veracity with such humble confidence as suppresses curiosity. We go with the historian as he goes, and stop with him when he stops. All amplification is frivolous and vain; all addition to that which is already sufficient for the purposes of religion, seems not only useless, but in some degree profane. Such events as were produced by the visible Interposition of Divine Power are above the power of human genius to dignify. The miracle of Creation, however it may teem with images, is best described with little diffusion of language: *He spake the word, and they were made*. (I.49-50)

Johnson's final remark alludes to the observation of Longinus, made famous by Boileau, in which, as pointed to in the previous chapter, the *fiat lux* of Genesis epitomizes unsurpassed sublimity in the plain style. He is further alluding in this context to Boileau's no less famous condemnation of Christian epic for debasing revealed religion in fictional elaborations of the supernatural. Traite du Sublime, ou du le Merveilleux dans le Discours, Traduit du grec de Longin (1674) is the full title Boileau gave to his translation of Peri Hypsous. His choice of the term "sublime" in place of "hypsous" is more than likely based upon the 16th-century Latin translation which Boileau undoubtedly consulted, but his addition of "le Merveilleux" as a term to be equated with the sublime is an entirely original contribution. As an attempt to clarify Longinus' meaning the additional term

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

intends to steer the reader away from confusing the universal principle of rhetorical excellence to which *hypsous* refers with the elocutionary species, *sublimis generis*, a category of style opposed to the plain or low style (*humilis*), which Longinus did not himself intend by the term, either, and took pains in his text to demonstrate. Boileau makes the distinction clear in his preface, whereupon, after warning the pedantic and the supercilious *moderne* that Longinus often cites passages "which, tho' very sublime, are nevertheless simple and natural, and rather seize the Soul than dazzle the Eyes" (6), Boileau continues,

> It must be observed then that by the Sublime he does not mean what the Orators call the Sublime Stile, but something extraordinary and [sic] marvellous that strikes us in the Discourse and makes it elevate, ravish, and transport us. The Sublime Stile requires always great Words, but the Sublime may be found in a Thought only, or in a Figure or Turn of Expression. A thing may be in the Sublime Stile, and yet not be Sublime, that is, having nothing extraordinary nor surprising in it. As for Example, *the Sovereign Arbiter of Nature with one Word only form'd the Light*; this is in the Sublime Stile, and yet is far from being Sublime, because there is nothing very marvellous in it, and which might not be easily thought and expressed on that Occassion by anyone; but God said, *Let there be Light and there was Light*, is an extraordinary Turn of Expression which so well denotes the Obedience of the Creature to the Orders of the Creator, that it is truly Sublime, and has something Divine in it; therefore, by the Sublime

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> in Longinus must be understood that which is extraordinary surprising, and as I translate it marvellous in discourse. (7)

Besides being understood for its common meaning, *merveilleux* will have been known to Boileau's contemporaries as critical jargon. For one, the epic convention known as "the marvelous" refers to incidents in epic poetry of such extraordinary force and magnitude as would suggest supernatural power and arouse reverenced awe. Thus pagan gods and goddesses are depicted as the supernatural agents, or machines, which control such incidents, and Boileaux's *le merveilleux* alludes to the controversial substitution in modern epic poetry of Christian for pagan machinery. Indeed, Traite du Sublime was published in the same volume as Boileau's own critical treatise, the imitation of Horace, L'Art Poetique, in which he no less famously denounces the marvelous in modern epic poetry for accommodating the pagan convention of supernatural machinery. Significantly, Boileau's tandem publication of the two treatises, one on rhetoric, the other on poetics, and his pairing of the sublime and the marvelous, in both the title and the text of his translation, equate the effect of sublimity in discourse with that of the marvelous in poetry, resulting in a propitious confusion of critical terms and meanings at a time when the need to distinguish biblical truth from literary fiction was as strong as the religious need to convert to Christianity the ancient, heathen, and mistaken beauties of poetry. The important difficulty remained in separating the pagan content of literary art from its form. As a universal principle of rhetorical excellence whose effect upon an audience is similar to the force of grace irresistible, the sublime would provide the critical grounds for poetical reforms in which it was conceivable to align the stylistic characteristics which

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

were common to both the Bible and the classics, Boileau's "simplicity and naturalness," for instance.

Boileau's identification of the sublime with the marvelous suggests that elocutionary power actually consists of the same spiritual force and magnitude to which epic poetry instead only refers with fantastic representations of the supernatural. Sublimity is to discourse what the marvelous is to epic, and the poet might as well study to replace in epic the debased and ridiculous machinery of the marvelous with an ideal of sublime writing, which instead conveys the emotional power and dignity of the redeeming Christian spirit, at liberty in the world, thus treating of secular moral subjects rather than fictionalizing biblical and ecclesiastical history. During the seventeenth century in France *le merveilleux chretien* had become an enormously popular trend in epic writing. Boileau opposed it as fiercely as he disdained the illiteracy and ignorant taste of the aristocratic court; its mannered and class-based dismissal of Homeric diction as primitive and crude; and the modern pretensions to grandeur and profundity, in general, and of pedantic discourse, especially, which assumed a deliberately mystifying, convoluted, and effete style.

Unlike his ancient predecessor, Boileau is appealing to the modern, Christian reader, who, whether or not a lover of the classics, would have to consider what it means to reject the idea that the word of God is sublime because the diction is lowly and unadorned. More than clarifying how sublime discourse—being extraordinary, surprising, and admirable—might as easily be called "marvelous," Boileau associates the sublime with "the marvelous" of epic convention at the same time he is also making a point: As

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

exemplified in the *fiat lux*, truth, which is naturally great and powerful, seeks its own best expression in words superior to any style that presupposes sublimity upon exercising the will to intimidate, overpower, and manipulate the reader with pompously exclusive—difficult, obscure, and inflated—manners of speaking. Boileau's readers would have interpreted his association of the sublime and the marvelous accordingly, especially as it is Boileau, himself, who is known for denouncing, as indecorous, blasphemous, and ridiculous, the substitution in modern epic of pagan gods with Christian machines. I shall later return to the significance of Boileau's religious piety, where, in the following excerpt from L'Art Poetique he is adamant about the necessity with which poetry must fail to provoke the abject fear of the faithful sinner before his Maker and Judge:

> In vain have our mistaken authors tried
> To lay these ancient ornaments aside,
> Thinking our God, and prophets that he sent,
> Might act like those the poets did invent,
> To fright poor readers in each line with hell,
> And talk of Satan, Ashtaroth, and Bel.
> The mysteries which Christians must believe
> Disdain such shifting pageants to receive;
> The Gospel offers nothing to our thoughts
> But penitence, or punishment for faults;
> And mingling falsehoods with those mysteries,
> Would make our sacred truths appear like lies.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Besides, what pleasure can it be to hear

The howlings of repining Lucifer,

Whose rage at your imagined hero flies,

And oft with God himself disputes the prize?

[. . . . . .]

And let us not, among our vanities,

Of the true God create a god of lies. (III.193-207, 235-6)

At the onset of its emergence in literary criticism, the theory of the sublime is focused upon the affective power of language, but relates to the problem, aesthetic and religious, of manifesting divinity in Christian epic poetry: Which is more sublime? An actual shield, such as Homer describes, consisting of unsurpassed strength and beauty, representing the cosmos in life-like detail, wrought by an immortal divine and possibly animated with a soul of its own? The same shield but known to exist only as an image in the mind, where, nevertheless, one is thrilled to fantasize about the possibility of its actually existing? Not the divine shield, per se, nor even the poetic fantasy of it, but the mysterious, transforming activity of the poetic imagination which both envisions and conveys it?

In making an important distinction between epic narration and tragic drama, Aristotle makes the point that while both ways of storytelling should aspire to delight by provoking awe, epic has the advantage over tragedy in the breadth and flexibility of its medium, for tragic drama is constrained by the spectacle of live performance in a physical setting; but by speech alone epic enables the audience imaginatively to visualize such

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

wonderfully exaggerated things as could only be seen in the mind and would be impossible to depict on the stage–or appear ridiculous for being diminished in the attempt. Further, in writing that epic "affords more opening for the improbable, the chief factor in the marvelous, because in it the agents are not visibly before us" (Poetics II.2326), he suggests that our wonder is raised not by what is visible to our natural sight, but in contemplation of what cannot be seen—impossible, imperceptible, non-existent, supernatural, or otherwise wholly speculative and intellectual—things that *would* seem miraculous in nature if they actually appeared there as tangibly real things, but whose mere reflective image in the mind thrills by pretending that such things could really be. Yet, insofar as we imaginatively conjure these things in the mind, where no discrepancy between visual and invisible is noticed, our awe of them must be the affect of our visualizing them—not of *not* visualizing them. The wonder about which Aristotle speaks comes from imagining things in reflection of how miraculous it would be to see them in reality, and this suggests that were we to see them in reality the awe might disappear, not only because the most wondrous of things—whether or not they do or could exist in reality—must be imagined in order to appear at all, but because our sensory and physical extension in space and time is too limited to encompass them. Also, the pleasure of imagination, which gives us the illusion that we see in our minds what we could not see with our eyes, enjoins us to create as many such wonderful things as we can. This pleasure raises the question of how we come to be awed by looking at something not imagined but actual, whether or not it be extraordinary, magnificent, or powerful in its characteristics. Is our wonder provoked by astonishment at the thing or because, even in

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

seeing it in actuality, what we perceive is not it, per se, but our embellishing reflection of it?

Aristotle maintained that like tragic drama epic narrative should represent the extraordinary actions of historical men, the most astonishing and fantastic circumstances of which could be explained by supernatural intervention, whereupon the gods and goddesses who participated in human affairs of the legendary past were able to work nature's laws to their advantage in ways that exceeded human wisdom. Thus, while the epic poem was meant to indulge the enjoyment of irrational speculation it differed from pure fantasizing in being restricted to legendary facts, and, though free to embellish those facts, it observed the rational order of probable cause and effect, for which the historian, upon only reporting what was said to have actually happened, however marvelous or incredible, need not be held accountable. For it is given that what *did* happen would not have occurred unless it *could* happen. The epic poet, however, unlike the historian who relates all the actions of one hero or many during a period of time, conceives of how the historical and biographical materials might be telescoped through a single course of action whose purpose is determined and executed by one of the heroes involved. Epic illustrates, in a way that the historical record cannot, how the universal can be understood in terms of the particular and vice-versa.

For Aristotle, truth in poetry follows from its imitative function, which pleases in itself but finally satisfies the instinct for knowledge, so much so, that it would be inconceivable in Aristotle's view for poetry to be pleasurable otherwise. The message of Poetics, is, after all, that poetry, so far as it is imitative and not prophetic, can be

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

understood and taught. Epic narration, like tragic drama, imitates the action of historical men in such a way as to elicit terror and pity. It is a higher order of knowledge than history since the credible depiction of what *could* happen, given the mere report of what *did* happen, must be reasoned through an understanding of causal necessity and probable outcome. The understanding is realized in poetic illusions of sensuous and pathetic vividness that are the same as but different from reality, at which the audience marvels since they know the depictions are illusions and yet believe them to be real. For the pleasure of being tricked by the poet is in the proof of the trick: the success of the illusion verifies true understanding. We could not believe the illusion if it violated truth nor enjoy our belief if we truly mistook the illusion for reality. In being tricked by art we exercise not only our enjoyment of imitation as a form of knowledge but our capacity to stretch the illusion as far a possible without snapping its complementary support in reason and destroying the illusion, which, if it did break, would discover both the limit of truth and the end of our pleasure. The formal criteria—of unified action and a logically coherent plot, appropriate and consistent characters, verisimilitude and decorum, stately and massive diction, and so on—gird the poem for as many marvelous incidents as the irrational imagination will allow, to greater effect than without its framework in reason. The reasonable dimension of the poem can withstand an improbable possibility less than it can a probable impossibility, and, since the implicit reasoning of the poem arises partly from its fictional nature, even an improbable possibility is feasible as long as it doesn't violate the reasonable premise to an unpleasant extent. Even so, since the epic is the occasion for marvels, an improbable impossible is conceivable as long as it gives pleasure. If the poet is

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

not an historian neither is he a prophet, and if a poet pretends to be a prophet, then perhaps that is also an illusion, but a fundamentally dishonest one if he is not admitting to the practice of imitation, or aesthetic reflection, but means to be conveying divine commands and intentions or to see actual but hidden events in the past, present, and future, concealed from the historical witness because exceeding the bounds of nature and, therefore, unnatural to the poet as well.

All knowledge gives pleasure, according to Aristotle, and the knowledge we get from poetry differs from that of other discursive forms for being mimetically realized instead of explained and argued, so the pleasure of knowledge in poetic imitation is manifested in the perception of the image. Without knowledge there could be no image and no perception. The image exists because it intelligently organizes the sensory materials in which we are able to recognize the object it imitates. Knowing means grasping a thing in its nature, of realizing the essential pattern of relationships that constitute the general entity, the particulars that belong to it, and the variations that are possible in relation to different circumstances and conditions. Knowledge, according to Aristotle, comes naturally from mimesis, even in the simplest forms of direct copying, because imitation sets up the fundamental differences and similarities from which the general identity begins to emerge against the relentless breaking-down of the whole into its particulars. The circumstances for observing similarity and difference are given by mimesis in the division that separates the representation from the represented, of reproducing "this" as "that." The object of understanding is then neither *this* nor *that* but their relationship, for a perception cannot itself occur without having instantaneously

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

created the discrepancy between the representation and the represented, across which it seems also to flash or leap with recognition. The sensory-affective thrall of poetic mimesis gives realization to the scope and intensity of perception that is exercised in understanding the relationship of illusion to fact, and believability to accuracy.

The first modern theorists of the epic poem are sixteenth-century Italian defenders of its moral purpose, who find in Aristotle's poetics reason to challenge the denouncement of poetry as intrinsically corrupt, the product of a fallen imagination, essentially untruthful, prurient, and blasphemous. They construe, from Aristotle's formal and causal analysis of controlled mimetic intentions and effects, the general components of a dignified, therapeutic, and instructive art, and they are bound to assess and to alter the unruly and fantastic tradition of their own *romanzi.*

Tasso's Jerusalem Delivered, conceived in the spirit of reform, is the first important poem written to illustrate a modern theory of epic poetry, in his words, "part as an imitation of the ancients and part as an imitation of the moderns" (98). The first attempt to reconcile romantic and epic forms, influenced by Aristotelian poetics and by the example of Aeneid, and following the prescription of his Discourses, it imitates the heroic action of errant knighthood in the distant medieval past, in a manner that strives to be consistent with the religion and history of Christianity, while careful to avoid sacred articles and themes which forbid the free-play of invention, and it retains many of the vernacular and customary aspects of the Italian romance, which Tasso thought indispensable to the reader's delight. He applies Aristotle's premises for balancing the marvelous with probability, necessity, and verisimilitude but eschews tragic terror and pity

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

as inappropriate to the spectacular ends of modern epic and as best conveyed in tragic drama. He advocates, however, a broadly appealing range of supernatural machinery with which to evoke admiration and astonished wonder in both the unsophisticated and learned, alike: God and his angels, Satan and his demons, in addition to saints, wizards, ghosts, and fairies. While preserving, if curbing and justifying, the dream-like fantasia of Boiardo and Ariosto, he eliminates for the sake of credibility the pagan pantheon from his machinery even as he continues to draw liberally for his supernatural materials from scripture, folk legends, and occult practice and superstition, on the grounds that their familiarity makes them believable.

Tasso's solution for reconciling probability and the marvelous will fail the objectives of reformed religion among seventeenth-century English theorists. The objection to Christian machinery on the grounds that it derives from religious deception, superstition, and ignorance is voiced in English theory at least as early as 1650, in the exchange of remarks between Davenant and Hobbes. Davenant regrets that Tasso, who, though he "reviv'd the Heroic flame after it was many years quench'd," failed to judge the aspects of the ancient which no longer endure, "Such as are his Councell assembled in Heaven, his Witches Expeditions through the Air, and enchanted Woods inhabited with Ghosts" (5).

> For though the elder Poets, which were then the sacred Priests, fed the world with supernaturall Tales, and so compounded the Religion of Pleasure and Mysterie, two Ingredients which never fail'd to work upon the People, whilst for the eternity of their Chiefs, more refin'd by

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> education, they surely intended no such vain provision: Yet a Christian Poet hath less occasion to imitate such Fables as meanly illustrate a probable Heaven by the fashion and dignity of Courts, and make a resemblance of Hell out of the Dreams of frighted Women, by which they continue and increase the melancholy mistakes of the People. (5)

The English theorists of this period are no less determined to redeem the epic than were the Italians of the previous century, but, from a perspective in which reformed religion is central to the epic framework. Despite the admiration for Tasso and his influence upon Spenser and Milton, the Renaissance Italian version of Christian virtue and valor amidst fabulous concoctions of native romance and superstition falls on the wrong side of the division between Rome and redemption. The untempered fantasy of the Italian epic romance, its preposterous conceits, complicated wordplay, and occult machinery, was meant to appeal in the estimation of the English critic to an uncultivated, misinformed, and superstitious populace. Thus, a controversial distinction between romance and epic followed that would bracket the Italian (and elements of Italian influence in Spenser and Milton) as a category of the romance, and would clear the way for an epic ideal that was favorable to an adjustment of the heathen model to a biblical scheme of history. Addison's commentary on this matter reflected the normative view:

> The truth of it is, the finest writers among the modern Italians express themselves in a such a florid form of words and such tedious circumlocutions as are used by none but pedants in our own country; and at the same time fill their writings with such poor imaginations and conceits,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> as our youths are ashamed of before they have been two years at the university....I must entirely agree with Monsieur Boileau, that one verse of Virgil is worth all the clinquant or tinsel of Tasso (Spectator No.5: V.26).

Shaftesbury, likewise, expresses the anti-Italian stance that was to remain, from the time of Boileau, well into the mid-18th century: "The Italian authors....may be reckoned no better than the corrupters of true learning and erudition; and can indeed be relished by those alone whose education has unfortunately denied them the familiarity of the noble ancients and the practice of a better and more natural taste" (I.335n). John Dennis (the important critic of transition at the turn of the century, between Dryden and Addison, as noted in Chapter I), wrote less than a decade prior to the above commentary, in no uncertain terms, "That an Art, so Divine in its Institution [as poetry], is sunk and profan'd, and miserably debas'd, is a thing that is confess'd by all" (I.335). He endeavored accordingly to restore poetry, first, by revealing the religious nature of its creative impulse, then, by analyzing its technical power and limits, poetic artistry consisting of principles consistent with universal law (ie. Nature):

> ...modern Poetry, as miserably as it is fallen from the Dignity of its original Nature, might gloriously arise and lift up its Head, surpassing even that of the Antients, if the Poets would but constitute their Subjects religious....[for] the Design of the Christian Religion is the very same with that of Poetry, which can be said of no other religion; that the Business of both is to delight and reform Mankind, by exciting the Passions in such a manner as to reconcile them to Reason, and restore the Harmony of the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Human Faculties. (I.365)

Addison, who sets about to explain the various manifestations of imaginative activity, in categories both natural and artificial, treats what Dryden called the "fairy way of writing" as a type of uncultivated imagination that conceives of, "fairies, witches, demons, and departed spirits," and requires of the poet both "a particular cast of fancy...naturally fruitful and superstitious" and a familiarity with "legends and fables, antiquated romances, and the traditions of nurses and old women, that he may fall in with our natural prejudices, and humour those notions which we have imbibed in our infancy" (Spectator No. 419:VI.362). Further, in recovering the general nobility of the ancient imagination against the deterioration of the medieval Catholicism Addison blames the corruption of the fallen church-state that preyed upon rather than enlightened the imagination:

> The ancients have not much of this poetry among them, for indeed, almost the whole instance of it owes its original to the darkness and superstition of later ages, when pious frauds were made use of to amuse mankind, and frighten them into a sense of their duty. Our forefathers looked upon nature with more reverence and horror, before the world was enlightened by learning and philosophy, and loved to astonish themselves with the apprehensions of witchcraft, prodigies, charms, and enchantments. (Spectator No. 419:VI.364)

Professing that poetry had deteriorated into little more than vain amusement, the English theorists of modern epic aspired in the spirit of redemption to raise poetic expectations to a height of technical virtue and moral vision commensurate with the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

reforms of philosophy and religion. For the contention was, that, so far as contemporary literary imagination lacked the force and grandeur of the Greco-Roman genres of "greater" poetry—epic narration, tragic drama, and the Pindaric ode—it failed to reflect the reverenced fear and universal compassion once raised in the terror and pity of ancient poetry and now raised, instead, before the astonishing and terrible wonders of nature, history, and scripture. But that itself would raise the questions: Do not the advanced method of enlightened philosophy and the gospel of revealed religion presuppose that poetry relinquish its former glory in heathen antiquity, as the organizing principle of human wisdom and divine truth? Why redeem poetry for a purpose that true science and true religion satisfy? From the nostalgic perspective of late humanism and amidst the restiveness of the Reform and counter-Reform movements, the classical tradition of the greater genres stood as the model for dignified poetic beauty reflecting human purpose and action, against the disorderly and dream-like flights of imagination which characterized the Italian *romanzi*. Further, the theorists of epic during this period engaged the authority of Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus in a critical debate that endeavored to distinguish the essential principles of poetic art and value from the temporary circumstances of variously limited and irrelevant perspectives. In doing so, they meant to justify the pleasure they had themselves enjoyed, as enthralled readers of Homer and Virgil, and to translate the effects of that pleasure into practical criteria, illuminated and guided by moral justification and answerable to the sense of historical difference that gave rise to "quarrels which the Living have with the Dead" (Davenant 1).

The effort at reform is best summed up at the end of the century by Dennis, whose

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

idea of the sublime I will elaborate fully at the conclusion of this chapter, for he is perhaps, as I mention in the first chapter, the most ambitious among the theorists of poetic reform and the first to credit Longinus' treatise on sublime rhetoric as the source for a theory of poetic psychology centered on religious passion. As indicated above, in the passage quoted from Dennis' The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry, the hope is that "modern poetry, as miserably as it is fallen from the Dignity of its original nature, might gloriously arise and lift up its Head, surpassing even the Antients" (I.365). By means of progress through retrieval the unredeemed imagination in heathen poetry would be reborn for revealed religion in the redeemed imagination of the modern Christian poet, a redemption which hinges upon reconciling the probable and the marvelous in terms relevant to the modern period. Though, perhaps, in the long run, the Greco-Roman epic would simply have to be embraced or rejected as the marvel, in and of itself, of natural religion perfected in poetic art. In the Preface to his translation of Iliad, following decades of debate about whether and on what grounds the marvelous in Homer convinces the modern reader—whether by force of imagination or by reason—Pope reasons from the poetical effect, alone, observing that "no Man of a true Poetical Spirit is Master of himself while he reads Him"(VII.4), despite the reader's religious belief or inclinations of reasoning, for

> ... whatever cause there might be to blame his *Machines* in a Philosophical or Religious View, they are so perfect in the Poetickal, that Mankind have been ever since contented to follow them: None have been able to enlarge the Sphere of Poetry beyond the Limits he has set: Every Attempt of this Nature has prov'd unsuccessful; and after all the Various Changes of Times

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and Religions, his Gods continue to this Day the Gods of Poetry. (VII.7)

But, returning to the mid-seventeenth century, one finds in Abraham Cowley's Davideis an epic-style poem exemplary of the effort to reform classical poetry by emptying poetry's content of heathen ideas and, keeping the "*Ornaments* of *Wit* and *Learning*" intact, filling it up instead with biblical material. Cowley is an admirer of the classics who, nevertheless, as a pious Christian, holds the Bible superior to ancient poetry in content if not in art, poetry being the consummate achievement of worldly wisdom and refinement; and he voices the passion for reforming and regenerating poetry according to the premises of revealed religion. For he views the current practice of poetry as a travesty in which "that *Divine Science* employing all her inexhaustible riches of *Wit* and *Eloquence* either in the wicked and beggarly *Flattery* of great persons, or the unmanly *Idolising* of *Foolish Women*, or the wretched affectation of scurril *Laughter*, or at best on the confused antiquated *Dreams* of senseless *Fables* and *Metamorphosis*" (88). In Cowley's perception, the medium is not the message, and, as David Norton observes in preparing to comment on that view, Cowley, "who conceives himself as the English pioneer of poetry based upon biblical subjects" (II.294), is careful to argue for the justness of his mission with evidence of biblical stories that already resemble pagan ones, in his preface providing such a list of biblical sources for poetry modeled on the classics: Noah as Deucalian; Samson as Hercules; Jephtah's daughter as Iphigenia; the friendship of David and Jonathan as that of Theseus and Perithous; the passage of Moses and the Isrealites as the voyages of Aeneas and Ulysses: Cowley asks, "Are the obsolete and threadbare tales of *Thebes* and *Troy* half so stored with great, heroical and supernatural actions (since *Verse*

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

with needs *Finde* or *Make* such) as the wars of *Joshua*, of the *Judges*, of *David* and divers others? Can all the *Transformations* of the *Gods* give such copious hints to flourish and expatiate on as the true *Miracles* of *Christ* or of his *Apostles*?" (88-90). But Cowley's sense of how poetically to apply these materials consists primarily of rescuing them from the crude style of Scripture and dressing them up in rhetorical ornaments. In Norton's words, "Essentially it is a matter of, to use his vocabulary, flourishing and expatiating on hints; of celebrating through the *addition* of wit and learning; of the production of variety and the reveling in the heroic and the supernatural: it is elaboration and decoration of truth" (II.297). Cowley, who is not reverent toward the style but only the content of the Bible is thus confident that the truth of Holy Writ can remain undisturbed by his elaborations, indeed, that its accounts can be better understood and appreciated. From such a perspective, the religious reform of poetry can hardly take place without imposing upon Scripture the decorous pomp against which Boileau used Longinus' definition of sublimity. Cowley's idea is precisely the contrary of Boileau, who, while strictly dividing the purpose of poetry from that of Scripture, nevertheless discovers and champions a concept of rhetorical sublimity, after Longinus, which in principle resembles the complete subjection of the will to Grace Irresistible. For the sublime, as Boileau translates,

> ne persuade pas proprement, mail il ravit, il transporte, et produit en nous une certaine admiration meslee d'estonnement et de surprise, qui est toute autre chose que de plaire seulement, or de persuader. Nous pouvons dire a l'egard de la persuasion, que pour l'ordinaire, elle n'a sur nous qu'autant de puissance que nous voulons. Il n'en est pas ainsi du sublime: il donne au

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> discourse une certain vigeur noble, une force invincible qui enleve l'ame de quiconque nous ecoute. (342-3)

Though, by virtue of the new standard of sublimity he adopts from Longinus, of which the *fiat lux* of Genesis is made the example of sublimely natural and simple speech, the style of Scripture is never at issue for Boileau, for the Bible is implicitly flawless as the divine accommodation which was conceived for a purpose wholly distinct from the poetical. But Cowley, who constructs a rationale for the religious reform of poetry based upon a paradigm of historical salvation through Christian conversion, the reunion of biblical and classical sources is inevitable:

> Amongst all holy and consecrated things which the *Devil* ever stole [and] alienated from the service of the *Deity*, as *Altars*, *Temples*, *Sacrifices*, *Prayers*, and the like, there is none that he so universally and so long usurped as *Poetry*. It is time to recover it out of the *Tyrant's* hands and to restore it to the *Kingdom* of *God*, who is the *Father* of it. It is a time to *Baptize* it in *Jordan*, for it will never become clean by bathing the *Waters* of *Damascus*. There wants, methinks, but the *Conversion* of *That* and the *Jews* for the accomplishment of the *Kingdom* of *Christ*. (88)

Conversion is implicit in the Bolevian-Longinian concept of sublimity, however, as when, describing the vigor of sublime oratory as an astonishing force, not aimed at gaining the hearer's consent but able to throw the audience into transport, in spite of themselves, Longinus contrasts the persuasive appeals of argument and flattery against a power, which, in William Smith's 1735 translation, "endued with Strength irresistible...strikes

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

home, and triumphs over every Hearer"(3). Exceeding the limits of rhetoric, resulting in conversion not persuasion, the sublime must evoke, both for the Calvinist Protestant and the Catholic-Jansenist, anti-Pelagians of our period, both the mystery of grace and the complete subjection of the will to God's authority in both Nature and Scripture. Again, Boileau's deliberate variation in translating the title of Peri Hypsous, by inserting "mervellieux" as an equivalent term for "sublime," plays upon that suggestion besides. In the context of debate about the limits of the marvelous in Christian epic poetry, it was an especially provocative equation when appearing next to his L'Art Poetique. Boileau objects to Christian epic on the grounds that scripture, which is the one true source of religious thought, not only forbids the visual-material depiction of deity but also withholds the assurance of mental pictures for worship and reflection—"the Gospel offers nothing to our thoughts / But penitence and punishment for faults" (III.201-2). Though not a proclaimed convert to Jansenism, Boileau's close association with and support of Pascal, Racine, and Arnauld puts him in a camp whose beliefs are consistent with the strongly puritanical focus of his commentary, and, further, throws light upon his interest in the principle of sublimity.

The Jansenist, or so-called Catholic Calvinist, reasons the necessity of predestination and grace by election from the perspective of his uncompromising faith, which requires complete submission to the authority and will of God, for which the experience of profoundest fear is as crucial as is the Pauline-like ecstasy of transcendence through abject humiliation. The understanding that God in a non-visible and indefinable being, beyond the ken of human perception, is crucial not only to the provocation of fear

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

but to the desire for God which impels the faithful forward: When the private process of sanctification is complete and the universal history of mankind redeemed comes to it end, He will be revealed. One can assert with piety that religious passion resembles literary sublimity, which is not to say they are the identical, only that they are related, which is cause for a confusion that John Dennis will attempt to sort through and clarify at the end of the century.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, *hypsous*, in Peri Hypsous, denotes the astonishing and ennobling quality of linguistic art perfectly achieved, where greatness of thought and verbal power appear indistinguishable, "a kind of height and conspicuous excellence in speeches and writing" (8-9), according to Longinus, who, defining it as such at the onset of his treatise, adds, "from no other source than this have the greatest poets and prose-writers excelled and thrown around their glorious reputations the mantle of the ages"(9). Indeed, as Longinus will maintain throughout, universality is a requirement of sublimity, since the sublime text must always consist of something more than what the understanding of an individual reader can exhaust at any one moment or series of moments. Thus, sublimity is both accessible and difficult—accessible because in the appeal to universality it reflects the nature of the human soul and, thus, makes an indelible impression on the individual mind, difficult because in that universality is presumed an inherent variety, the breadth and range of comprehension of which is too complex to exhaust. "You see, by true sublimity our soul somehow is both lifted up and —taking on a kind of exulted resemblance—filled with delight and great glory, as if our soul itself had created what it just heard"(42). The failure of a speech or writing continually to uplift the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

soul proves its lack of sublimity, that it has "fallen into a state of withering underdevelopment," neither to be regenerated in the reader's mind nor to regenerate the mind in turn, for it has not left "deep in his mind more to theorize on than what was actually said" (42). Further, the universality of the sublime speaks of harmony arising from discord, the inherent indisputableness of which is characteristic of an object beheld in wonder. "You see, whenever men of different behaviors, lives, emulations, ages, and speeches and writings all have one and the same opinion, then the agreed upon opinion, arising out of a discordant group, takes on for the object of wonder an assuring strength which does not lend itself to debate" (43-4). The particular distinction of the reader's subjective response to the sublime thus consists in the intensity of the reader's private realization of being naturally at one with someone or something other. Therein resides human greatness, the extraordinary legacy and continued cultivation of harmony through the discursive arts, so Longinus endeavors with his student Terentianus not so much to explain what sublimity is—since they already know it when they see it—as "to show how and by what orderly ways the sublime may be attained by us...the manner in which we might have the strength to lead our nature so some increase of greatness" (4-5). The divinity of the human soul and the sublimity of great writing are identical. In sublime speeches and writings, then,

> what is beyond nature drives the audience not to persuasion, but to ecstasy. What is wonderful, with its stunning power, prevails everywhere over that which aims merely at persuasion and gracefulness. The ability to be persuaded lies in us, but what is wonderful has a capability and force

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> which, unable to be fought, take a position high over every member of the audience. Experience in originality, and arrangement and 'economy' are not things we see from one or two passages, but we see them appearing gradually from the whole web of speeches and writings; and sublimity, brought out at just the right moment, makes everything different, like lightning, and directly shows the "all-at-once" capacity of the speaker. (9)

Longinus again employs the metaphor of lightning when describing Demosthenes's style. In contrast to Cicero, whose greatness consists in development—the build-up or profusion of materials which is likened to a deluge—Demosthenes "is great"

> by a sublimity that is abrupter....[and] because he is such as to set everything on fire and catch it by his force, swiftness, power, may be likened to lightening or a thunderbolt....[T]he right moments for Demosthenes' sublimity and hypertensings are in his powerful passages and his intense emotions and his knowing when one ought to astound the audience. (76-7)

Sublimity is related to the same selective genius in ekphrastic writing whose knack is to recognize the visual object in the part of it that reflects the whole. The ecstatic leap of the sublime is the action which launches from the particular into the framework which include it and something other than it besides. One might go further, and say that ekphrasis is the rhetorical figure of ecstasy in which the visual and the verbal are aspects of being both oneself and beside oneself, immediately upon verbalizing a visual representation. Still further, the ecstatic motion of separation, interrelation and union

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

signified by the reflexive elaborations of visual and verbal mediation dramatize the self-same condition of the human creature/creator as both spectator of and participant in the cosmic *panegyre*. The expression in sublime writing of magnitude and force, which cannot be transfixed by visually determined limitations, is fundamental to the aesthetic of the sublime. For the same reason that an astute and lively description must pass over many of the visual details in order to provide a vivid image of the object, great writing can only achieve its magnitude and force through the commission of some flaws in style that a mediocre writer would not allow while carefully presiding over each detail, the visionary scale of the mediocre talent being small and cramped, leaving no occasion for the exhilarating abruptness and rapidity of thought identified with sublime effects. Longinus' defense of flawed excellence—for which Homer, Demosthenes, and Plato serve as his supreme examples—depends upon his conviction that the human being is a creature innately noble, the divinity of the human soul being a concept indispensable to his thesis on sublimity in speech and writing:

> Now, what did those authors, equals of the gods, understand as they desired what is greatest in writing and felt themselves to be above precision in all details? It was, in addition to many other things, this: that nature did not decide that man would be a low or ignoble animal; but leading us into life and into the whole cosmos as if into a kind of world's fair to be, in a way, its observers and to be lovers of the esteem which comes to those who compete, immediately she implants into our souls an erotic passion which cannot be fought for all that is great and more deamonic that we.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> For just this reason not even the entire cosmos taken together can cope with the thrust of human theorizing and perceptiveness, but man's intentness on perceiving often everywhere goes out beyond the limits of what holds him in, and if anyone gaze around at life in its cycle, he will swiftly understand for what purpose we were born, by seeing how much what is "too much" and great and fine holds more advantage in all things. Therefore we are (heaven knows) somehow driven by nature to wonder not at small streams, even if they are clear and useful, but at the Nile and the Danube and the Rhine, and still more at the Ocean; nor, of course, are we more astounded by that little flame which we kindle, when it preserves a pure gleam, than by the gleam of the heavenly bodies, though they are often gloomed over, nor do we generally consider it more worthy of wonder than the craters of Aetna, whose eruptions carry up rocks and whole mounds from its abyss and sometimes pours forth rivers of that single earthbred fire. But in all such things we may say this, that though what is useful or even necessary has for humanity an easy passage, still, what is contrary to opinion is over and over wonderful. (174-80)

But we need only turn to Calvin, for a sense of how Longinus' thesis, which is not executed in praise of the divine but in support of the elevation of human genius and wisdom, shall not so easily reconcile with the sublimity of Holy Writ:

> When Scripture reveals to us who we are, it is to annihilate us utterly. It is true that men will always think highly of themselves, imagining that there is

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> some great worth in them. Yet, for all their good opinion of themselves, God sees nothing in them but filth and corruption; He rejects them, to the extent, indeed, of deeming them loathsome. And thus, although we are given to this folly and are so presumptuous as to glory in what we imagine to be our virtue and wisdom, God, to annihilate and confound us, has but to inquire: 'O man who art thou?' When these words are spoken, we are utterly deprived of all occasion for vainglory. For we know that there is not a single particle of good in us and we have then no further excuse for any kind of self-esteem. (qtd. in Leonard 296).

The central position of the vernacular Bible is commonly recognized as having profoundly influenced modern literature and poetics. Remarkably, through the broadly puritanical and anti-traditionalist incentives within the reform movement, Holy Writ would become the single most widespread source of instruction, entertainment, and imitation, enjoying the popularity that would ironically contribute to the erosion of belief and foreground, instead, confidence in the Bible as the archetype of unspoiled, native truthfulness and verbal candor, "sober, plain, and unaffected," as Milton early maintained. Moreover, the lay reader, presumed to be at liberty to interpret and apply its meanings privately, ostensibly without the guidance of the biblical scholar or priest, might read the Bible exclusively or deliberately against works of poetry in the heathen tradition, the sophisticated appreciation of such works requiring the very education in literary art and custom that sacred writing supposedly did not, in order for biblical speech spontaneously and immediately to impress the heart and mind of the reader with its divine expression of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

truth. Although the pervasiveness of the Bible for modern Christianity might compare with the Homeric epic for ancient civilization, one cannot get past the crucial difference of which the Protestant was himself aware: the Greek epic is marvelous but the Bible is miraculous. Homer and Virgil were not writing down the word of God. Their works were a form of poetic discourse, which might refer to, speak about, or convey sacred truth without being manifest truth. Holy Writ, because it accommodates human understanding, condescends to the most excellent rhetorical and poetic modes of expression that discourse can achieve, the sacredness of scripture presupposing a kind of speech and thought in discursive forms that makes purest sense in words most perfectly chosen even when they seem not to be, "though the majesty of the Spirit...be evident everywhere" (Calvin I.viii.2: 83). Gentile literature, however, is viewed from that perspective (noted earlier) as having been cultivated through the deceptions of Satan, "in many ways an imitator of God, in order by a false likeness to insinuate himself into the minds of simple folk"(I.viii.2: 83). In Paradise Regained, Milton's comparison of the Scriptures with the classics is exemplary of this idea, where Jesus scoffs at Satan's advice to study the literature and thought of Greece, leaving Satan more or less speechless to hear not only that Holy Writ is superior to great heathen literature in content but also in style (IV.331-64). By the turn of the nineteenth-century, William Blake can confidently assert the implicit clarity and primal force of biblical figuration as compared with the artificially contrived instruction of moral allegory. Not only is the Bible "more entertaining and instructive than any other book," but it is "filled with imaginations from end to end and not with moral virtues," and consists not of "allegory, but eternal vision or imagination of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

all that exists" (qtd. in Norton 150). On such grounds Blake lays claim to an aesthetic concept that had been developing through an elaboration of Protestant poetics for three centuries, at least since the time of George Wither's Preparation to the Psalter (1619). In words that compare with Longinus' description in Peri Hypsous of verbal sublimity as the transporting effect of great writing, which strikes the reader as if by lightening, Wither, explaining the artistry of the Psalmist, must note, however, the inadequacy of conventional rhetorical analysis, which, owing its wisdom to the cultivated artifice of discourse cannot explain the seeming artlessness with which the Psalmist affects the reader so directly, at times, no mediation appears detectable:

> Nay I could shew you Straines of *Poesie,* and such flowers of Rhetoricke, as among them could neuer yet be found. But some there be that are not expressible, and I may resemble them to the purest sort of Lighting. For, as that passeth through a purse...and there melts the Coyne, without leauing any impression or signe upon the leather: So, there be certaine Rhetoricall passages in the Psalmes, so pure from sensibilitie, that they can and doe conuey thing through the senses, vnperceived; and yet melt the heart, and worke strange operations in the soule, such as no man can imagine, but he that hath felt them (qtd. in Morris 21)

Wither's reference to an unclassifiable sort of discursive genius suggests the use elsewhere of the phrase, "une certaine je ne sais quoi," a now familiar cliche which was first used among literary commentators as early as the fifteenth century in Italy and France to denote a grace beyond the reach of art, and, as noted in the previous chapter, it is the phrase

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Boileau uses when submitting that the sublime escapes causal analysis, it being an affect, which, experienced by the reader, remains mysterious. In Wither's testimony we find something of the religious reformer's unmediated experience of the biblical text, which Blake would eventually identify as the experience of "spiritual sensation" and attribute to the imagination, as a faculty of apprehension distinct from understanding and reason. Between Wither and Blake the grounds for a science of perception, first denoted as "aesthetic" by Alexander Baumgarten in 1750, will have been gathering momentum through the cultivation of biblical textuality as a field of truth-perceptions and of nature as the observable phenomena of discoverable laws which, in turn, are proved by nature. Here, one might easily apply to biblical discourse the definition of poetry provided by Baumgarten in Reflections on Poetry (1735), where he first proposes the viability of aesthetic science, in order to see how the Bible, similar to nature, begins to be recognized as a perceptual order, its discourse not intending to represent abstract ideas but sensate ones, by degrees obscure and clear, confused and distinct: for poetry is "perfect sensate discourse"—meaning, according to Baumgarten, that every component of that discourse, the sensate representations, their interrelationships, and the words or the articulate sounds which are represented by the letters and which symbolize the words, are together "directed toward the apprehension of sensate representations" (39).

In her study of the English seventeenth-century devotional lyric, Barbara Lewalski distinguishes the poetics of the Reformation, as derived from Augustine's On Christian Doctrine, from the medieval Catholic approach to the same text, remarking that the Reformation contributes "an overwhelming emphasis on the written word as the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

embodiment of divine truth"; whereas the other "presupposes a symbolic universe in which the movement of thought is Platonic....[and] must finally depress the significance of poetry along with all arts of human discourse, since, though words are important as signs, truth is conveyed not by words but by revelation and intuition" (6). According to Lewalski, what endeared Augustine to the Protestants was the aspect of his exegetical theory that attended to the literal sense of the words as the ground for spiritual significance. This involved attention to every valid implication of sense, "the meaning of the words...the circumstances in which they were spoken, collation with other passages, and interpretation according to the sum of revealed doctrine....knowledge of the original languages, of logic, of history, and especially of the rhetorical figures—a precept leading directly to the conception that the Bible's texture is poetic" (73-4). Certainly, the Protestant devotional lyric is exemplary of that special milieu of which Lewalski speaks, wherein the Christian poet, "far from eschewing aesthetics for a rhetoric of silence or a deliberate anti-aesthetic strategy" perceives the Bible as a literary model for imitation, chock full of poetic and other genres, philosophical and historical, of rhetorical conceits, elocutionary variety, resonant grammatical complexities, and symbolic figuration, and is "confident that in this model at least the difficult problems of art and truth are perfectly resolved" (6-7). However, I would add, no such resolution is provided for the epic poet, as he endeavors within the classical mimetic tradition to reconcile the historical materials of Christianity—whose chronicle is sacred Scripture—to the heathen paradigm of fictionalized historical narrative. "Epick Poetry," writes Richard Blackmore, "is indeed the Theology of the Country where the Poet lives, and every Work of this kind is a System

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of the Religion, and a sort of Confession of the Publick Faith there establish'd" (xii-xiv). Scripture is true because it is sacred, but truth in classical speech and writing is a function of art and consists in the just representation of nature and the appeal of mimesis to the consent of the listener/reader as a perceiver—not as a believer—of art as the technique of objective agreement between speaker/author and listener/reader as fellow witnesses in the intelligible world of their mutual description. The separation of God and man is proved in the strangeness and opacity of Scriptural language, the textual ambiguities, paradoxes, and contradictions which must be taken on faith as divine expressions of utmost clarity. Indeed, the Protestant devotional lyric of the seventeenth century appears as the perfect foil for the Christian epic of the same era. It is rhetorical but not fictional and does not have to account for discrepancies between sacred and actual history, between prophetic vision and false imaginative. It proceeds as a dialogue with scripture, a scheme of sin and salvation that presupposes the universal fallibility of the speaker and assumes as part and parcel of its subject matter the tormenting turns of error, doubt, and clarification inherent in the practice of private interpretation—of what Christ means to me. The devotional poet subjects himself in lyric to the same "painstaking analysis" as would be required were he not writing poetry. Whereas the dramatic or epic poet may simply "treat the biblical stories in themselves," the poet of devotional lyric draws from the Bible "as source and model for the presentation of sacred truth in art" because he is endeavoring to speak truthfully to his Creator about the nature and condition of his soul (Lewalski 13). Indeed, the practice of devotional lyric might raise questions about the good sense and candor of the speaker, eliciting just the sort of disapprobation expressed by Johnson toward the end

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of the eighteenth century, as it might have raised two centuries earlier, though his position is certainly not derived from contempt for the inadequacy of language but from a profound humility, in gratitude for the privilege of faith bestowed by God: "Contemplative piety, or the intercourse between God and the human soul, cannot be poetical. Man admitted to implore the mercy of his Creator and plead the merits of his Redeemer is already in a higher state than poetry can confer" (I.299). That is, his mind has transcended nature and imagination. Yet, whatever its perceived flaws, Christian devotional lyric differs from the Christian epic for it cannot be said to compete with the Bible itself. The lyric poet does not endeavor, as does the epic poet, to present a spectacle of collective Christianity. Thus, we might turn again, if somewhat ironically, to Dr. Johnson for the criteria which Milton's epic poem could meet because its historical source is not hagiography, nor crusading knighthood, nor the Reformation of the Church, but the Bible proper:

> Of the *probable* and the *marvelous*, two parts of a vulgar epick poem which immerge the critick in deep consideration, the Paradise Lost requires little to be said. It contains the history of a miracle, of Creation and Redemption; it displays the power and the mercy of the Supreme Being: the probable is therefore marvelous, and the marvelous is probable. The substance of the narrative is truth; and as the truth allows no choice, it is, like necessity, superior to rule. To the accidental or adventitious parts, as to every thing human, some slight exceptions may be made. But the main fabrick is immovably supported....Of the *machinery*,...by which is meant the occasional interposition of supernatural power, another fertile topic of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> critical remarks, here is no room to speak, because everything is done under the immediate and visible direction of Heaven; but the rule is so far observed that no part of the action could have been accomplished by any other means. (I.174-75)

Likewise, Shaftesbury observes that Milton's success is in having justly discerned which sacred materials to depict according to a mythological treatment, but had he gone further, "wou'd soon find the Weakness of his pretended *Orthodox* Muse, and prove how little those Divine Patterns were capable of human Imitation, or of being raised to any other Majesty, or Sublime, than that in which they originally appear" (I.358). But Isaac Watts is adamant about the fitness of Christian divine history to the purpose of epic. Greatly influenced by the critical writings of John Dennis in favor of a modern poetry based in the gloriousness of redemption, whose purpose is identical with Christian history, Watts maintains, in his Preface to Horae Lyricae (1706), that, though the mysteries of Christianity are "capable of gay Ornament" such as poetry provides, those mysteries also have no need of "Tinsel Trappings." For, whereas the most extravagant inventions of the heathen religious imagination are finally tiresome and ridiculous in being false and entirely empty of mystery, in contrast, the mind never stops marveling at the true and profoundly paradoxical events of Christian history recorded in the Bible:

> [T]he Glories of our Religion in a plain Narration and simple Dress have something brighter and bolder in them, something more surprizing and Divine, than all of the Adventures of Gods and Heroes, and all the dazling Images of false lustre that compose and garnish a Heathen poem; here the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> subjects themselves would give wonderful Aids to the Muse; and the Heavenly Theme would so relieve a dull Hour and a languishing Genius, that when the Muse nods, the Sense would burn and sparkle upon the Reader, and keep him feeling awake[...];there is nothing amongst all the Anceint Fables or Later Romances, that have two such Extremes united in them, as the Eternal God becoming an Infant of Days, the Possessor of the Pallace of Heaven laid to Sleep in a Manger, the Holy *Jesus* who knew no Sin bearing the Sins of Men in his Body on the Tree, Agonies of Sorrow loading the Soul of him who was God over all Blessed for ever; and the Soveraign of Life stretching his Arms on a Cross, Bleeding and Expiring: The Heaven and the Hell in our Divinity are infinitely more delightful and dreadful than the Childish Figments of a dog with three Heads, the Buckets of the *Belides*, the Furies with Snaky Hairs, or all the Flow'ry Stories of *Elysium*. (xiv)

Indeed, issues of taste—meaning judgment, or discernment—came to be reflected in the early modern discourse of the sublime, since critical perception and moral value, which are the aspects of taste under consideration, concern the verity with which a poetic illusion succeeds in winning the heart and mind of the reader, a matter directly relevant to the balance of the probable and the marvelous in epic fiction. So far as the modern poet's originality was applied not so much in creating something out of nothing as in transforming what was written in antiquity in a synthesis with the modern, it consisted of the sharpness of his discernment, inseparable from his capacity for conceiving diversity in

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

unity, a limitless extension, or prospect, on both sides of the flexible hinge upon which reflection and anticipation are balanced. Arguably, though I am not aware of any theory of rhetoric or poetic that claims as much, the power of critical judgment, or division, may find a formal analogue in the epic convention of *media res*, contributed by Horace, which marks the self-conscious stance of narration, being ever between what was and what will be in the history that is told, and from which the history unfolds as an action parallel with but separate from the action related in the story.

In a comparison of the literal meaning of "taste" and its figurative sense in the phrase, "a fine taste in writing," Addison, whose observation is commonplace, asserts that both the sense and the intellectual faculty of which it is the metaphor signify "degrees of refinement" in discerning a hypothetically endless unfolding of differentiated qualities and aspects, in correspondence with the natural plenum of infinite variety, ceaselessly self-revealing. Further, in rounding out the meaning of literary taste, he adds to its analytic perceptivity the affective dimension of moral evaluation, the degree of refinement that pertains to whether and in what way a discerned quality is pleasant or disagreeable, important or slight. Literary taste, in both its aspects, the perceptual-discriminative and the affective-evaluative, is innate though unevenly distributed among individuals. In any case the faculty deteriorates if left to languish in nature without the benefit of learning and experience. Moreover, borrowing directly from Longinus, the test for whether someone even possesses enough natural taste to warrant its cultivation requires that he read "the celebrated works of antiquity, which have stood the test of so many different ages and countries; or those works among the moderns, which have the sanction of the politer part

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of our contemporaries." Therein, if such a person is not "delighted in an extraordinary manner," or, worse, "upon reading the admired passages in such authors he finds a coldness and indifference in his thoughts, he ought to conclude , not (as is too usual among tasteless readers) that the author wants those perfections which have been admired in him, but that he himself wants the faculty for discovering them" (Spectator No.409: VI.316).

For Addison, as for Longinus, whose mark upon Addison is everywhere evident in this little paper on taste (the paper at the end of which he announces his next project on this topic, his series on imagination) subjectivity is not the grounds for taste in literature but for tastelessness in general; taste, as it is meant by these critics, is itself the idea of culture and obtains in the preservation of objective norms, of which discourse is the medium. Though occurring through original acts of perception by the individual, thereby internal, private, and unique to the peculiarities of individual temperament, taste is universally justified in explicit terms, which is why a culture—or cultivation—is possible to begin with, based, as it is, upon the recognition of oneself in another, of general human traits, of the individual as a variant not a separate species. Thus, the necessary complement of critical discernment, or taste, which discovers ever finer distinctions, is the ability of wit to intuit the principles of similarity that unite different things, as in allegory and metaphor, especially where such figures of speech function to illustrate a general observation or an abstract concept in non-fictional discourse:

> Allegories, when well chosen, are like so many tracks of light in a discourse, that makes every thing about them clear and beautiful. A noble

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> metaphor, when placed to an advantage, casts a kind of glory round it, and darts a lustre through a whole sentence: these different kinds of allusion are but so many different manners of similitude, and , that they may please the imagination, the likeness ought to be very exact, or very agreeable, as we love to see a picture where the resemblance is just, or the posture and air graceful. (Spectator No. 421:VI.371)

The great poet, like the great critic of poetry, discovers through his subjective powers, which are perfectly receptive and sensitized in attentiveness to the world, the point of universal contact between himself and others in relation to the world, that being the supreme effort (and effect) of speech in its essence—its sublimity. The individual's experience of delight or displeasure in a work of literature is thus both particular and general or else the work is fundamentally incommunicative and thereby not sublime. Addison ends his meditation on taste by echoing Longinus's insistence that while the capacity of an individual for sublime writing is innately determined, genius is worthless without training, the best mode of cultivation being, however, not the mere learning of rules but the sympathetic immersion of oneself in great works—the reader's experience of sublime poetry being identical with the poet's sublime disposition upon writing it. Maintaining that, among other practices, it be necessary for "a man who would form to himself a finished taste in good writing, to be well versed in the works of the best critics both ancient and modern," Addison regrets the inferiority of critics who only grasp and convey to their readers "the mechanical rules":

> I must confess that I could wish there were authors of this kind [critics],

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> who, beside the mechanical rules which a man of very little taste may discourse upon, would enter into the very spirit and soul of fine writing, and shew us the several sources of that pleasure which rises in the mind upon the perusal of a noble work. Thus, although in poetry it be absolutely necessary that the unities of time, place, and action, with other points of the same nature be thoroughly explained and understood; there is still something more essential to art, something that elevates and astonishes the fancy, and gives a greatness of mind to the reader, which few of the critics besides Longinus have considered. (Spectator No.409:320-21)

While English critics had concluded that Paradise Lost was the supreme example of Christian epic, that it had comprehended, as Addison would argue, the singular qualities of Homer, Virgil, and Ovid, respectively, "the great, the beautiful, and the strange" (Spectator No. 417:354), it was made to answer the criticism of even its most ardent champions wherever parts of the poem failed to reconcile the marvelous and the probable in adjustment to a modern perspective. In terms of rhetoric, that means falling short of the perfect balance, pitch, and speed required to strike a convincing illusion in the mind of the reader, thereby, failing to produce the aesthetic emotions of "greater poetry," principally admiration, terror, and pity. The more enlightened and cultivated the reader the more difficult the task of the poet, the maker of illusions, who is not expected to reason about the rightness of a judgment or an action, but to convey it by force of imagination, as if instantaneously realized in the mind of the reader, so that the reader perceives as the author perceives, transporting the reader out of himself at the same time the poet is

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

himself transported in sympathetic thought.

The especially discerning and experienced reader will find that a poet's lack of skill in balancing the probable and the marvelous creates an obstacle to the reader's surrender by alerting his rational mind to the discrepancies, the author's effort at illusion having fallen short of the reader's own greater measure of aesthetic conviction. As such, the modern issue that is focused, if not resolved, in theoretical speculations about the sublime, from Boileau's introduction of Longinus to now, concern the problem of whether and how to intensify and broaden the imaginative disposition and to sustain its simple attitude of wonder against the increasing sophistication and rationality of the reader, whose powers of observation, discernment, and logic are honed by the same discursive medium—the essential responsibility of which is communicative and participatory—as that which produces poetry. The very idea that instruction and practical training are necessary for the achievement of poetic sublimity, a concept that set Longinus against his opponent Caecilius (and a point largely ignored by romantic proponents of the Sublime, who, by late eighteenth century, perceived sublimity as the expression of raw, unspoiled passion), signifies that Longinus's notion of the sublime is implicitly optimistic, well adapted to Christian expectations, whether deistic or Calvinistic, not merely with respect to the process of individual sanctification following redemption and conversion, but the practical relevance of religious faith for the progress of history, politics, and science, in being reasonable yet mysterious and passionate; democratic, efficient, and discursive, yet dignified, graceful, and refined; grandly comprehensive and universal in scope and relevance, yet finite and particular in its private modes of feeling and perception. For the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

inherent perfectibility, or implicit optimism, of the sublime as a rhetorical, and therefore, an effective and pragmatic principle, is yet analyzed by Longinus as the mode not of persuasion but belief and informs his effort to discover "how and by what orderly ways the sublime may be attained by us," hence "the manner in which we might have the strength to lead our natures to some increase of greatness"(4-5).

The English criticism that flourished in esteem of Boileau's spirited discovery and introduction of the new-ancient critic, Longinus, strove to explain that sublimity in poetry resulted from the poet's "trained instinct," if I may borrow from Brody's translation of Boileau's phrase, *parfaite habitude*, of which the sublime genius in action is sober, even—or especially—in the throes of bacchic frenzy, excelling through the practiced reflex that is triggered while the poet is utterly attentive to the demands of his medium, his purpose, and the context of the work underway, steadfast in his handling of the timing, duration, and scale of particulars in relation to the whole. Since at any given moment of the process he is at all times acting with relevance to circumstance, place, manner, and motive, he is free to strike the imagination of the reader with boldness, precision, speed. Sublimity, "la souveraine perfection du discours," according to Boileau's Longinus, is thus conceived as a perfect blend of nature and art, an elastic sense of spontaneity, intensity, calculation, and breadth, wherein it is plain that "in artistic creation the principles of vitality and control are...not only inter-operative but inseparable" (Brody 40-41).

In correcting the unexamined myth of Boileau as the rigid *legislateur du Parnasse* and, subsequently, the inability of current historians of the Sublime to give Boileau his proper due as Longinus' modern messenger, Brody's study of the French critic and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

satirist's affinity with Longinus argues effectively for a point that also applies to the reasonableness with which the Restoration critics, in the spirit of Longinus, argue for the cultivation of literary taste, based in knowledge of the ancients but adjusted to modern conditions, in order to guard against the absolute imposition of rules, on the one hand, and the utter abandonment of learning and regulation to unfettered, individual genius, on the other hand. As Longinus maintains, we can only know through technical wisdom alone that certain effects in speech and writing depend wholly upon natural genius (14). The primacy of poetic genius is a given in the criticism of Longinus, Boileau, and the English critics, but, as Brody observes, "What is perhaps most deeply humanistic about the treatise On the Sublime and the tradition on which it draws is its forceful vindication of the individual act of judgment and its defense of the artistic sensibility against the reduction of the creative act to either demonic dispossession or pretentious, rigorous scientism." Yet, as he immediately warns, though Longinus opposed the formalist critics of his own day, he did so not "in the name of the subjectivity of feeling;" rather, "he appealed to the higher subjectivity of judgment" (43). In turn, Boileau, for whom the sublime represented an "inscrutable principle of insight and control...recapitulated in the word *raison*," or, as with Longinus, "that inner essence which rivets the attention," understood that literature was defined by its emotive effects and that those emotive effects were associated with the sublime, being not weakened but intensified by a simple and natural force of artifice whose principle he sought to clarify through Longinus; for the sublime, in Boileau's estimation of what Longinus conceived it to mean, is "the supreme degree of beauty, which realizes perfectly the effect desired by the artist....that point beyond which art can accomplish no

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

more because the receptive mind makes direct contact with the creative mind" (White 159).

John Dennis, the first critic after Boileau's translation of Peri Hypsous to put to use systematically a principle of sublimity construed from it, endeavors above all to reconcile the poetical and the biblical traditions by arguing that, in the very least, it can be said that, unlike philosophy, both poetry and religion are immediate, sensuous, and passionate. Poetry is the noblest of all arts, according to Dennis, having an end and a method, its purpose being "to excite Passion," whereby it "entertains Sense...in order to satisfy and improve, to delight and reform the Mind, and so to make Mankind happier and better" (I.336). His stated aim in The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry (1704) is "not only to retrieve so noble an Art and to fix the Rules both of Writing and of Judging, that both Readers and Writers may be at some certainty; but, to raise it to a height which it has never known before among us, and to restore it...to all its Greatness, and to all its Innocence"(I.338). The restoration of poetry's innocence is to be accomplished by rediscovering its essential nature as an art with a purpose and a method, but its greatness may be restored by reuniting it with the religious ideas from which it originated and became magnificent among the ancients, a solution Dennis has already proposed in The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry (1701), while noting, that all which is great in Religion is most exalted and amazing; all that is joyful, is transporting; all that is sad is dismal, and all that is terrible, is astonishing" (I.218). Thus, in Grounds he proposes to show, further, that poetry and religion are aspects of the same "Enthusiastick Passion," in that "Religion in Poetry was absolutely necessary to raise it to the greatest exaltation, of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

which so Noble an Art is capable, and on the other side, that Poetry was requisite to Religion in order to its making more forcible Impressions upon the Minds of Men" (I.325). Heathen epic and sacred scripture are alike in that regard, for epic mythology is the poetry of natural religion, and the Bible is indeed a poetic creation. But, more, he has the example of Paradise Lost before him, as proof that the chief religious passions—admiration, terror, pity, joy, horror, sadness, and desire—"which contribute most to the greatness of Poetry...flow greater from Revelation than from Natural Religion; because all Reveal'd Religion, whether true or pretended, speaks to the Senses, brings the Wonders of another World more home to us, and so makes the Passions which it raises the greater" (I.363-64).

Dennis's general intention echoes the sentiment of Milton's "Of Education," where, distinguishing poetry from "subtle and fine" rhetoric, Milton characterizes poetry as "more simple, sensuous, and passionate," referring, he explains, not to the

> prosody of a verse,...but that sublime art which in Aristotle's Poetics, in Horace, and the Italian commentaries...and others, teaches what the laws are of a true epic poem, what of a dramatic, what of a lyric, what decorum is, which is the grand masterpiece to observe. This would make them soon perceive what despicable creatures and our common rhymers and play-writers be; and show them what religious, what glorious and magnificent use might be made of poetry, both in divine and human things. (637)

Indeed, the foundation of Dennis's argument reiterates Milton's thesis, that

> The end...of learning is, to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which, being united to the heavenly grace of faith, makes up the highest perfection. But because our understanding cannot in this body found itself but on sensible things, nor arrive so clearly to the knowledge of God and things invisible as by orderly conning over the invisible and inferior creature, the same method is to be followed in all discreet teaching. (631)

Dennis reasons that happiness is the equal objective both of religion (natural or revealed) and of poetry (which cultivates imagination), each being meant "to delight and reform Mankind, by exciting the Passions in such a manner, as to reconcile them to Reason, and to restore the Harmony of the human Faculties" (I.365-66). Though similar in *effect*, religion and poetry are not identical in their method or in their ultimate aim. The restorative powers of Christianity are exercised in charity and faith through the living process of sanctification, whose boon is yet the mere foretaste of pleasure in eternal afterlife; whereas poetry, which is not a divine cure but a natural remedy of the imagination and part of the self-healing process of the psycho-physiological order, must be artfully perfected and yet remains both a symptom of our mortality and limited by it.

The modern solution for poetic reform, which he first lays out in Advancement, is to write the religion of true faith in poetry, as did Milton, and according to the classical tradition whose poetry is greatest. For, though Dennis does not say so, the problem for the modern is whether and how to write revealed religion beyond the Bible. Clearly biblical material, whether poetic or not, is not thought of as being conceived within an

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

ongoing literary tradition, being that the Bible is a sacred text and thereby fixed and absolute, its language and form not separable from its content. Whereas, the classical sources, regarded as having been created from false religion, are not prophesy but art and made subject to the abstract analysis which separates content from form.

In Grounds, Dennis relates Longinus' idea of sublime to his own concept of the "Enthusiastick Passions," which are the emotions stirred by having turned an ordinary, original sense impression into an uncommon and extraordinary idea. The imagination, in that case, is not limited to recalling images or inventing fanciful creations but actively influences and recreates the original sense impression into something new and different than what it was. The difference is illustrated by a distinction between two kinds of seeing, one that perceives the sense impression, one that alters the perception itself, turning it into an idea that continues to increase and stretch the soul's capacities. The example Dennis gives is of the perception of the sun. In ordinary conversation, the mention of the sun "gives the Idea of a round, flat, shining Body, of about two-foot diameter;" however, when received by the impassioned imaginative, whose reflection arouses enthusiastic admiration, the sun "gives the Idea of a vast and glorious Body, and the top of all the visible Creation, and the brightest material Image of the Divinity" (I.339). Likewise, enthusiastic terror follows not from the mere mention of thunder, which, in common conversation, "gives an Idea of a black Cloud, and a great Noise, which makes no great Impression upon us." However, "the Idea of it occurring in Meditation, sets before us the most forcible, most resistless, and consequently the most dreadful Phenomenon of Nature" (I.339). Enthusiastic admiration and terror, mostly as produced

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

by religious ideas, are the two emotions which Dennis identifies as the essential components of the Bolevian-Longinian sublime:

> All the Examples that Longinus brings of the Loftiness of the Thought, consist of terrible Ideas. And they are principally such Ideas that work the Effects, which he takes notice of in the beginning of his Treatise, viz. That ravish and transport the Reader and produce a certain Admiration, mingled with Astonishment and with Surprize...But, secondly it is plain...that this Enthusiastick Terror is chiefly to be derived from Religious Ideas; and...every Man's Reason will inform him, that every thing that is terrible in Religion, is the most terrible thing in the World. (I.361)

But, in the category of terrible ideas, Dennis lists a variety of natural and supernatural objects which might easily be depicted in epic-romantic narrative: "Gods, Daemons, Hell, Spirits and Souls of Men, Miracles, Prodigies, Enchantments, Witchcrafts, Thunder, Tempests, raging Seas, Inundations, Torrents, Earthquakes, Volcanos, Monsters, Serpents, Lions, Tygers, Fire, War, Pestilence, Famine, etc." He quickly, however, returns to the idea of religious terror, remarking, of the terrible ideas listed above, that they are all the more so which show divine wrath and vengeance, being also

> the most wonderful; because...seeing them both threatening and powerful, and not being able to fathom the Greatness and Extent of their Power, we know not how far and how soon they may hurt us. But, further, nothing is so terrible as the Wrath of infinite Power, because nothing is so unavoidable as the Vengeance design'd by it. There is no flying nor lying

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> hid from the great universal Monarch. He many deliver us from all other Terrors, but nothing can save and defend us from him. And therefore Reason, which serves to dissipate our Terrors in some other Dangers, serves but to augment them when we are threatened by infinite power; and that fortitude which may be heroick at other times, is downright Madness then. (I.361-2)

Whether the danger is real or imagined—that is, religious or poetic—should not matter as to the effect upon the soul, according to Dennis. Indeed, it would appear that "terror" is an equivalent term for the generally violent internal disorder caused by the Enthusiastic passions of both poetry and religion, which is necessary in the process of restoring internal harmony. What Dennis appears to be trying to get at and explain, but must refer to the powerful emotions of religious thought in order to convey, is a sense of how the soul experiences and communicates self-realization upon using the occasions of perception in the world to make itself visible. For, the remarkable if unstressed point of Dennis's example of the difference between the sublime and the ordinary expressions of speech is that the ostensible objects of either description are the same. Neither the sun nor a storm in and of itself is the cause for its sublime effect. Rather, the attitude and desire of the soul as it approaches these objects for self-reflection determines their sublimity, and the duty and purpose of writing poetry is formulated accordingly. Here, we might be reminded of the responsibility of the reader, as configured in the reformer's naked approach to Holy Writ, wherein the reading of Holy Writ proceeds as a trial of fearful self-exposure, the dark nature of the sinner's soul coming to light, in Augustinian terms, but

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

succeeding according to the reader's prior sense of where the Holy Spirit means to convey him. In Dennis's equation, which reiterates the Augustinian view that poetry is ephemeral but Scripture is permanent, the terrors of true Religion and of poetic imagery differ only in so far as restoration by poetry is a temporary illusion, a natural function of imagination; whereas, the miracle of the true religion, whose pagan type is found in Plato and whose unifying passion is charity, actuates in everyday life the harmonious equilibrium of reason, passion, and sense that is eternal and will become purely manifested in the afterlife as perpetual pleasure. Poetry aspires by invention to succeed at what religious feeling can accomplish, without pretense or image, but through divine intervention and the subsequent dispositions of pure faith and compassionate suffering.

Addison, who, like Dennis, is an advocate of the religious significance of the imagination when he writes, that, so far as life is at worst unliveable and at best wholly unpleasant without the benefit of the imagination in its every aspect as the mediator of nature, art, poetry, history, and science, "what an infinite advantage this faculty gives an almighty being over the soul of a man, and how great a measure of happiness or misery we are capable of receiving from the imagination only" (Spectator No. 421:VI.373). Unlike Dennis, however, because Addison is interested not only in how the imagination applies to the language arts but in every aspect of its power, he speculates about the limitation of its capacity, in physical-psychological terms, as natural to its physical condition *and* to the fallen condition of humanity. For Addison, the defect of the imagination registers not in the fulfillment of its nature as a producer of illusions, but in its inability to keep apace with intuition and reasoning, failing to visualize the objects of either through their extensions

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

into infinity, both outward through the galaxies and inward through the tiniest of atoms, "this little world, a new inexhausted fund of matter, capable of being spun out into another universe" (Spectator No. 420:VI.368). In a passage that describes precisely the very limit that Kant, nearly a century later, would call the "mathematical sublime," Addison writes that in being grounded in sense the imagination cannot adjust "to such extraordinary degrees of grandeur or minuteness" beyond the ken of normative spatial experience, even though "the understanding, indeed, opens an infinite space upon every side of us" and "our reason can pursue a particle of matter through an infinite variety of divisions." In the one case, the imagination is soon "swallowed up in the immensity of the void that surrounds it," in the other, it "feels itself a kind of chasm that wants to be filled with matter of a more sensible bulk." At the spatial extremes of either breadth or contraction, Addison observes there is nothing, meaning no image. But, this incapacity of the imagination for "very large or very minute ideas" is probably not a defect of the soul, he asserts, but of the soul hampered in relation to the body, limited by the smallness of the brainpan and the relatively weak charge of its mere "animal spirits." However, since it can be supposed that "beings of a higher nature excel in this respect...it is probable that the soul of man will be infinitely more perfect hereafter...[so] that the imagination will be able to keep pace with the understanding, and to form itself distinct ideas of all the different modes and quantities of space" (Spectator, No. 420:VI.368-9).

Likewise, in Dennis's scheme, poetry is not the substitute for religion, nor can religion be merely poetry. While the sensuous and passionate effects of poetry and of religion are identical, the sources and circumstances of their causes are profoundly

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

different. People should not mistake poetry for religion, nor religion for poetry and should not try to accomplish with one what only the other can accomplish or to misconceive religion in terms of poetry. Nevertheless, the initiation through poetry of religion is as possible as that of religion through poetry. In a lively summary of his view Dennis writes:

> Poetry seems to be a noble Attempt of Nature, by which it endeavors to exalt itself to its happy primitive State; and he who is entertained with an accomplish'd Poem is, for a Time, at least, restored to Paradise. That happy Man converses boldly with Immortal Beings. Transported, he beholds the Gods ascending and descending, and every Passion, in its Turn, is charm'd, while his Reason is supremely satisfied. Perpetual Harmony attends his Ear, his Eye perpetual Pleasure. Ten thousand different Objects he surveys, and most the dreadful please him. Tygers and Lions he beholds, like the first Man, with Joy, because, like him, he sees them without Danger. But nothing that is merely Human can be on all sides perfect. The Delight which Poetry gives, is neither perpetual, nor are all Men capable of it. Religion alone can provide Man a Pleasure that is lasting, as it may be universal. Poetical Fire neither always burns in us, nor can it always warm us; but Charity, like a sacred Flame that was the Guardian of the *Roman* Empire, if 'tis with Care maintain'd, like that, becomes, like that, eternal. (I.264-5)

In an earlier essay, dated 1695, on Blackmore's epic poem of Prince Arthur, Dennis admits to finding less pleasure in the Christian machines of epic romance than in

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the pagan ones of classical epic because, he reasons, poetry pleases by an imitation of nature, but Christian machines, being entirely outside of nature, cannot delight in their description, more especially when luxuriantly conceived, the Angels appearing insipid for lacking distinction of sex, variety of passions and diversity of inclinations, the Devils, more horrible and odious than terrible, for, though ascribed some passions and inclinations, they fall short of the human-like pagan deities, lacking range of emotion or judgment beyond "infernal Rage and diabolical Malice and Immortal Hatred to Man, the good as well as the bad." "The imitation which excites Joy, must be an imitation of something in Nature. For Imitation, says Aristotle, is therefore pleasing, because we are instructed by it without Pain" (I.105). If he is to be instructed by an imitation, Dennis asserts, he must be able to judge it, which is not possible if he has not a clear and distinct idea of its object. Here we have the foundation of a later distinction between the sublime and the beautiful, as the opposed types of formlessness and form, and in relation to the feelings of pain and pleasure, respectively, which would occupy aesthetic psychology in the next century. For, as Dennis continues, he is reminded that Virgil, to his great credit, refrained from describing his gods in their physical person and instead described their actions, which *could* be judged in terms of verisimilitude and probability, while the gods remained obscure in their appearance. By conceiving his deities as entities in action, Virgil came closest to the thing in nature that would best exhibit the character of his deities, since action is within nature yet visible not as a body, per se, so much as the evidence of physical spirit or force: "By describing his Machines by their Actions, he seems not so much to have gone out of Nature, for Motion in Matter is Nature." Further, "all Poetry is

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Imitation, and nothing represents or imitates like Action; which is Aristotle's Reason, in the Third Book of his Rhetorick, Chapter the Seventh." Finally, "all Poetry ought to animate," which the describing of action does do (I.106). It seems that the question of how poetry realizes divinity remains a matter distinct from the transformation of the individual soul through faith, which occurs in the reading of Scripture, and it depends, rather, upon an understanding of the natural world, the physics of vitality, both raw and cultivated, which comprehends the civic structures of language, religious practice, and the arts. It returns, in other words, to where the heathen philosophers begin.

Aristotle, writing that God is the "one impelling force, unseen and hidden from our eyes [by which] all things are stirred and perform their individual functions," compares the operations of the familiar but impersonal soul of human wisdom as it goes about informing the daily conduct of private and social life:

> That this force is unseen stands in the way neither of its action nor of our belief in it. For the soul whereby we live and dwell in houses and communities, though invisible, is yet seen in its operations; for by it the whole ordering of life has been discovered and organized and is held together—the ploughing and planting of the earth, the discovery of the arts, the use of law, the ordering of the constitutions, the administration of home affairs and war outside our borders and peace. Thus, too, must we think of God, who in might is most powerful, in beauty most fair, in life immortal, in virtue supreme; for though he is invisible to all moral nature, yet is he seen in his very works (I.637).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Generally speaking, the cause for poetic reform at the close of the seventeenth century, which aimed to restore in modern poetry the glory of the ancient, required the construal of universal aesthetic principles, such as the sublime, which arose not from a disinterested philosophical investigation into the universal laws of poetry but from an impassioned desire to know truth in the images of poetic realization. That pursuit required an understanding of poetic illusion, whose test was the limit of belief, not reason, yet the nature of poetic belief would have to be distinguished from the conviction of religious faith. Poetry, the verbal art of feigning imagination, however irrational and disorderly its natural faculty, could not be perfected except within the rational limits of artistic mediation and the consent of reason, which, if violated, resulted in the destruction of its illusion. However, religious faith exceeded the bounds of illusion, aspiring to a perfection that was out of this world, and its sincerity was not the implement or the consequence of poetical or logical persuasion, so judgment was relinquished in its passion. Insofar as our theorists would have to illustrate the grounds for reconciling poetry and religion, they would have difficulty explaining the irrational nature of poetic belief without alluding to religious faith and confusing them by analogy.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

CHAPTER THREE

The Soul in Action: From Dialogue to Allegory, from Text to Landscape

Elena...had a glimpse of the lofty region of the mountains, but of no object that could direct her conjecture concerning where she was. She saw only pinnacles and vast precipices of various-tinted marbles, intermingled with scanty vegetation....Elena, after having been so long shut in darkness, and brooding over her own alarming circumstances, found temporary, though feeble, relief in once more looking upon the face of nature; till, her spirits being gradually revived and elevated by the grandeur of the images around her, she said to herself, 'If I am condemned to misery, surely I could endure it with more fortitude in scenes like these, than amidst the tamer landscapes of nature! Here, the objects seem to impart somewhat of their own force, their own sublimity, to the soul. It is scarcely possible to yield to the pressure of misfortune while we walk, as with the Deity, amidst his most stupendous works.' (Ann Radcliffe, The Italian)

The modern aesthetic of the sublime, which we might distinguish from the Bolevian-Longinian concept of *hypsous* in literary art, develops through the metaphysical elaboration of thrilling effects, associated with the rawest and least hospitable of natural terrains. As mentioned in Chapter One, Twentieth-century scholars have explained this taste for savage scenery as the affect of an especially British experimental sensibility: As nature came to be perceived not only through the artificial apertures of microscopic and telescopic sight and in conformity with the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm of absolute space and causal mechanics, spectacles of mountain fastnesses, frozen tundra, stormy seas, and the like, would combine with exhilarating speculations about the infinitely strange reaches of the cosmic sensorium; and this philosophically heightened aesthetic would not only embellish the scientific view but also become, itself, the natural object of eighteenth-century psychology, self-distancing and self-reflective. But, as I have been maintaining, the characteristically sublime ejaculations of astonishment and terror among writers of the Baroque and Restoration periods were being hollered from within the epic landscapes of biblical historiography.

Thomas Burnet, explaining what is meant by the word "sacred" in the title of his

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

geological history, The Sacred Theory of the Earth, distinguishes the most extraordinary features of the natural landscape in light of their narrative relevance, each the impression in nature of an astonishing turn in the plot which is recorded in Scripture and continues to progress in historical time:

> This Theory of the Earth may be called Sacred because it is not the common Physiology of the Earth, or of the Bodies that compose it, but respects only the great Turns of Fate, and the Revolution of our Natural World; such as are taken notice of in the Sacred Writings, and are truly the Hinges upon which the Providence of this Earth moves; or whereby it opens and shuts the several successive Scenes whereof it is made up. (15)

Natural philosophy in the seventeenth century might have turned the mortal spectator toward unprecedented views of Creation, but the narrative of salvation would yet underwrite the transfiguring insight through which the magnificent and startling effects of such views render nature marvelous:

> Where there is variety of Parts in a due Contexture, with something of surprising aptness in the harmony and correspondency of them, this...[is called] a Romance; but such Romances must all Theories of Nature, and of Providence be, and must have every part of that Character with advantage, if they be well represented. There is in them, as I may so say, a Plot or Mystery pursued through the whole Work, and certain Grand Issues or Events upon which the rest depend, or to which they are subordinate; but these things we do not make or contrive our selves, but find and discover

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> them, being made already by the Great Author and Governour of the universe: And when they are clearly discover'd, well digested, and well reason'd in very part, there is, methinks, more of beauty in such Theory, at least a more masculine beauty, than in any Poem or Romance; And that solid truth that is at the bottom, gives a satisfaction to the Mind, that it can never have from any Fiction, how artificial soever it be. (17)

Burnet's romantic geology indeed anticipates the following century's landscape poetry, works such as Thomson's Seasons, which glory in depicting the natural varieties of climate and scenery in their pure element, unembellished and virtually devoid of human figures—except for the reader, himself, who is imaginatively transported to the scene, as if an isolated player on the stage of Creation. In being viewed as the magnificent ruin of a catastrophe recorded in the Old Testament, and in continuing in the Christian era of grace as the natural stage for events which are still unfolding toward the end-time, the sublime landscape is the re-imagined, historical scene of a linear narrative which transcends the natural cycle. So on the one hand, the pilgrim views the inhospitable terrain as equivalent to the mortal circumstances through which his soul must journey home to heaven; on the other hand, in aspect of the most extreme circumstances in nature, of deprivation and danger to mortal life, the unforgiving landscape, stripped of any boon to fleshly appetites and desires, is also an allegory for the heavenly abode after which his soul pines and for which his mortal body is vanquished. [1]

---

[1] See Dorothy Whitelock, "The Interpretation of the Seafarer"(Early Cultures of Northwest Europe, H.M. Chadwick Memorial Studies, 1950) 261-72. Whitelock argues that the first and second halves of "The Seafarer"comprise a unified monologue, wherein the excursion amidst harsh climes in the first half relates to the seafarer's expressed

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The sublime landscape, as such, is an allegorical vision from the salvific perspective, which thwarts neo-classical attempts to write successfully a poem from the heroic model; and, as I shall argue here, the appeal of Peri Hypsous amidst such attempts relates to how the Biblio-centric imagination more readily charts the natural terrain in epic terms than construes from heroic poetry an apt paradigm for the modern writing of a Christian epic poem.

The paradoxes attending the conversion of Greco-Roman epic into a viable, modern version are perhaps best illustrated in John Dryden's commentary on epic poetry in his essay on satire, where he is pressed to account for "the failings of many great wits among the Moderns, who have attempted to write an epic poem" (85). Dryden is determined to contradict the commonplace explanation that Christianity is to blame, but he cannot deny that revealed religion is at odds with the unredeemed imagination of pagan myth, from which the Homeric form sprung and was cultivated, Christianity being simply, "not capable of those embellishments which are afforded in the belief of [the] ancient heathens." For, " 'tis true, Dryden concedes,

> that, in the severe notions of our faith, the fortitude of a Christian consists in patience, and suffering for the love of God, whatever hardships can befall him in the world; not in any great attempt, or in performance of those enterprises which the poets call heroic, and which are commonly the effects of interest, ostentation, pride, and worldly honour; that humility and

---

longing for God in the second half, and that the ascetic significance of harsh seas and brutal terrains is more typical than not of the idea of spirituality in Anglo-Saxon literature.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> resignation are our prime virtues; and that these include no action but that of the soul. (85-6)

Like John Dennis, Dryden opposes the deist's argument, that holy truths imparted by revelation might also be discovered through natural reasoning, so he cannot construe on deistic grounds a true method for advancing the arts of epic narration from ancient heathen to modern Christian, but, unlike Dennis, who discovers a psychological key in poetical enthusiasm, Dryden offers a biblical-historical solution. In the preface to "Religio Laici," Dryden reiterates the teaching of early Christian philosophers, that pagan religious ideas are merely the faded impression of biblical truths in the collective memory of Greco-Roman consciousness, that the cults of natural religion are not original but "faint remnants or dying flames of revealed religion in the posterity of Noah" (100). That notion appears to ground his rationale for writing epic poems in which episodes of Judeo-Christian history chronicled in the Bible are made to conform to the heroic design of the classical model; and, so far as epic must involve "some great action of war, [and] the accomplishment of some extraordinary undertaking, which requires the strength and vigour of the body, the duty of a soldier, the capacity and prudence of a general and, in short, as much, or more, of the active virtue than the suffering," such poems would also require the "heroic action of some great commander, enterprised for the common good, and honour of the Christian cause"("Discourse on the Original and Progress of Satire" 86). It would appear, that, upon being returned through a modern perspective to its uncorrupted source in revealed religion, the heathen soul of epic poetry might be redeemed and its formal principles allowed to progress across the breach which

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

distinguishes virtuous pagan thought from the otherworldly piety of enlightened Christianity.

Dryden presses on as if he has just formulated a promising new solution against the difficulty of treating Christian passivity in terms of primitive *arete,* and even though he has merely reiterated the very problem toward which he is addressing a cure. For the issue of whether and to what extent the Christian religion should attach itself to ideas of nationhood or dictate the historical circumstances of political, national, and cultural identity remains a problem, and his is a dubious proposition to consider for English poets well within memory of civil war, given that Cromwell's army of Puritan warriors were themselves, so to speak, "enterprised for the common good, and honour of the Christian cause." Certainly the potential for reasoning the religious justification for war among Christians could still be roused, despite Restoration compromises. But it appears that Dryden is deflecting the kind of criticism that was leveled by Thomas Rymer against such attempts at Christian epic as Alexander Cowley's Davideis. Rymer complained that Cowley failed to satisfy the fundamental premise of epic poetry; namely, that it should imitate action, or deeds—*not* suffering (Rymer 171). Indeed, the critic was not merely being fussy about genre rules and definitions but identifying a formal distinction which reflects the very breach dividing heroic arete from Christian love. The question remains: How is it possible for a Christian epic to be about action that is not allegorical—not about the movement of the soul merely figured forth in martial and courtly pursuits? Certainly, from the Christian perspective, the epic warrior is situated in the historical arena in ways not congruent with those of the martyr. If epic is to render not the competition of heroes

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

for the highest *arete* but courageous deeds of sacrifice for the common good in opposition to evil, then the way of the individual soul through Christ is lost to the collective identity of a generic purpose, so that epic must appear to reify in poetry a nationhood of the saved, not the individual soul in rebirth, but an earthly community of souls whose common destiny is to be fulfilled through historical actions, distinct from the personal experience of a fallen soul being redeemed through various phases of justification, conversion, and sanctification.

Like Rymer, Dryden is yet not prepared to credit Milton with having already accomplished the feat of composing an epic on par with the ancients, but he knows he is obliged to admit that Milton comes closest to doing so. Although justly admired, Paradise Lost is not "an heroic poem, properly so called" (84) in Dryden's estimation. While he insists that a modern epic poem (based upon historical legend and consistent with the doctrines of Christianity) can be written according to the pagan model, he tacitly denies that it can be done, or done in the right way—that is, done in a medium as refined and dignified as that of the ancients and, further, on a scale of national, religious and cultural pertinence equal in magnitude to the ancient model. Indeed, Dryden acknowledges that Milton's "thoughts are elevated, his words sounding, and ...no man has so happily copied the manner of Homer; or so copiously translated his Grecisms, and the Latin elegancies of Virgil" (84). Yet his criteria in judging that Milton's poem is not a true epic appear to be slight or poorly premised and show there exists in the expressed need to claim valid grounds for Christian epic the implicit rejection of those grounds wherever they indeed are found. For example, Dryden is certain that both the subject and the plot of Milton's poem

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

runs counter to the Homeric model in the following way: "His design is the losing of our happiness; his event is not prosperous, like that of all other epic works; his heavenly machines are many, and his human persons are but two." [2]

If Milton fails in Dryden's view to write an epic, he does so upon having simply proved that in order to succeed at a level of accomplishment equal to Homer and Virgil the modern poet of Christian epic must write as a gifted interpreter of Scripture, opposed to the heathen heroic imagination. For, first and foremost, the modern poet is a reader of the Bible, and he cannot deviate substantially from the perspectives of biblical history without either writing a pagan narrative or writing no epic at all. [3] Finally, Dryden sets

---

[2] As Ker notes (84n), Dryden oddly forgets here the tragic plot of the Iliad. Perhaps it is not so odd or surprising, however, that for his epic paradigm Dryden appears especially to favor Homer's Odyssey. It is, after all, the poem which Virgil imitates upon establishing the Roman debt to Greek culture at the same time as his Trojan hero, Aeneas, the future king of Latium, appears to signify the Roman departure from and eventual mastery over Greece, the plot of Aeneid being a reverse reflection in Latin of the Odyssey. For, though hinged upon the Odyssean cycle of separation, exile, return, and reunification, Virgil's Aeneid is distinguished by the transcendence of its hero, the sacred calling of Aeneas, who, in pursuit of Roman nationhood, must distinguish himself in terms of a radical reorientation of identity, or a re-founding of origins, which permits a progressive transfer of power from Greece to Rome. Further, Virgil's poem links the fable of return in the Odyssey to the founding of Rome by Aeneas and, subsequently, to the founding of Britain by his grandson, the exiled Brutus, who, after having had traveled to Greece and there redeemed the defeated Trojans from slavery, delivers them to the shores of Alban. And though the legend of Brutus is treated by modern English poets as self-consciously legendary, ie. allegorical, it nevertheless resonates in the period of English epic theory as a tale of nationhood, along with the legend of Camelot, and, further, with the Northern legacy of revolt against the corrupt Roman church. One is reminded in this context that Milton's initial plan for an English epic poem was not Paradise Lost but one based upon Arthur's legendary court, and that he was first inspired by the notion while in Italy, eagerly absorbing all that he might learn from the wasted Florentine intelligentsia, now subject to papal tyranny, his Italian sojourn about to be interrupted by the imminent outbreak of English civil war.

[3] It is telling that Dryden does not allow that Milton's plot might not be centered in the victory of Satan over mankind but in the continued victory of Christ over Satan,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

forth an epic in hypothesis: A greater poem than was written in the heathen past and which remains to be written must lie untapped in the historical materials of the true religion, only the moment is not yet arrived nor the poetic genius yet born who might bring that work to fruition; hence, the implicitly messianic purpose of Christian heroic poetry is made evident in the prophetic attitude of the critic, who heralds the future coming of the redeeming poet:

> If any of so happy a genius be now living, or any future age can produce a man who, being conversant in the philosophy of Plato, as it is now accommodated to Christian use; for (as Virgil gives us to understand by his example) that is the only proper [subject], of all others, for an epic poem; who to his natural endowments of a large invention, a ripe judgment, and a strong memory, has joined the knowledge of the liberal arts and sciences, and particularly moral philosophy, the mathematics, geography, and history, and with all these qualifications is born a poet; knows, and can

---

first in defeat of the rebelling angels, secondly, in Christ's offering of himself to be incarnated as man and to be sacrificed in redemption of Original Sin, thirdly, in the triumphant Second Coming, the final defeat of Satan and the end of history. Wherever Milton's arena of epic action is not otherworldly (not, for instance, concerned with angels) its this-worldliness consists of a wholly internal framework of action, as with the post-lapsarian vision of the future history and salvation of mankind dreamed by a slumbering Eve and simultaneously transmitted by the speech of Rafael as balm to the woefully alert Adam. Yet, when urging Christian epic poetry, Dryden, while seeming to ignore the fact that the poetic use of angelic engines had long been employed, cites Daniel (10:10) for a justified poetic use of divine machines based upon the ministry of angels, both heavenly and fallen, which both Protestants and Catholics might tolerate, even though the angelic engine proves to be theologically as well as artistically problematic in the context of epic fiction; further, he limits epic subject-matter to the pre-Christian wars of the Mediterranean and the Near East, which, contemporary with the events of the Old Testament, illustrate Providential intervention in support of the Greeks and the Romans and in punishment of the backsliding Jews (90).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> practice the variety of number, and is master of the language in which he writes; if such a man, I say, be now arisen, or shall arise, I am vain enough to think that I have proposed a model to him by which he may build a nobler, a more beautiful, and a more perfect poem that any yet extant since the Ancients. (90)

The failure to write an epic poem is essential to the more important exercise of theorizing about the modern epic in terms that draw attention to the problem of human co-authorship with the Holy Spirit, not only in writing about the events of Christian history, but in living in and through history as an allegory of the soul's progress toward heaven. Epic theory indeed is less a grounds for writing heroic poetry than for rethinking the possibilities of history.

In such an essentially literary context, in which the pilgrim reads Scripture as if journeying through a landscape and journeys through nature as if reading a sacred text, the Christian is the latest spectator-participant in a providentially appointed sequence of events, which is yet unraveling, and in those sublime surroundings, in which the divine, impersonal dimensions of fate appear to be configured, he identifies his own capacity for self-abstraction on an epic scale. The transition of the soul within and through the physical environment of its significant textual and natural landscapes might be described allegorically, in terms of heroic action, but the activity is essentially mediative, a reconciling process, which is figured in the composite persona of author and reader—hermeneutic, self-transforming, and transcending—as Longinus so finely demonstrates in his theory of literary *hypsous*.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

When Boileau introduced his version of Peri Hypsous into seventeenth-century speculation about the nature and value of literary art, its ancient author was believed to be the third-century Greek, Cassius Dionysius Longinus, loyal consul to Zenobia, the rebellious Palmyrean queen in whose court he was killed. Boileau prefaces his translation with an adulatory characterization of the ancient author, a contextual provision for the reader, by which to gauge the weight and significance of the treatise. With relevance to the moral value of literary excellence, the legendary courage and nobility of the rhetorician, radiant as he faced his executioners, suffices in Boileau's account as an allegory of the sublime. Only recently has Peri Hypsous been otherwise attributed (though tentatively) to an unknown first-century writer, a likely contemporary of Philo of Alexandria and possibly a Hellenized Jew (Arieti & Crossett, The Dating of Longinus). Although the current shift in historical context from the third to the first century has, of course, also meant that twentieth-century scholars began to interpret the text somewhat differently from their predecessors on that score, the famous valor of the known figure, Cassius Longinus, had long stood to amplify the spiritual vitality and grandeur perceived in the literary-critical sensibility of its author, whoever he was. This is perhaps best exemplified by Edmund Gibbon, who, in a brief account of the failed Palmyrean uprising, again pays tribute (in the manner of Boileau) to Longinus, as a cultural hero, in whom superior moral courage mirrors the refined sense of literary excellence with which he is himself identified. Gibbon's rendering depicts Longinus in apotheosis, as the embodied soul of virtuous literariness, an allegorical figure in whom the civilizing balance of genius and tradition is personified:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> The courage of Zenobia deserted her in the hour of trial; she trembled at the angry clamours of the soldiers, who called aloud for her immediate execution, forgot the generous despair of Cleopatra, which she had proposed for her model, and ignominiously purchased life by the sacrifice of her fame and her friends. It was to their counsels, which governed the weakness of her sex, that she imputed the guilt of her obstinate resistence; it was on their heads that she directed the vengeance of the cruel Aurelian. The fame of Longinus, who was included among the numerous and perhaps innocent victims of her fear, will survive that of the queen who betrayed or the tyrant who condemned him. *Genius and learning were incapable of moving a fierce unlettered soldier, but they had served to elevate and harmonize the soul of Longinus. Without uttering a complaint, he calmly followed the executioner, pitying his unhappy mistress, and bestowing comfort on his afflicted friends* [italics mine].(I.267-8)

In Peri Hypsous, Longinus is careful to show, that, in referring to "a kind of height and conspicuous excellence in writing and oratory" (8-9), *hypsous* does not mean the flawless execution of a studiously refined elocutionary theory nor of an exquisite taste for certain verbal textures and images, but consists in the all-consuming magnificence of a noble thought and its direction, appearing suddenly to break through, upon the virtuosity of the author's skill, past the smoothness and economy of his rhetorical vehicle, the wonderfully delighted soul of the reader or hearer being likewise impelled in ecstasy. The heroic bearing of the soul in Longinus' description of literary virtue evokes the arete of the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

epic demigod, but, in truth, the nobility and fame of virtuous authors depends upon the reciprocation of the reader or hearer, who transcends his baser self upon being entirely consumed in the most excellent parts of that author's literary composition. Even as a practical and critical guide to elocutionary excellence, Peri Hypsous argues from a moral premise for the highest standards of verbal conception and execution, in so far as the health of the *polis* is perceived to be identical with the virtuousness of its literary culture; but, further, only through the most adroit expressions of magnificent thought in speeches and writing is the individual soul able fully to recognize its own divine nature. The inherent divinity of the sublime in verbal art does not preclude the rhetorician's critical obligation to analyze and explain its technical execution; rather, it warrants a nuts-and-bolts analysis of how language is employed toward that end in such passages of writing whose sublime effect is exemplary. Longinus argues for critical analysis and the useful discovery of teachable principles for imitation, toward the improvement of linguistic versatility and power—however inimitable are the exemplary passages one would investigate for that purpose, and even though the mere imitation of methods is not sufficient to produce sublimity—because, importantly,"We must, rear up our souls as much as we can to greatness and make them, as it were, pregnant over and over again with a noble inspiration" (52).

Peri Hypsous is indeed a syncretic endeavor, which "psychically far transcends Aristotle's artistic theory, at the same time...[it] falls short of Plato's metaphysical transcendence" (Arieti & Crossett, On the Sublime xvi); and, because it is grounded in rhetoric, Longinus' theory appeals to the modern reader's metaphysical disposition for the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

very reason it falls short of the Platonic. Longinus and the modern reader have in common a literary ethos which depends upon a canonical formation of exemplary texts, works of universal appeal, which transcend the time and place of their original conception. Longinus explains the ecstatic effect of *hypsous* in the experience of the audience as the consequence of an irresistible force, which we might compare with the first soul-jolting impact of the beloved's physical beauty, to which Socrates refers in Pheadrus, the dialogue in which Socrates justifies his dialectical method according to the erotic motivation which compels its proper uses. But the reciprocating momentum which follows in the living exchange between lover and beloved, according to the method of dialectical inquiry, is antithetical to the circumstances of separation, isolation, and absence which are intrinsic to the self-contained persona of the author/reader in literary compositions. The Socratic ethos cannot abide what the culture of the text recognizes of itself in Longinus' concept of *hypsous*—i.e., the ecstasies of the reader as a lover of the literary body.

Still, Longinus' theory justifies the gloriousness of literary culture in terms which not only compare with epic fame, but which also compare, quite differently, with the erotic disposition of the Socratic soul, as gleaned from Socrates' argument in Phaedrus against false rhetoric, and, in the context of Socrates' effort in that dialogue to establish the philosophical grounds for a true art of rhetoric. If the aim of the orator, as Socrates surmises, is to produce conviction in the audience, then the first business of true rhetoric is to analyze the nature of the human soul, first, generally, but at last, particularly, with regard to individuals. However, since the only souls which indeed count are in fact the individual souls of the types into which the general soul might be divided, Socrates proves

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

obliquely the irreparable gap between the dialectical science of rhetorical composition and that of conversing souls. For he leads Pheadrus to conclude that the authentic criteria for true rhetoric are so difficult to satisfy, that it might only be practiced in theory; further, that even should it be practiced correctly, true rhetoric is still inferior to dialogue, since "unlike words which are written on the soul of the hearer," which "enable him to learn about the right, and the beautiful, and the good,...a written composition on any subject must be to a large extent the creation of fancy" (101).

In the spirit of Socrates, Longinus argues for the most noble effects of which verbal art is capable, but, unlike Socrates, he is resigned to the formal problems arising from the peculiar mediation of author and reader in the body of the text, to how, in being self-contained, the written work is the imaginary composite of their relationship. From the Socratic perspective, a written work can be as illusory in the impression of its thought as visual images are, fixed in muteness and, hence, disengaged from the vital processes of reasoning, explaining, and inquiring among companions whose love for each other and for wisdom is identical. *Hypsous*, though it entails a flight of the soul peculiar to the soul's affinity for language, involves the elocutionary devices of literary composition in various genres, from poems to arguments, so that the momentarily transporting effect of the sublime passage in any such work, in the context of a pseudo-dialogue between author and reader, is beside or external to the living process of Socratic conversation, through which the souls of the participants together soar. Perhaps, in comparison with the Socratic ethos, the sublime moments of a text indeed resemble the original occasion of erotic astonishment, which occurs when the beloved first catches sight of the beloved, and the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

initial period of divine chaos which follows, at the very threshold of reason, in which the lover suffers, helplessly undone. However, the dialectical path of self-knowledge upon which the soul embarks thereafter occurs in the real time and place of face-to-face participants, lover and beloved. They are equals and their language is transparent: In being present to one another they need only agree to pursue knowledge together and to carry on as best as they can in a verbal process which binds them to reason and to the teleology of their spiritual progress, so that they are released from their bondage to the natural cycles of physical pain and pleasure, desire and gratification. [4] The circumstances of *hypsous* are not dialectical but textual. So, unlike the Socratic dialogue, in which the speech, the participant, and the journey are one, the transporting effects of hypsous are born upon the effective presence of the illusory verbal image, the vivid and energetic impression of a presence which conceals the mutual absence into the which author and reader recede.

While Peri Hypsous is concerned with isolating the radical principle of excellence in verbal thought and expression, its argument reflects a sense of perfection impelled by and embedded within the anxiety-provoking gaps and flaws which written composition entails. Its appeal, from the period of Boileau's influence through the end of eighteenth century, reflects the interest of modern authors and readers in exclaiming the spiritual vitality imparted by written composition, of the enjoyment in being transported to an

---

[4] Likewise, Phaedrus pronounces delight in the task of their mutual inquiry about the difference between good and bad writing when he says to Socrates, "What would be the point of existing at all if it were not for pleasures such as these? Certainly life is not worth living for pleasures whose enjoyment entirely depends on a previous sensation of pain, like almost all physical pleasures; that is why the latter are rightly called the pleasures of slaves" (69).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

extra-spatial, extra-temporal realm, and in assuring that such transports are universal, residing in principles of form and style for which some writers have a genius, which, however, must be cultivated in order to be effective.

As for the eighteenth-century discourse on the sublime in nature, its vistas of savage enormity and stupendous force are no less Longinian in principle, for they derive from the visual-spatial metaphors for consciousness upon which Longinus relies to impart the exhilarating breadth and penetrating intensity of sublime writing. Like a landscape, verbal composition is a visual-spatial entity, objectively distinguishable from the spectator-reader who approaches and enters or steps back and turns away. Longinus simply demonstrates the aptness of the natural landscape for constructing an image of the mind in its native glory: He compares the magnitude of a great thought to the immensity of the ocean and the starry heavens, and he likens the force of an astonishing passage in oratory to a violent onslaught of lightening or volcanic eruption.

Longinus figuratively unites the sublimity of the landscape and of literary composition in a comparison which blends the visual-visionary border between exterior and interior spaces, so to speak, and which the eighteenth-century discourse on the sublime in nature develops literally. Longinus is concerned with how the stylistic and formal elements of a verbal composition come together in delivering the reader's soul from its mundane circumstances, a noble feat of communication, in which author and reader are mutually engaged, and which compares with the metaphysical effectiveness of the dialectical method, except that it occurs allegorically, imaginatively, in the non-dialogue between author and reader. Landscape is a spatial construct which the absence in

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

a text resembles—the absence of the author (from the perspective of the reader) and of the reader (from the perspective of the author). Longinus is concerned with how, by virtue of the power of speech and of the greatness of literary culture, which embodies the might and magnificence of divine Logos, the most excellent turns of verbal expression in some parts of a composition succeed in uniting author and reader in their mutual apprehension of a concept beyond both.

However, the visual-verbal ambivalence of the text also informs the eighteenth-century discourse of the sublime in ways irrelevant to Longinus's concept of *hypsous*, for it draws from the materialist category of pleasure-causing pain (as adopted by Hobbes, Burke, Hume, and others from Aristotle's psychophysiology of the passions) for an elevated notion of obscurity and difficulty, strangeness and doubt, which is relevant, however, to the incomprehensibility of the divine author of Scripture in contrast to the divine soul of human authors. And whereas incomprehensibility might be censured in a secular work, Holy Writ cannot be reproved on such grounds. Longinian *hypsous* obtains in the effective unity of word and thought, i.e., in the transparent communication of great conceptions, of which extraordinary writing is not only capable but continues to be capable throughout the ages (according to Longinus) as long as it continues to effect readers with its excellence. Thus, by means of *hypsous*, the soul of the individual reader is united with the greater soul of cultural immortality, which consists of the fame of authors.

The verbal communication of author and reader, separated in space and time, is not concrete and literal but abstract and figurative, in that the relationship of author and reader occurs only in each other's absence, each being the allegorical presence of the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

other. This imagined relationship in language is a mere shadow of the living conversation which Socrates values. Longinus sees that in being abstract and figurative the literary body is already itself transcendent: His problem is to understand and to explain the noble nature of the literary soul, whose body is already a mind.

Indeed, the modern aesthetic of the sublime in nature and the ancient aesthetic of the sublime in rhetoric might be reconciled by the conflation of landscape and text which is premised upon the natural reticence and obscurity of textuality, itself, compared with the relatively transparent processes of inquiry and exchange among speakers in a living dialogue. As a mute body of signs, or visible words, as Augustine might say, the written text is like an object in nature, in that it must be interpreted and explained even though it is supposed to be explaining something to the reader.

For Longinus, sublimity consists simultaneously of the excellence, in writing, of a noble soul and the ennobling experience of the soul of the reader, who is impelled into ecstatic self-awareness—aware of himself as being more than and including other than himself—by the excellence of the text he is reading. Longinus, configuring sublimity as the vital unity of author and reader, thus incorporates into his ideal of sublimity in writing and speeches an idea similar to the mutual ecstasy of souls inspired by love to which Socrates refers in prescribing his dialectical method of philosophy. However, conversation among friends in pursuit of truth, which Socrates in Phaedrus identifies with the pursuit of self-knowledge (such knowledge being virtually impossible to achieve except through the dialectical method) is antithetical to the writing and reading of compositions which, in essence, are mute and unresponsive and, like the allegorical

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

presence of meaning, require interpretation. Allegory, and formal composition in writing, which is a type of allegory, calls for the projection of meaning and engages the dialectically active soul in a counterintuitive process. Significantly, Socrates does not interpret but takes literally the oracular command, "know thyself," a subtle point which is made in Phaedrus, to which I shall return, but I should first like to discuss the controversies of allegory in antiquity, so far as they frame Socrates' treatment of the subject in this dialogue but also prepare for the more sophisticated treatment of allegory which we find in Longinus.

Allegorical interpretation of the Homeric gods can be traced to the beginning of the sixth century BC when in the transition from myth to scientific speculation some philosophers of the new cosmology viewed the stories as coded physical doctrine. For instance, Pherecydes is reported to have interpreted the speech of Zeus to Hera (Iliad, XV.18), in which Zeus angrily reminds Hera of his once having cruelly punished and humiliated her by weighting down her feet with anvils, chaining her hands and dangling her from on high, as an allegory, which, stands for "the words of God to matter" and "darkly hint[s] that matter being originally in a confused state, God took it and bound it by certain proportions and ordered it," (Tate, "The Beginnings of Greek Allegory" 214-15). By the time of an interpretation of this kind, however, such explanations were probably arising from an already well-established habit of thinking explicitly about what meanings lie beneath the literal surfaces both of mythic narrative and of figurative language, in reckoning with the traditional regard for the old poets as wise teachers, the myths being divinely inspired and not unlike daemonic visitations in dream-life, or the oracular

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

pronouncement of the Sybil, the latter of which, as Heraclitus observed, consisted of symbols that neither told nor hid their meaning. Others of that period, such as Xenophanes—who may have been indifferent to the *hyponoia,* the hidden or underlying sense of poetical fictions, so far as these fictions were being presumed to represent symbolically and figuratively the invisible order of natural phenomena, that is, the principles and relations philosophers were claiming to be able to explain in literal terms—nevertheless, censured the poets' anthropomorphic and ignoble fictions as impious misrepresentations of the godhead, true Deity being in itself neither human nor comprehendible by humans, even though "mortals suppose that gods are born, wear their own [mortals'] clothes and have a voice and body" (Frag. 14). Perhaps inevitably as an ironic result of depicting Deity according to the human model, "Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all sorts of things which are matters of reproach and censure among men: theft, adultery, and mutual deceit" (Frag. 66). But here Xenophanes may not have been either ridiculing or censuring the content of the stories so much as further stressing their obvious fictitiousness, especially in light of the self-reflective likeness projected there, which he makes further evident upon noting the ethnocentricity of the humanlike gods: "The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black; Thracians that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired" (Frag. 16). So that if other creatures than human, such as "horses or oxen or lions," had the same articulate means as humans to express themselves they too would "draw the figures of the gods" in their own likeness (Frag. 15). Or perhaps in pointing to the anthropomorphic partiality of such religious conceptions Xenophanes meant by contrast to show that godhead is indivisible and consists of being

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

more than all of what humans can perceive only in parts and primarily in relation to themselves, whether they perceive them in nature or fiction. If there is censure here, it would appear to be against prideful human vanity, whether it be exercised in religion, poetry, or rational speculation. Xenophanes is reminding his audience that humanity is partial according to its limitations and is, perhaps, at its worst when forgetting that; although, when remembering their own partiality, humans transcend it long enough to say with Xenophanes, that "one god is greatest among gods and men, not at all like mortals in body or in thought...whole he sees, whole he thinks, and whole he hears...but completely without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind" (Frags. 23-5). Likewise Heraclitus who in the same century opposed the poets and also disparaged the popular gods remarks, "The wise is one alone, unwilling and willing to be spoken of by the name of Zeus" (Frag. 116). Yet here, too, is a human likeness of Deity, but one more suitable to the philosophical disposition of these speakers, in that Deity reflects the experience of consciousness as a way of being that rises above and observes the appetites, passions, and conflicts of physical nature from a disinterested perspective. "You will not find out the limits of the soul...even if you travel every way, so deep is its report" (Heraclitus, Frag. 35).

Certainly the moderns of antiquity who professed to see the true natural order shining through the mythic personifications of its elements, laws, and relations were not at odds with the image of Deity, in abstraction, as the will and unifying principle that exists objectively outside of the human mind to an extent far greater than its grasp and is perceived only partially by it through inexplicable intuitions of daemonic communication.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

However, the question of whether, in being greater than any discrete manifestation of itself in nature, Deity might in some partial aspects of its being be truly represented in symbolic images of certain of those manifestations was a problem distinct from the question of how and toward what end the fictional gods and goddesses of Homeric myth could be rationalized as representations of natural processes. From the perspective of the cosmologist, Homer's deities were fictional substitutes not even of Deity itself but of the operations of its mind in nature, which is not inconsistent with belief in the unimaginable and unnameable character of divine being. But from the religious perspective the problem is not whether, why, and for what purpose myth relates physical doctrine in an indirect, symbolic way, but that the unseemly-behaving gods and goddesses should appear to be such unworthy representations of Deity at the same time as they are presumed to be truthful symbols of the eternal cosmic order with which Deity is also identified.

Eventually the ancient philosophers who set about to interpret the poetic traditions as though they were conscious allegories would not only decode the myths but in the process explain them in illustration of their own scientific theories. Thus they reshaped and extended the meanings of the stories in terms suitable to their philosophical purposes, while appropriating the glamor of the poets' divine authority and popular appeal.

The increasingly common practice of decipherment, together with that of fanciful pseudo-etymological speculations, is met with some derision by the time that Socrates is found complaining of the arrogance and vanity of such endeavors. In his conversation with Phaedrus, after giving a possible rational explanation for the legend of Oreithyia, abducted by Boreas on the banks of the river, nearby, where he and Pheadrus are resting,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Socrates admits that while he finds such explanations very interesting they are also "too ingenious and labored" to pursue, and, given a universe of lore filled with all manner of imaginary beings, the unenviable man who devotes himself to the task of setting aright the correspondences of myth and reality must submit to being constantly overwhelmed and admit to having nothing better to do.

> Now I have no time for such work, and the reason is, my friend, I've not yet succeeded in obeying the Delphic injunction to 'know myself,' and it seems to me absurd to consider problems about other beings while I am still in ignorance about my own nature. So I let these things alone and acquiesce in the popular attitude towards them; as I've already said I make myself rather than them the object of my investigations, and I try to discover whether I am a more complicated and puffed-up sort of animal than Typho or whether I am a gentler and simpler creature, endowed by heaven with a nature altogether less typhonic (25).

By matching the gods of poetry to parts of physical nature, which the gods might be thought to personify, one eliminates from the poetry all but its presumably symbolic function and thereby leaves it with nothing that cannot be put plainly without the embellishing fantasies, which the allegoresis explains away. But the deciphering of myths by skeptics of religious imaginings who at the same time are persuading their audiences to believe instead in their own equally fanciful rationalizations and who, being "typhonic," pump themselves up by association with the enduring appeal of the same myths they are degrading, is a rhetorical ploy that Socrates clearly disapproves. While the matter is taken

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

up briefly in the beginning of Phaedrus, it indeed belongs in this dialogue whose topics are both the false art of sophistical rhetoric and how rhetoric, or the presumed art of persuasion, might yet be redeemed for the common good if reformed according to the principles of Socrates's own dialectical philosophy, that is, made formally to incorporate the process of thinking as it takes place in living conversation, though such a philosophically composed rhetoric must still fall short as a vehicle for the communication of truth, compared with Socrates's living method of conversational inquiry among friends.

Longinus, however, shall conceive of the sublime in terms which equate literary excellence with the ultimate internalization in writing of conversing souls, manifested by means of figurative substitution and inversion in the broad sense of allegory, as Aristotle, in Rhetoric, meant upon referring overall to the discrete variety of ways of thinking and saying, through which one means one thing by indication of another.

The passage from Iliad I discuss in Chapter Two, which describes the rendering by Hephaestus of a plow field on the surface of Achilles' shield, suggests that in his own time the poet is addressing an audience already self-conscious about the analogical ways of thinking that informed the enjoyment against which later commentators found issue in variously dividing philosophy and poetry. For in his recital of the tilling scene, the Homeric poet himself appears to comment on the very nature of imaginative work at different levels of symbolic consciousness. As the instrument of the plow serves the reproduction of life, so the forger's representation (or aesthetic reproduction) of plowing on the life-protecting shield both presents and preserves the idea of it as a moral value; and as a marvel in its own right Hephaestus's very artistry at the forge is being set among the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

other wonderful displays of divine power about which the poet narrates throughout his epic tale; but, more profoundly, the marvelous effect of verisimilitude in the forger's rendering of this particular scene—about which the poet remarks as being himself a witness, and to which he points as occurring through the virtual disappearance of the medium of depiction (gold) into the object (earth) it depicts—pertains as well to a transformation in the mind of the perceiving poet-narrator, which is parallel with the kind of analogical thinking that goes into the making of poetry itself.

Where I elaborated upon these points in the previous chapter, I was taking up the description of the tilling scene rendered on Achilles' shield with regard to how the sublime aesthetic relates to ekphrastic description. But, here, the way in which the poet's imagination appears to draw attention to itself upon commenting about the wonderful illusionary effect of Hephaestus' art seems a good place to return for simply pointing to aspects of analogical thinking that Longinus makes central to the idea of literary sublimity. I am thinking especially of his remarks about Homer's Battle of the Gods. The section of Iliad which he quotes in his text is not, in fact, a discrete passage from the poem but a conflation of lines quoted from different passages (XX.61-5, XXI.338 and 750), thus communicating in Homer's own words the intensity of their impression in Longinus's memory:

> Heaven, mighty Olympus, trumpeted; unseen Hades,
> Lord of the dead souls underneath, trembled in horror.
> Trembled upon the throne and screamed, lest then
> Earthshaker Poseidon break earth open,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

His home be seen by mortals and immortals,

Dire, mould'ring, hated in heaven. (55)

This uniquely compressed selection of lines from the poem, remembered according to Longinus's own imaginative experience of the original sequence of lines, serves as the occasion for his observation about the poem's allegorical character and about the nature of allegory, in general, as a mental activity of inversion, substitution, and conversion that is essential to sublimity. Upon first isolating and amplifying the portion of Homer's description of rampaging Poseidon, which depicts not only the terrible physical force of the colossus as he rages on foot after the defeat of the Acheans, downward toward the ocean depths from his look-out perch on the peak of the mountain on Samos, but also conveys the anticipated effect of that terrible force, as it appears pictured in the terrorized imagination of Hades (who fears that his kingdom will accidentally be upturned by colossal Poseidon's rage), Longinus imparts the poetic sense in which Hades, king of the dead, is himself seen, so to speak, in the very depiction of his being the essentially invisible thing that both dreads to be seen and would be dreadful to see. It is in aspect of his invisibility that Hades stands for the terror, with which the mortal reader identifies. In this compressed flash of an invisible but visceral presence—Hades furious, screaming and shuddering, terrified of being exposed to sight, should the earth indeed crack and throw up its moldering dead—Longinus intuits both the danger and the fear that resides in image-making. And Longinus' remarks, which follow, not only concern the direct emotional effect upon the reader who is also imagining, with Hades, the terrible scene of immanent universal destruction, but also develop the ramifications of the reader's being aware, as an

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

experienced reader, that, unless Homer is to be censured both for impiety and breach of decorum, the entire episode of the Battle of the Gods must be perceived as not merely fictional but allegorical.

> Do you see, fellow pupil, how the earth is split open from its profound depths, Tartarus itself laid naked, the whole cosmos appearing to overturn and break up—everything at once—heaven and Hades, the mortal and the immortal—how everything at once shares together in the war and in the danger of fighting? But though these are frightening, if one were not to take them as allegory, they are otherwise impious and unobservant of what is appropriate. In my opinion, you see, Homer in representing the wounds, factions, revenges, tears, bonds, and all-confusing emotions of the divinities has (to the extent of his capacity) made the human beings in the Trojan tales into divinities and the divinities into human beings. (55-6)

Not being a philosopher of nature but a rhetorician whose art is psychological, Longinus is concerned here as both interpreter and critic with allegories of the soul through which the poet both represents and appeals to the passions. The emotional effect of the aesthetic terror he describes is of a passion both real and ersatz, for if the poem is read as allegory, symbolic distance renders the passage frightening in a different way than might the report of an actual event in nature, such as an earthquake, even one that does not threaten to initiate the annihilation of the cosmic order, though indeed it might threaten human life, or a fictional report that naive readers treat as if it could be real—Poseidon himself stomping the earth to its brink of collapse. Yet, as allegory, the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

subdued natural emotion succeeds nonetheless in turning upon the essential exchange in the imagination of human and divine characteristics, which results in the audience contemplating its own mortal pain and dread more acutely than when in the throes of natural terror. At the same time, strife among the immortals momentarily renders the audience superior to those suffering gods, whose bad luck it is, to be tormented by passions as immortal as themselves. But even as the audience feels relief upon anticipating the end of suffering in death, the very depiction of such suffering in terms of allegorical representation, as divine ideas imagined on a cosmic scale infinitely outreaching the physical limits of human mortality, impresses upon them a more severe sense of the terrible enormity and intensity of actual human suffering than they might have known otherwise and which forces its own relief in the elevated perception that such suffering ends in death. Heraclitus had written, similarly, "Immortals become mortals, mortals become immortals; they live in each other's death and die in each other's life" (Frag. 66).

As gold becomes earth and earth becomes gold in the artist's image of the plowed field, so too the divine appears to become the human and the human to become divine wherever deity is mediated in terms of human likeness. That itself is the marvel Longinus means to describe in writing about literary sublimity, here, much as Homer's poet-narrator marvels at how the image of the plow field on Achilles' shield turns gold into earth, though Homer's representation of that turning allows that one is better able to see—in a depiction not of miraculous intervention or of gods stirring up magnificent upheavals and strife but of the ordinary plow turning soil into the site for a future bounty—that what is truly as marvelous as the astonishing glory of the gods depicted in fiction is the real

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

activity of making that fiction, its figurative turns preparing internally the propitious ground for changes and reversals that occur within oneself. One might think again here of Xenophanes' observation about the fictitious nature of religious images of deity, based upon the anthropomorphic and ethnocentric features attributed to them, as well as think back to his censure of Homer for teaching through stories of battling gods that Deity is in conflict with itself, and, further, the complaint lodged against Homer's own remorse over that conflict, by Heraclitus, who argued that indeed conflict is essential to the nature of Deity, the universe being held together by the attraction and repulsion of binary opposition, for the very inversion of divinity and humanity in allegorical figuration, about which Longinus speaks, is precipitated by the physical resemblance between the immortal gods and mortal human beings, the mirror reflection itself reflecting the metaphysical drama of the soul enacted through phases of emulation, contest, and apotheosis.

In his remarks on Homer's Battle of the Gods, Longinus points to how the divinities are shown to suffer the same passions as human beings, but on a scale commensurate with the whole of creation, immortal and unfathomable, which leaves the audience feeling, on the one hand, superior to the conflicting gods, that is, grateful that their own sufferings end in death (56). On the other hand, the divine depiction of human passions raises such passions to heights of universal significance. Thus, Longinus admires even more than Homer's rendering of the terrible, in Hades' fear of Poseidon's mighty rage, Homer's rendering of the terrible in Poseidon's glorious might, "striding the waves," whence divinity appears, in the pure idea of itself, unmixed with mortal flaws, "the daemonic element...truly undefiled, great, and undiluted" (56). Therein the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

allegorical element still applies, perhaps especially, to prove the very height and grandeur to which the human soul aspires, as with Homer's depiction of Poseidon (from which Longinus again quotes as a conflation of lines from different passages)—a colossus rocking the earth, from ocean floor to mountain top, commanding the magnificent sea-creatures of his domain, and breaking the ocean surface in his chariot of golden horses: "Ocean exulting and parting his waves, onward his horses flew" ([Iliad XIII.29] 57).

Erich Auerbach, noticing the way Longinus presents the scene for its sublimity, notes the anomalousness upon which Longinus' reading of the passage depends for Longinus' own illustrating of the sublime, for, indeed, Longinus demonstrates a sort of boldly abbreviated leaping of thoughts and rhythms which is imitative of the same kinetic surge of power he is both pointing to and explaining. "Longinus made the scene even more grandiose and long-rolling than it is in Homer by skipping" the descriptive details in the original and by ignoring, "not by design but unconsciously in his enthusiasm for the sublime," the contradictory wording he has himself created from his impromptu-style quotation of mixed lines, in the first referring "plainly to a journey on foot and in the others to a chariot ride" (226). Further, Auerbach reads Longinus to mean, that, where Poseidon represents the godhead in its unstained essence as "unblemished and without mixture," Poseidon is "free from the all-too-human passions and moods which usually inhabit the gods in Homer" and, thus, Longinus has ignored the very context of the scene, which is, that Poseidon is indeed now being impelled forward into battle by enslaving passions—his partisanship with the Acheans and his rage against Zeus:

> And yet Longinus is not wrong, for Homer too seems to forget the context.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> He surrenders to the moment and the reader is entitled to do he same. No one reading the passage relating how Poseidon descends from the mountains and rides over the seas, whether in Homer's original text or in Longinus's version, has any need to remember that Poseidon is full of rage and bitterness. One feels nothing of the sort. The power of the god is manifested in all its purity, first in the trembling of the earth, then in the colorful tumultuous procession. One tends to think of him as conscious of his power, serenely enjoying it in the knowledge of his eternal youth and intactness. In Homer the present moment is everything. And so Longinus is right in praising Poseidon's striding and riding as a pure representation of divine sublimity. In its pure *appearance* it is free from all passion and purpose. (227)

I wonder though, if, after having just acknowledged the metaphorical nature of Homeric divinity Longinus is really not simply showing, that the purity of the daemonic element is represented by the undiluted and singular force of Poseidon's passion, such a pure conception being precisely of what an allegorical personification consists. If Poseidon is free of passion in his daemonic element perhaps that is because his passion is entirely abstract (or essential) in its depiction, drawn out and away from the realistically confused depiction of gods as complex humans, mixed up and ambivalent. Longinus identifies the essence of immortality (represented by Poseidon in this scene) and the transcendent image of passion, which Poseidon's rage becomes, in the poetical clarity of its idea, indeed, an *appearance* as Auerbach notes, "free from all passion and purpose."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The criticism of Longinus proves to be a vigorous and capacious exercise of the soul in its own right. Its method—the objective, experimental analysis of a sublime passage of writing based upon the evidence of its effect in the sensory-affective experience of the individual reader—requires the reader to rise to the power of the author as the articulate witness of its effects. Hence, the relevance of Gibbon's famous observation about the sublime contribution of Longinus as a reader-critic able to draw himself through the peculiar genius of a passage and reveal its glory all the better:

> Till now I was acquainted only with two ways of criticizing a beautiful passage: the one to show by an exact anatomy of it the distinct beauties of it and whence they sprung; the other, an idle exclamation or general encomium which leaves nothing behind it. Longinus has shown me that there is a third. He tells me his own feelings upon reading it, and tells me with such energy that he communicates them. I almost doubt what is more sublime, Homer's Battle of the Gods or Longinus' apostrophe to Terentianus upon it. (Journal 155-6)

Indeed, as I discuss in Chapter One, the idea of sublimity in Peri Hypsous is no less a reflection of the sensory-affective experience of reading in the imagination of the reader than of the recognition it elicits through the reader's elevated critical perception. The effect and the evaluation together form a concept of sublimity conceived with relevance to the modes of recognizing and witnessing which the critical philosopher for whom being ravished cannot be the end of sublimity but must be the beginning of a process involving the recuperation of one's ravished senses in the renewed light of one's experience. Though

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

seeming to jest, in part, about which is more sublime, the Homeric passage or the commentary upon it by Longinus, Gibbon nevertheless points to the ambivalent, even paradoxical, nature of Longinian sublimity as a critical concept, for the full implications of a sublime passage cannot be satisfied by cold scrutiny nor sycophantic praise if what distinguishes it from other writing is its elevation of the reader. The reader is not only lifted up but is raised through his own participation in a series of actions that begins with consent; further, he is prompted to compete in grandeur, as such, with the grandeur of the source. One cannot really tell by reading Peri Hypsous of what the central experience of sublimity consists, nor in reading a sublime passage can the reader be sure that he is not himself confusing the sublimity of the passage with his recognition of the effect of elation upon reading the passage in the original, or to the experience of recognizing that the passage is sublime and thereby remembering it. With respect to the literary sensibility, which engages the text imaginatively and allegorically and requires that a written work appear to be as vital and fresh in its presence, as if the reader were not confronting a static and symbolic entity, but in dialogue with another soul, I should like to return to my earlier discussion about the relevance of Phaedrus for Peri Hypsous.

In Phaedrus Socrates defines a true art of persuasion to be distinguished from the sophistical flair in rhetoric for shameless pandering. He draws this art into the purview of philosophy, as a like method, diffusely spread through all practices of verbal communication. In a natural, idyllic setting just outside the city wall, the impressionable Pheadrus reads to Socrates a rhetorical exercise by Lysias, which urges a youth to take up with a man who is not in love with him over one who is. Lysias' reasoning is premised

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

upon the observation that lovers are maddened by their passion. Thus, in contrast to the non-lover, the irrational lover would be a jealous nuisance and finally a social and material threat, whereas the sober-minded non-lover would provide the youth with all the amenities of an affair and none of the disadvantages. Socrates criticizes the speech for being poorly written. It is not a true composition, so to speak, but a disorganized list, repetitive, and lacking counter-points and key definitions. In order to please Phaedrus, Socrates himself composes an eloquent version of Lysias' argument. But, afterward, his inner voice will not let him leave their idyllic spot until he truly remedies the wrong he has just committed against Eros. Hence, Socrates composes his famous palindrome. In that second speech, which is structured through the myth of the soul as a charioteer, he argues that love is a divine possession by means of which the souls of both lover and beloved soar home to heaven.

As relevant to the mortal soul's struggle between spiritual and appetitive motives, the opposed speeches on love by Socrates and Lysias represent, respectively, the true art of persuasion and the false appeal of the panderer. The metaphysical vision of the theologian-philosopher in praise of Eros constitutes an obliteration of the venal aim of the self-aggrandizing sophist, whose small purpose reaches from the debasement of love to exercise a rhetorical sleight of hand, in the feigning of kindness toward the beloved. In the false lover's estimation, the beloved is yet a simple object of lust, whether that object be desired by the madly obsessed lover or by the coldly calculating non-lover, whose rationalization is itself a falsely constructed denial of his own unmitigated passion for the beloved. Socrates eventually proves that Lysias' unsavory attempt at seduction, masked

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

as a dignified and reasonable appeal to the welfare of the youth he wishes to seduce, issues from a profound failure to recognize divinity in the beloved and is not only evidence of soullessness in the speaker but, finally, demonstrates in caricature how sophistical rhetoric, generally, both abuses speech and debases the audience.

Lysias' poorly constructed speech about why a youth, for his own sake, should favor the non-lover over the lover is shown by Socrates to be incapable of more than just meeting the rudimentary criteria of sound speech-making since a false pretense of knowledge about one's subject cannot be carried through with verbal excellence of any kind. The neatly developed and coherently arranged test-speech which Socrates then composes as a remedy to Lysias' badly written effort still shows that even an eloquent composition in support of Lysias' false thesis (that the rational non-lover should be favored because unlike the irrational lover he does not pose a danger to the beloved) must, as long as the false terms and premise remain unaltered, result in no better than a meticulous and smug illustration of merely technical competence since, truthfully, no relationship that physically enslaves the soul of the beloved can bode well for him. So far as Lysias can be said to represent the non-lover, his speech is even worse for pretending to respect the beloved in order to receive his consent to being treated as a prostitute. The failure of Lysias to persuade a knowledgeable audience of reasoning judges (such as Socrates!) begins with the blind materialism of his sophistry as a speechmaker and of his lack of passion as a non-lover, for these two roles are exposed in the dialogue as interchangeable identities—Lysias' argument from appetite being fundamentally irrational, a point set forth with deliberate irony on the part of Socrates since Lysias panders to the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

unchallenged opinion that lovers are irrational. Lysias presumes to defend the unconscionable behavior of the non-lover on the grounds that its business-like style not disturb the status quo. That is a position he need hardly persuade his audience to agree with if, indeed, they already reason, from the premise that self-interested pursuits after worldly comfort and success comprise the highest virtue, and that any behavior which threatens to obstruct it is irrational. But, as even Pheadrus must concede, though Lysias, the sophist, might be able to take the opposite position, that lovers should be preferred over non-lovers, in the service of that same principle, he cannot reason toward principles consistent with the actual experience of lovers, who, as Socrates observes, would not only disagree with the aspersions cast upon love in the first two speeches, by Lysias and himself, but would think they were listening to "men brought up among the scum of the sea-port, who had never seen what love between freeborn men was like" (45). Socratic philosophy, we know, is motivated by love. On the contrary, rhetoric in the speech of Lysias is represented as persuasion uninspired by love and thereby devoid of reason as well. Lysias' meager lust is unable to comprehend the ambiguousness of a great passion, which, aroused by physical beauty, consists of both sensual appetite and spiritual desire. He would not be able to see that the disturbing power of erotic love with its threat of unleashed appetite is the very jolt that necessitates reason; the lover, calling upon his sense of virtue to protect and strengthen the beloved against the abuse of his own appetite, is initiated through the difficulty and pain of self-imposed discipline into a higher order of beauty in lasting friendship. Through divine possession both lover and beloved begin to know by experience the true moral foundation of the community in which they live.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Longinus perceives that community in the literary body of works in the Greek language—which have become part of himself.

In this context, I should like to conclude with a remark upon Socrates' organic metaphor for speeches and its subsequent elaboration in Peri Hypsous. Socrates asserts, and Phaedrus agrees, that any speech should be made to resemble a living being: "It must not be without either head or feet; it must have a middle and extremities, so composed as to fit one another and the work as a whole" (79). Indeed, as if to stress the very absence of a living being in the body of a written speech, Socrates proposes that a speech should at least conform in effigy to the vitality for which it is a substitute, the single composition being a specimen of the literary "body" which is its species. Hence, in the joke which follows, Socrates compares Lysias' indifferently arranged speech to the famous epitaph on Midas' tomb, known especially for the inconsequential order of its lines. Socrates appears to be saying, Lysias' speech is yet an effigy, but the kind of body it substitutes is as dead as Midas and as scattered as his corpse.[5] Longinus, too, writes that a speech must be written in the image of a single body, a vital arrangement of essential parts composed into an organic whole[6]; but, as if to compensate, even for the failure of the organic metaphor,

---

[5] " 'A girl of bronze on Midas' tomb I stand,/As long as waters flow and trees grow tall,/Remaining here on his lamented tomb,/I'll tell to all who pass "Here Midas lies" ' " (79).

[6] "Come, now, let us see whether we have the other faculty capable of making speeches and writings sublime. Now, then, since in all things there are certain parts which are by nature fundamentally in session together with their material, we must come to be capable over and over again (and this capacity is responsible for sublimity) [1] of selecting from all that brings itself out to our attention what is just right and [2] of setting it together so as to make a unity, a kind of body" (64-65).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

itself, to be other than a proof of disconnection from any living body, he demonstrates this point with a love lyric by Sappho,[7] in which the agony of erotic passion is made vivid through the speaker's utterly convincing description of her physical breakdown:

> Don't you wonder at how, under the same emotional experience, she seeks out soul and body, hearing and tongue, sight and color, all departing as if they were someone else's, and throughout the contrasts she simultaneously burns with cold and speaks irrational sense (you see, she is either frightened of death or within a little of being dead), so that in her appears not one kind but an intersection of emotions? Though all such things come to lovers, her taking the high points and putting them together into the same emotional experience have worked up the conspicuous quality of the poem. (66).

Longinus presents Sappho's ode as an exemplary composition of organic unity, but, as Neil Hertz observes, "the elements that Sappho is bringing together into the body of her poem are precisely the names of the fragments of her natural body, seen as the debris of a shattering erotic experience that has brought her, in the words of the ode, "only a little short of death." Hertz, who analyzes the method of composition in Peri Hypsous,

---

[7] Longinus's quotation of the lyric is the single source for Sappho's poem, the last line of which is corrupted. It appears in his treatise, as follows: "Seems to me that man to the gods is equal/ Who sits across from you near and hears/ Your sweet voice,/ Laughter of love. 'Tis a cause to flutter/ Heart within rib-cage; should I merely/ Behold you, the voice within me sounds/ No longer./ Yet, the tongue is broken; a gentle fire/ Runs beneath my flesh in a rush; seeing/ Leaves my eyes, my ears echo in a boom/ Of humming./ Sweat upon me pours, as a tremble seizes me/ All over; I seem wanner than the pale green grass,/ To be near dying, lost in/ A weakness./ All must be endured, since as a wretch..." (66).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

recognizes in Longinus' selection of and commentary on this lyric the very condition of Longinus' own technique, and the "sublime turn" which distinguishes it, a shattering apart and a gathering together of the scattered pieces of his critical reading across the entire canon of Greek authors and which he reincorporates into his own discourse. Longinus' composition "consists in the more or less violent fragmentation of literary bodies into 'quotations' and is consistent with the literary phenomenon which most concerns him, the recurrent "movement of disintegration and figurative reconstitution" (14). But, I wonder, if Sappho's ode is to suffice as a paradigm for that movement, then how does the persona of the agonized lover relate to the erotic disposition of the critic as a lover of texts? The recognition of divinity in the beloved is not only implicit in the poem; it is expressed in the lover's desire for divine-like conversation with the beloved: "Seems to me that man to the gods is equal/ Who sits across from you near and hears your sweet voice,/ Laughter of love" (66). That expression is of a sentiment, which, in the context of literary "life," might have evoked for Longinus the faded ethos of Socrates' loving, conversant souls.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

CHAPTER FOUR

Flawed by Design: Self-Personifying Thresholds of the Sublime

In the Mid-Eighteenth-Century English Ode and Novel

In Kantian terms, aesthetic consciousness might be defined as the power to redeem sensation in perceptual and teleological judgments of universal preference and value. The aesthetic of Kant, being neither a judgment of sense nor logical in its determination, but consisting of the free play of imagination and understanding, is distinguished by him from moral reasoning and philosophical knowledge in order for it to work in his epistemology as their arbitrator. Kant's practical, theoretical, and aesthetic components correspond, respectively, with goodness, truth, and beauty, and some critics have found he succeeded more effectively in isolating the aesthetic from the others than in showing how it mediates them: In separating the Good (moral reasoning) and the True (scientific understanding), as one scholar observes, Kant's first two Critiques left man "a citizen of two worlds," while "the third left him as a citizen of three," which, in turn, left unresolved the sense in which an art, such as poetry, might, as Aristotle believed, intrinsically constitute theoretical and practical insight (Steele, 178-9). The aesthetic as free play, however, its superfluity and its pure expression in the fine arts, would be left to signify the freedom of consciousness itself. What does it mean, in that case, to ask along with neurologist Antonio Damasio, in The Feeling of What Happens, "What is consciousness really good for, considering that so much adequate regulation of life can be achieved without conscious processing, that skills can be automated and preferences enacted without the influence of a knowing self?"(302). In its candor Dr. Damasio's question presumes his addressee to know, very well, that one

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

would hardly survive, let alone thrive, were one required each morning to rethink, personally, entirely, and in earnest, the conventional premises for one's own and everybody else's participation in a common system of codes and routines. For, where "the adequate regulation of life" is not threatened from without, the exercise of consciousness can threaten from within, as is illustrated by Herman Melville's mechanically compliant scrivener, Bartleby, when his surprisingly irrelevant and incomprehensible pronouncement, "I prefer not," threatens to undermine the replication of legally binding contracts in a Wall Street law office (even as the statement itself would become no less predictable in its repetition than the copying of documents, along with other office functions Bartleby prefers not to perform). Yet, is not a regular and willful invocation of the "knowing self," whether in prayer, poetry, or critical reflection, the expression of enlightened and reformed consciousness? Perhaps, consciousness is not superfluous to the smooth operation of a self-regulating system but is the expression of a flaw for which it is both the symptom and the cure; whence, upon the failure of some internal mechanism to produce an anticipated end, the system instead produces the grounds for remedy in self-awareness, and a differently imagined version of the same end.[1] Otherwise, if consciousness were merely superfluous, it might be thought of as the luxurious byproduct of successful conformity to a reflexive order of socially and technically controlled appetites and, hence, as only the negative evidence of a system which is able to entertain the ideas of its own destruction without effecting it. On the other hand, if I may again invoke the ghostly legal-copyist as

---

[1] Here, perhaps, is a variation of William James' notion of the "vague" in relation to homoeostatic regulation (The Principles of Psychology, 1890).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

an emblem of personal freedom as negative consciousness, Bartleby's death was immanent in his will to the surcease of business-as-usual, so that one might read his negative expression of consciousness, "I prefer not," as the verbal icon of a self, which substitutes the life of the particular *as* a particular, yet represents the vitality of the particular upon whose repression and death cultural reproduction (as signified in the contractual agreements which Bartleby was hired to copy) depends in order to secure the social grounds for cultivating individual freedom. Sanford Budick, writing on the Western theory of tradition, observes that cultural transmission in the West, from antiquity to modernity, is configured in the sublime, so far as "the ground assumption in the West has most often been that the unique work of cultural tradition is to provide at least intermittent access to the experience of freedom and moral feeling" (xiii), which consists, as Kant would summarize it, in the transition from sense to thought, which one experiences as a momentary deprivation of the life force, a temporary death.

At least since Burke's Enquiry, the sublime aesthetic has been associated with the enjoyment of ideas representing danger and extinction, whether the enjoyment be experienced in the visceral intensity of dynamic sensations, morbidly thrilling as the dying swan, whose rough voice is refined heavenward at the perceived threshold of loss, or in deliberate reflection of a terribly daunting circumstance, whose immanent threat is only entertained, but not actual, because it is situated at a remove or because it is mediated by art, or by religious faith, so that one is made conscious of being in that moment superior to the threat. But the sublime, in either vein, is distinct from the satisfying apprehension of form (as might be figured in rational, metrical proportions) and identified with the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

disturbing and extravagant power of imagination, or, of what used to be called, both colloquially and in the early jargon of modern empirical psychology, "wit," or "fancy," the force and magnitude of which (resonant of difficult, novel, and adventurous ideas, also relevant to the cultivation of scientific curiosity and prowess) are complemented by the harmony, regularity, and repose of perfect knowledge (i.e., the formal Beauty in which the Good and the True shine forth). The distinction in aesthetics between the sublime and the beautiful developed in the context of modern empirical thought, relative to a natural continuum of pleasure and pain which aesthetic thought transcends through the artistically controlled representation (which might include the mere *techne* of written language) or otherwise disinterestedly composed reflection of pain or pleasure, the practice and forms of which comprise a kind of enjoyment satisfying unto itself. As such, the transcendent aesthetic both cultivates and satisfies expectations of feeling which neither natural pain nor natural pleasure can provide if unreflected or unrepresented. As a science of perception or feeling, aesthetics would address the motives of artistic representation in terms of that which is extra or beyond the subjective conditions of experience, if not entirely supersensible in relevance, and treat imaginative reflections of sense and passion as a higher order of experience, hence, Kant's notion of the aesthetic as the enjoyment of consciousness in reflection of its own vocation as freedom, possessed of the means to name, manipulate, and reproduce itself in terms of an objective, universal value, which formulates the grounds for and cultivates the judgments of universal subjectivity, or "taste," and (in relation to the sublime) of universal respect, or moral feeling. "There is an essential difference," Kant writes,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> between *what we like when we merely judge it*, and what *gratifies* us (ie. what we like in sensation). The second is something that, unlike the first, we cannot require of everyone. Gratification (even if its cause happens to lie in ideas) seems always to consist in a feeling that a person's life is being furthered generally [gesamt]. And [this feeling] thus includes furtherance of his bodily well-being, i.e. his health. The liking or disliking [that] is based on reason...is the same as *approval* or *disapproval*. Gratification and pain, on the other hand, can rest only on the feeling of *being well* or *unwell* (whatever the cause), or on the prospect of possibly being so. (201-2)

But the activity ambivalently termed "aesthetic," which accumulates, abstracts, orders, analyzes, and synthesizes is engaged in both gratification and judgement: for, while being in time, the mind must also, however, strain in the process of its activity against being ravished by time, transcendent in scrutinizing the corroding effects of some kinds of loss and change against the profounder sense in which a law is said to endure. The ultimate virtue of empirical consciousness might then be the paradoxical combination of daring and prudence, evident in a disciplined and steadfast tension, which, in terms of a visual-spatial analogy, appears to balance both hindsight and foresight at the apex of power, as is figured in the landscape-allegory of the mountain pinnacle, an equivalent of Mind, whose far-reaching vistas stretch indefinitely in all directions. In being configured as such it is not clear whether Mind is identical with the aesthetic function which otherwise might only be considered as a component of the mind.

When, nearly a century after Addison's Locke-inspired encomium to sight in his

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Spectator essays on imagination, Wordsworth arrives at the pinnacle of natural sublimity from which he sings an ode to Imagination—the peak is so high, the landscape finally so uniform in its irregularity, that no view is afforded through the gothic conceit of its confusing effects; instead the poet is wrapped in a cloud that denies him the knowledge of where he is—that he has indeed crossed the Alps. No clear and distinct idea is granted him at this enormous height. Instead, he stands apart in reflection of the power of reflection, itself, called "Imagination" by a failure of convention to name correctly the fact that no image is represented in that power—that what is sensed by it is the infinity which exceeds even metaphors of seeing. The being that is Nature disperses in the poet's configured sensation of clouds:

> Imagination–here the Power so called
> Through sad incompetence of human speech,
> That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss
> Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
> At once, some lonely traveler. I was lost;
> Halted without an effort to break through;
> But to my conscious Soul I now can say–
> "I recognize thy glory:" in such strength
> Of usurpation, when the light of sense
> Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
> The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
> There harbours whether we be young or old.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Our destiny, our being's heart and home
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be. (VI.592-608)

Wordsworth's effusion appears effortlessly to naturalize the eighteenth-century ode-writers' artificial invocation of Fancy, here casting his poet-seer's exhilarating, holy confusion through a conceit of vision, the ostensible object of which is the natural world; but the natural object is not really the Alpine wilderness in which the prophetic perceiver has situated himself for an intimation of the infinite, but ideal Nature fashioned in the image of the self as annihilated sense, savagely sublime. As with the excursion poets throughout the eighteenth century, at least since Thomson's "Winter," Nature is the sublime object, but, codified as scenery, it is the stage for a pilgrim's journey. And in the journey through the Alpine passages, especially, Nature proves to be the very threshold through which one perceives oneself in reflection, as mind (or soul) imagining itself and imagined, a source beneath or beyond the empirical, wholly sensational and material view of natural space and time. Mind alone is Wordsworth's epic hero—its heroic activity the contemplation of its object—where here the object is itself and the Mind is all, personified as Imagination, an allegorical figure of the poet's discovery-journey through nature.

As a literary and religious trope, physical blindness has stood for human ignorance as well as for the visionary insight of poets and prophets, who see imaginatively through and beyond the natural visual landscape, itself, merely a stage for the allegorical

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

performance of an afterlife. However, the experience of those who truly are sightless remains a mystery for neuroscience, even poignantly so—if the privacy of physical blindness can be said to stand for the implacableness of Mind against the materialist's probing dissections into its perceptual and cognitive processes. Neuroscientist Oliver Sacks has recently observed the remarkably varied, individualized, and unpredictable way in which the blind live in the world, especially those who were born with sight. Some develop an entirely nonvisual and a-spatial modality, of enhanced tactile, aural, and kinetic points of reference; yet others carefully, even spectacularly, visualize themselves and their surroundings in vivid hallucinations, which they inhabit as a virtual reality, while knowing it to be entirely subjective, and, in that sense, to be fictional. Yet these different tendencies among the blinded, nonvisual at one extreme and hypervisual at the other, are also evident among the sighted. Some sighted people claim to have no visual imagination whereas others are very practiced at picturing, mentally, in remarkable detail and toward further, accurately engaged exploration, things at which they have barely glanced. Still others, with synaesthetic perception, visualize abstract ideas, words, and numbers as distinctive colors, shapes, and sounds. The varieties of nonvisual and hypervisual blindness call into question unexamined assumptions about the relation of visual sensations to mental images, but also point to the inadequacy of conventional methods for discerning scientifically what categories of sensation are possible, there being, in fact, no modalities of sense which correspond purely and simply with the physical organs of sense—auditory, visual, or otherwise. The blinded provide the neuroscientist with evidence, rather, of the "intersensory, the metamodal—states for which we have no common language" (55), but

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

seem more typical of how people actually experience the world than not, as the conventional divisions of experience into nonvisual and visual reality dissolve in confusion.

For Dr. Sacks, the unexpected depth, range, and flexibility of perceptual and cognitive powers exhibited among the blind, of either hypervisual or nonvisual propensities, illustrate the ingenious authority of the individual mind. No sighted person wishes to become blind, and the very idea terrifies most. Yet, the incalculableness of sensory capacities in the absence of visual sense indicates the universal ingeniousness of personal, subjective consciousness. The onset of blindness in those who have been used to living in the seamlessness of the visual and the real jolts the mind into an original state of creative alertness. The elusive subjectivity demonstrated in blindness suggests, in light of the freedom of consciousness which it configures, neither ignorance nor solipsism but the hyper-attentiveness of the knowing self, which follows from the freedom of will to choose and to build one's surroundings in the world; the liberties of blindness, in conjunction with free will and judgment, define the genius of original authority—of which the blind poet is a figure. And the blindness of the knowing self in aesthetic reflection, it would seem, refers to the sublime flaw in an otherwise seamless unity of reality and perception for the unconsciously lived life.

Dr. Sacks concludes, in remarking about the variance of perceptual and cognitive habits among the blind, that visionary thought might include but is far broader than the ability to visualize objects in a mental space, for any given mind might as likely resolve its purpose in visual as in non-visual "images." As Burke and Lessing noted in a period of cultural explanation which stressed the visual, there are yet many kinds of thought and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

speech whose sense bears upon nothing visual and spatial, at all; whereas, on the other hand, the ability to visualize perfectly what others cannot or need not see is for some a power of singular necessity, if not simply a preferred way to live in the world. Thus, in the following remarks, Dr. Sacks appears to echo the poetical sentiments of a Wordsworth or a Coleridge:

> Simple visual imagery...may suffice for the design for a screw, an engine, or a surgical operation, and it may be relatively easy to model these essentially reproductive forms of imagery or to simulate them by constructing video games or virtual realities of various sorts. Such powers may be invaluable, but there is something passive and mechanical and impersonal about them, which makes them utterly different from the higher and more personal powers of the imagination, where there is a continual struggle for concepts and forms and meanings, a calling upon all the powers of the self. Imagination dissolves and transforms, unifies and creates, while drawing upon the 'lower' powers of memory and association. It is by such imagination, such 'vision,' that we create and construct our individual worlds. At this level one can no longer say of one's mental landscapes what is visual, what is auditory, what is image, what is language, what is intellectual, what is emotional—they are all fused together and imbued with our own individual perspectives and values. (59)

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Below I examine how each of three literary works composed in the 1740s, the ode "To Fear," by William Collins, Clarissa, by Samuel Richardson, and Tom Jones by Henry Fielding, turns its argument through a flaw or irregularity in the fictional structure of its argument, the discontinuity of which divides percept and concept, Nature and Mind. The flaw, however, is structurally required as a conceptual threshold, through which the discourse passes and returns a reflection of itself, in effect, as self-abstracted, hence, as alternately transcendent and debased in the ironies of its figuration, between fanaticism and sublimity. For, as a kind of personified abstraction *in situ*, which stands in place of a prosaic explanation for the moral argument driving the poem or novel, the self-consciously allegorical figure or episode depends upon it being perceived as the expression, both true and real, of fictionalized necessity.

In "To Fear" the modern protagonist is grieved to find himself on the wrong side of a breach in literary consciousness, which separates him from the divine source in heathen antiquity, the terrible "Dark Pow'r," out of which the true poetry of tragic drama springs, and to which he prays for inspiration. But, his prayer, while intensifying his aesthetic sentiment as a reader of the great dramas past, only amplifies his physical and historical remoteness from that source. He prays to be an author, but worries that, instead, the persona of the affective reader (configured as "Fear") is truly his own and only true source of mythic production. In a world of reformed readers, intent upon being redeemed not by the unenlightened visions of fallen literatures but by the living word of Scripture, Collins' tragic emotion alludes (if confusedly so in the mixed context of natural and revealed religion) to the holy fear of the faithful, whom the Psalmist exhorts to "serve

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the lord with fear and rejoice with trembling" (Ps. 2:11). "To Fear" was critically resuscitated in the 1970s as an emblem of poetical fanaticism and as expressive of the romantic errors, or false sublimities, typical of the "weak poet" in Harold Bloom's anxiety-of-influence theory. Perceived as a transitional figure in the English romantic tradition but paralyzed between Milton and Wordsworth, Collins is blamed for having the poetical convictions of neither. Yet, I find that even if Collins is daunted by the preeminence of Milton (and Spenser and Shakespeare), he is finally preoccupied with how limited an historical terrain is left for the modern poet of drama and epic, who struggles to conflate religious and aesthetic emotion in narrative materials other than scriptural, and, hence, Collins' temptation to find in native folklore and fairy legends authentic materials from which to draw in writing the poetry of British mythic-historical consciousness. This very point about the problem of what should constitute the proper subject matter of Greater Poetry, in the modern era of enlightened science and post-Reformation sentiment, is only confirmed by the judgment of twentieth-century critics that Collins must fail where Wordsworth would succeed as a poet-prophet of the egotistical sublime, or transcendent Self, in consort with his reflection in Nature; and for which reason I would have to agree with James Russell Lowell, that Wordsworth's enlarged style of lyrical effusion is not commensurate with Milton's epic strain, but of a range comparable in breadth to the strains that issued, rather, from Cowper's epic sofa. Similar in theoretical subject matter to the odes on imagination written by Collins and his peers (who, though they employed the ode to stand in opposition to the verse essay used it to illustrate a discourse on poetry), Wordsworth's explicitly sublime, blank-verse lyric is a poetically embellished

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

philosophical discourse on the sublime aesthetic. The difficulty for poets of sensibility in Collins' generation resided only partially in the ill-suited fit between the sublime conceit of original feeling and the artificial constraints of Augustan-style rhetorical and metrical refinements, from which Wordsworth famously departed. It resided also in a problem for which Wordsworth could yet offer no solution, which was the diminishment of verse—blank, rhymed, or otherwise—against the elevation of the novel as a type of epic genre, increasingly adept at harmonizing the idioms of contemporary life into an argument as rich in philosophical and religious significance as one might expect from Greater Poetry in the epic and dramatic traditions, respectively, of Homer, Dante, or Milton; Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Shakespeare.

Hence, the heir to Milton in Collins' generation and the next is not a lyric poet ensconced in metaphysical ruminations—neither Collins, nor Cowper, nor Blake, nor Wordsworth—but is a fiction-writer, novelist Samuel Richardson. Richardson's fictionalization of contemporary history is premised upon Milton's epic translation of Scripture and exploits it as an aesthetic link between Christian historiography and personal history, the breadth of which is reflected, besides, in the sublime aesthetic of fear—a typological re-conception of tragic loss or failure in terms of immanent salvation.

In Richardson's epistolary novel, Clarissa, the heroine reports, explains, and influences the action of the plot in letters whose portion is mixed with a multitude of perspectives from numerous witnesses, commentators, schemers, and confidantes—and the plurality of narrators bespeaks the social confusion of codified passions and appetites upon which Lovelace depends for his artful subterfuge in deceiving Clarissa. After Lovelace rapes her,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Clarissa is at last undeceived, but her earthly imagination (whose metaphor is the cultivated field or garden) is destroyed as well. No longer even able to fantasize chaste retirement as her beloved grandfather's cerebral dairy maid, she sees now through Lovelace's disguise but cannot envision herself as a future wife and mother, insofar as she would have to submit herself to him, now, for the sake of propriety. In tearing from her sight the illusion of Lovelace which she had entertained in hoping for a fruitful and virtuous life, the rape has not only violently rent from under Lovelace the very grounds for his continued guile—even as, after the rape, he wishes for her to marry and redeem him—but has obliterated from her mind the image of his goodness, upon which her earthly calling had depended: "What now is become of the prospects of a happy life," she writes,

> which once I thought opening before me?—Who now shall assist in the solemn preparations? Who now shall provide the nuptial ornaments, which soften and divert the apprehensions of the fearful virgin? No court now to be paid to my smiles! No encouraging compliments to inspire thee with hope of laying a mind not unworthy of thee under obligation! No elevation now for conscious merit, and applauded purity, to look down from on a prostrate adorer, and an admiring world, and up to pleased and rejoiced parents and relations! (L 261:892)

As Clarissa's noble conception of middle-class life fades from view she envisions her own death with such terrible conviction that its lofty purpose dominates and infects every other strain among the voices that write apace of her demise, including Lovelace's, who, despite his Satanic oaths, now finds himself more prone to reformation promises

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

than ever. As Clarissa transcends all worldly cares, her language conforms to the word of gospel, and the novel's letter-writing community, friend and foe alike, is cast through her religious expectations. Having been born to reproduce goodness, the ravaged Clarissa can only endure after the rape as an emblem of virtue, an allegorical figure, which in death her enraptured corpse becomes. Before raping Clarissa, Lovelace complains to Belford that in proving to be beyond his powers of seduction, she appears to be "All mind!" His rape of her is the debasement he hopes will subdue her will, "to secure her mine in spite of them all; in spite of her own inflexible heart; mine, without reformation promises"(L 31:145). But the rape proves, rather, to be the violent threshold through which her filial piety is more perfectly abstracted, and she herself elevated as the image of free will consummated in eternal life; hence, she does not live to reproduce sexually her fine nature nor grow to beautify and enrich her earthly garden, but, in being reproduced immortally as virtuous Will, personified, she is the emblem and proof of Richardson's religious argument, the novel's transcendent purpose. The end of the novel resolves to make explicit the premise, in terms of modern Christian epic, which permitted such a heroine to be conceived in the first place: Clarissa, the novel, is a lesson for which the character, Clarissa, is the icon. For, was not his heroine allegorical to begin with? More, is she not a type of Eve—and Lovelace a type of Satan? And are these types based not in Scripture but in Milton's depictions in Paradise Lost? Richardson's is the first truly Christian novel on par with Milton's epic poem, for it succeeds in terms wholly reflective of modern life, even as it reifies the Christian metaphysics of immortality. Richardson's larger-than-life depiction of contemporary social characters draws from the fact that from the perspective of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Christianity the conviction that history, at any moment, is an allegory of the soul and the Christian individual performs as the hero in his or her own life. Large passions beget heroic figures. The novel's transcendent principle consists in the interiorized struggle of private individuals whose moral dilemmas are of greater significance to the fate of their souls than to the securing of wealth, power, privilege, and fame. Here, as it turns out, is not merely a bourgeois contest between a maiden and a lord, as in Pope's Rape of the Lock, but the ever persistent contest in history between Christ and Satan in the personae of a maiden and a lord. Richardson proves that Milton's Paradise Lost might indeed be succeeded in fictions about the struggles of contemporary people, so far as they represent the private afflictions of the soul, which, high or low, mundane or spectacular in their worldly-historical contexts, resonate universally through the spiritual-historical significance of Christ's sacrifice and consist, thereby, in a psychological struggle of epic proportion and consequence.

Unlike Clarissa, who triumphs as a masterpiece of virtue on her way out of history, Fielding's flawed hero, Tom, is victorious within the flow of history. He represents the best that human nature and society can reasonably be expected to achieve, and this point is anticipated, ironically, on the hill-top retreat of the ascetic hermit, the Man of Mazzard Hill, whose remote hideaway combines the elements of strenuous melancholy and sublime nature made popular in the graveyard elegies and odes of gothic romance. Fielding exploits these in satirizing the hermit's rancorous pessimism, self-defeating misanthropy, and idiotic bombast. The so-called Man of Mazzard Hill episode in Tom Jones, in which the hermit tells Tom his life-story, occurs as a unique hiatus in the action of an otherwise

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

seamless plot, but, as I shall argue, the episode functions as an allegory, in that it provides a representative image of the whole of Fielding's novel, at a propitious crossroad in the action; therein it serves to conceptualize the significance of Fielding's fictional history and his purpose in writing it. Hence, this episode, which readers have considered to be superfluous to the plot, is a mirror image of the novel in reflection of its larger purpose as argued in the plot. The hermit, who is a double or shadow of Tom, opposes the novel's argument in terms which facilitate not the action, per se, but enhance the moral and philosophical disposition from which the action follows in opposition to the hermit's own faulty solutions for living virtuously. The episode not only presents a comprehensive rationale for the novel in which it occurs, but defends, as exemplary modern fiction, the prose-epic genre, of which this novel is conceived by its author to be the original. Hence, the only episode superfluous to the plot is, as I shall argue, the single most important episode of self-reflection in the plot and constructs an allegorical argument for the novel itself.

William Collins' "Ode to Fear": Not So Terrible After All

In a studied eschewing of versified rhetoric, the mid-eighteenth century writer of the descriptive-allegorical ode cultivated a radical lyric of visual imagery, in which were conflated contemporary theories of natural psychology and ancient myths of the prophetic seer. In deliberate opposition to the fashion for versified moral and philosophical essays, the British ode-writer turned from imitating Latin refinements and toward the lyrical effusions of the primitive Greeks—original votaries of the divine passion from which true

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

poetry sprang. On that sacred premise the learned English ode-writer experimented with lyrical idioms meant to praise as well as to illustrate a "pure" poetic of the visual imagination, that is, of the power of visualization, so vivid as to compel recognition of the extraordinary poetical or aesthetic "feeling" which signified the verbal unity of the spirit and the flesh. Insofar as Collins and his peers were self-consciously illustrating a theory of poetry in odes which intended to prove the exclusively visual and/or visionary orientation of poetic speech, their descriptive-allegorical ode was no less didactic than the rhetorical verse they opposed. It could very easily fail, for that reason, to express and to stir feeling for other than its fanatical poetic; further, not unlike the modern experimenters of epic verse, whose theoretically conceived poems failed to stir an affective response the descriptive-allegorical ode succeeded more effectively in illustrating an abstract argument about the experiential effects which it desired for its reader but which it could not actually produce in the experience of the reader.

However, William Collins, whose poems were recognized by the Romantics as the most distinctive among his peers, seems to have come closest to evoking the mysterious power itself, yet he would emerge in twentieth-century affective criticism as a distinctly problematical and even a pathological figure—ill used as a type of the feeble, unworldly sensibility gone mad with false visions of poetical genius. Conventionally, retrospective accounts of Collins' career admit the earnestness of his "I" and view his achievement, however minor and transitional, as continuous with a larger scheme of Romance

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

consciousness. [2] In recent decades, however, the elevated treatment of romantic imagination in Collins' odes is questioned by those who would discover in his lyric the expression of profound ambivalence about the access of modern poetry to divine truth, more indicative of skeptical rationalism in his own era than of an empirical sensibility, foreshadowing Wordsworthian resolution and independence in the next. Controversy about the nature of this ambivalence reflects the extent to which Collins is viewed as a naive enthusiast, psychologically and critically ill-equipped to master genuine authorship, or is esteemed for possessing both keen awareness of his personal and historical limitations and the ability to transform these into a poetry which acknowledges, if nothing else, the difficulty of maintaining a fruitless, if necessary, vigil against his own doubt.[3]

---

[2] See A. S. P. Woodhouse, "Collins and the Creative Imagination: A Study in the Critical Background of His Odes (1746)," Studies in English by Members of University College, Toronto, ed. M. W. Wallace (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1931), 59-130; and "The Poetry of Collins Reconsidered," From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 93-137.

[3] For neo-Romantic views, which, sharing a Freudian orientation, define Collins' poetical crisis of limitation as a covert function of oedipal anxiety and repression, both specific to his personal pathology and covertly indicative of his era's supposed reactionary overvaluation of the rational, see Harold Bloom's The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975); The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 99-112; "From Topos to Tropos: Collins' 'Ode to Fear,' " Poets of Sensibility and the Sublime, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 165-84; Paul H. Fry, The Poet's Calling in the English Ode (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) chap.5; Geoffrey H. Hartman, "False Themes and Gentle Minds," Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays, 1958-1970 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970); Paul Sherwin, Precious Bane: Collins and the Miltonic Legacy (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977); Thomas Weiskel, The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), chap. 5. For a criticism that dissents from psychoanalytic speculation and examines the formal tensions in Collins' odes as evidence of a purposeful and controlled testing of creative-artistic limits

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The validity of either view depends upon the magnitude of scope permitted when examining a very slim *oeuvre*, which, for the most part, eludes full explication and is un-supplemented either by adequate biographical materials or by critical writings from Collins' own hand.

Harold Bloom and Paul Sherwin, whose now dated Freudian approaches make much of Collins' alleged insanity, view his sublime aesthetic as a hysterical manifestation of repressed frustration and anxiety before the rich and intimidating legacy of his predecessors in the English tradition, namely, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton. His "Ode to Fear" is especially targeted to illustrate what stark panic materializes upon his confrontation with the visionary legacy that both inspires and defeats his poetic aspirations. As such, the poem is re-read in demonstration of Freud's theory of the uncanny and its protagonist a victim of the return of the repressed. Sherwin, who calls this ode "one of Collins' most haunted and painfully burdened poems," argues that Collins, estranged from the "happy pieties of his major predecessors," worries that his own imaginative impulse can only unleash the fanatical delusions of an all-too-human madness

---

through a reinvention of the conventional devices and materials that traditionally define "crises" of ambivalence and indeterminacy in poetry, see Richard Wendorf's defense of Collins' critical and artistic integrity; also, Stephen Knapp's depathologizing criticism of Collins' "Ode to Fear" as a poem typically post-Augustan (as opposed to preromantic) in its extravagant pursuit of artificiality (87-97); Janice Haney-Peritz' deManian deconstruction of Collins' allegorical language, " 'In Quest of Mistaken Beauties': Allegorical Indeterminacy in Collins' Poetry"(ELH, 48 [1981], 732-756). Deborah Heller, arguing that Collins' investigation of the origin and nature of aesthetic creation in "Ode to Fear" denotes a crisis that he "intends, controls, and accomplishes as a dramatized event," reads this ode "not deconstructively or psychoanalytically as 'about' covert matters revealed through the inadvertency of trope," but treats it as a "consciously structured inquiry into the differences separating the true sublime from the factitious or false"(104-5).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

within, instead of un-curtain, in the throes of some fine frenzy, sacred Truth. Collins, Sherwin maintains, can neither overcome his fear of the irrational and his suspicion toward things imaginary, nor release himself from the mystique of poetry's divine origination. He is caught up, rather, in "his own self-frustrating energy, a perverse desire masquerading as dread which shies away from the threatening space of absolute freedom" (77). Thus regarded as failing to achieve a kind of Wordsworthian resolution and independence of his own, Collins is disowned as an embarrassment, a genetically malformed member of the Romance family who fatally misconstrues the imaginative project and turns himself into a barren cartoon of the mad poet; for, as Sherwin argues, "Collins never comprehends, as do Milton and the Romantics, that his own personal history, in its totality, might serve as the starting point for a coherent body of poetry at once mythical and true" (101).

Such commentary, however, appears calculated to disassociate Collins' entire era (as much as Collins himself) from later Romantic developments, especially where the eighteenth-century poet's mythology of *poeisis* is seen to involve a revival of sublime emotion in wholly daemonic terms. This is evident is Bloom's opinion that "Collins, like Smart or Cowper, is one of the doomed poets of an Age of Sensibility....The cliff on which Milton lay is 'of rude access,' and supernatural beings guard it. No manic seizure will bring Collins there" (Visionary 11). Bloom, who approaches "To Fear" with the question "what has he to fear except himself and John Milton?" reads the poem as a disturbing document of Collins' inevitable insanity: "Fear is Collins' own daemon,...the more-than-poetical-madness that beckons him into the upward fall of Extravagance....Yet at how high a price Collins purchases this indefinite rapture, this cloudy Sublime! For his

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

poem is one with his deepest repression of his own humanity, and accurately prophesies the terrible pathos of his fate, to make us remember him always, with all his gifts, as Dr. Johnson's 'Poor Collins'" (Anxiety 111). According to Bloom's argument, the "daemonizing" of the precursor's spirit, by Collins and other "gloriously estranged sensibilities" of his era, dehumanizes the imaging faculty in a self-crippling act "intended to purchase knowledge by a playing at the loss of power, but more frequently resulting in a true loss of the powers of making" (109).

Richard Wendorf, who strongly objects to such an argument, especially warning against the unsupported biographical speculation behind it, and also urging that we not judge Collins by the poetical-critical standards of a later era, insists that Collins' poetry achieves a coherence and validity of its own (193). Though Wendorf admits that Collins possesses an ambivalence about poetical fictions endemic to his post-Augustan milieu, he argues that Collins surpasses his immediate contemporaries for having successfully translated ambivalence into poetic form and structure, Collins' confrontation with his major precursors (Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, but also Thomson and Pope) having actually occasioned his most original work (xii). In Wendorf's view, Collins' notoriously incoherent syntax and obscure imagery in such poems on poetry as the quintessential "Ode on the Poetical Character" is "neither accidental nor perverse" but "carefully designed so that [his] readers will also experience the obstacles and frustrations that thwart the ambitious writer" (xi). Accordingly, Wendorf re-affirms Collins' relation to the later Romantics by reminding us that this poet's anxieties and frustrations are inherently modern ones. He credits him with discovering "what was to become a major Romantic theme: the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

admission of difficulty, even of futility in writing poetry, often enables the poet to create a vehicle that may, if only fitfully, reach paradisal heights" (55).

Like Wendorf's, my reading of "To Fear" also urges that we rescue its earnest votary from the pathologist's couch,[4] but, further, in the interest of viewing Collins as an agent distinct from the poet-speaker of his lyrically constructed "I" and as an author engaged with his peers in a common discourse of poetical interests, that we set aside questions of authenticity and of ontological duplicity and address his timely reassessment in "To Fear" of the modern poetics of Fancy, informed by Lockean-Addisonian empiricism

---

[4] Wendorf argues that Collins' madness is a biographical and critical myth, the product of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century exaggeration and embellishment, which has unfortunately influenced the way his poems are read and his poetic achievement characterized. "In its most common form, this interpretation sees Collins as one mad poet among many, an instance not only of the inseparability of genius and insanity but also of the necessary utterance of the truths of unreason in an age of oppressive reason"(19). Quoting lines from Joseph Warton's "Ode to Fancy" in which its speaker pleads to be laid "by the haunted stream/ Wrapt in some wild, poetic dream," Wendorf is mindful that Warton, "manifestly sane," shared with Collins and others of his time a recognition of the power of imagination to place within him a "visionary bliss" that pierces the "bosom's inmost foldings;"and yet, only Collins' poetry, "because of the convenient myths of insanity surrounding the poet himself, has been misread and distorted in ways in which similar, if inferior, poetry by Akenside or the Wartons has not"(25). Patricia Meyer-Spacks adopts a similar view in her questioning of the Freudian neo-Romantic critic for whom "the interest of the poetry depends on the possibility of making provocative claims about its author," and she complains that "the line between poetic speaker and living person blurs when Bloom can link an ode's evocation of fear to its author's subsequent insanity or Sherwin make confident assertions about Collins' own fears" ("The Eighteenth-Century Collins" 5). She applauds Wendorf's understanding that Collins "develop[s] from a fairly orthodox eighteenth-century position to take gradual possession of an original idiom, technique, and subject"(8). And, eschewing a Bloomian reading of "Ode to Fear," Stephen Knapp, who argues that Collins' "stands at the center, not at the periphery of eighteenth century attitudes toward poetic fiction" and "shares the ambivalent interest in figurative agency...implicit in contemporary accounts of personification," views its risk-taking as one of literary fanaticism, a risk "not of madness, as some earnest critics have assumed, but of farce" (87-8).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and advanced by Joseph Warton, Mark Akenside and other poets intent upon exercising the mind's genius for shaping intangible ideas and sensations into visual images.[5] The attempt to categorize, as purely poetic, a non-rational mode of ordering experience, distinct in value and function from natural or moral philosophy, was, nevertheless, contingent upon a theory of the imagination so completely sight-oriented as merely to promote the activity of visualizing fictional scenes within a private, interior space parallel to the external space of commonly observable phenomena and thereby regarded as

---

[5] My reading of the ode was anticipated in Deborah Heller's argument, that Collins shares with Burns and Coleridge an uneasiness with the pictorialist bias developed in the wake of empirical philosophy and "implicates the painterly manner because it pretends to the pathetic effects it envies; it is pretentious, its claims to emotional power facitious and thus indicative of a dishonest and impotent poetic ideology" (119). While I am in agreement with her reading of "Ode to Fear" as an "indictment of the imaginative feebleness of the modern poet, whose only access to and exercise of Fear is a set of pictures"(105), I am inclined to think of Collins as more playfully self-parodic and experimental than resolved in setting up the poem's critical contrast between modern and ancient experiences of poetic emotion, especially given (in this and other odes) his intense relishing of and fascination with the aesthetic pleasure derived from the pictorial. Moreover, there are too many formal and stylistic gaps and inconsistencies in the poem itself, its emotive-sublime orientation too inchoate to delineate a precise dichotomy of the kind that would be indicative of a very clear-cut and decisive argument in the poem. Heller's interpretation is a unique contribution to previous assessments of Collins' employment of visual imagery: See A.S.P. Woodhouse ("The Poetry of Collins Reconsidered") for a distinction between the pictorially descriptive allegorical personification employed by Collins' contemporaries and his own more symbolic and elusive representation of ideas; Patricia Meyer-Spacks, The Poetry of Vision: Five Eighteenth-Century Poets (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), for her chapter on his use of visual images suggestive of "feeling"; Jean Hagstrum's classic study, The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) includes a chapter on the pictorial elements in Collins' poetry as exemplary of his era's sight-oriented poetics; also, see Marjorie Hope Nicolson's comprehensive study of the visual in relation to poetry, Newton Demands the Muse: Newton's Opticks and the Eighteenth Century Poets (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946). For the latest perspectives on how scientific technology and aesthetic value are conflated in the modern period one might consult the recent works of art historian, Barbara Marie Stafford.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

consisting of objects as vivid to the mind's eye and as available to descriptive language as real objects to ocular sense. [6] Here, reiterating Locke, is Addison's now well-know pronouncement in the first of his Spectator essays on the pleasures of the imagination:

> It is this sense [of sight] which furnishes the Imagination with its ideas; so that by the pleasures of the imagination or fancy (which I shall use promiscuously) I here mean such as arise from visible objects, either when we have them actually in our view, or when we call up their ideas into our minds by paintings, statues, descriptions, or any the like occasion. We cannot indeed have a single image in the fancy that did not make its first entrance through the sight; but we have the power of retaining, altering and compounding those images, which we have once received, into all the varieties of picture and vision that are most agreeable to the imagination; for by this faculty a man in a dungeon is capable of entertaining himself with scenes and landskips more beautiful than any that can be found in the whole compass of nature. (No.411:VI.323)

With only the distinction between fictional and non-fictional kinds of optical data sufficing to differentiate visionary and visual materials, the products of "true" poetic genius were yet judged viable for their conformity, as mental pictures, to standards of empirical verity, rational consistency, and spatio-temporal coherence. But, as Deborah

---

[6] James Sambrook shows that the representation of idea as image follows Locke's demonstration that thought is principally sight-derived, The Eighteenth Century: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1700-1789 (New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1986).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Heller argues, Collins, beginning to suspect that "the difference between his day and Sophocles' or even Milton's was a difference between the truly Visionary and the merely visual,...significantly associates sight with the Enlightenment and blindness with a pre-Enlightened state of true creative power" (103).

In treating this distinction between eyesight and insight in Collins' "Ode to Fear," Heller considers the poem's virtually neglected theme of tragic drama and observes that its Fear is nothing like Aristotle's great passion: the appearance of it is "not provoked by a mimesis of human suffering but some assembled images or picturesque ideas of this passion....an optical event in the mind's 'Presence Room,' created through the picture-making agency of Fancy" (105). It follows that recent critical speculations about Collins' private or poetical anxiety in "Ode to Fear" misconstrue its figure of panic—the personified Fear that its poet-speaker first conjures, then "sees" and mimics in the poem's strophe—for a depiction of the creative passion the poet-speaker desires to really "feel," which is the genuine tragical passion he unsuccessfully invokes in the antistrophe's concluding prayer. The strophe's reflexive scene of Fear's invocation and spectral response instead parodies the modern odist's almost certain success in conjuring pleasing descriptive-allegorical visualizations. Collins here registers the modern diminishment of poetry's emotive and creative power to picture-making exercises by way of illustrating the abstract principle of creative fancy put forth and celebrated in the lyrical revival which he had himself joined. With more wit than Collins is given credit, his ode distinguishes its modern poet-speaker's facile talent for arousing artificial passion and sensationally thrilling illusory effects from a poetry he identifies with the sublime awe or wonder of faith-

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

inspired, mytho-genic consciousness, its vestige yet reflected in the same speaker's expression (in the epode and antistrophe) of his profound emotive and imaginative experience as audience to the great tragic literature past. Moreover, as we shall later see, his strophe's visualized and visualizing Fear, as distinct from the power of tragic poetry's "aw'ful Voice" (evoked in the epode's celebration of Greek drama) conflates terror and madness to depict a wretched hallucinatory state that satirizes the contemporary odic-allegorist's ersatz rapture and unlikely appropriation of archaic poetry's mantic power in terms which might have been borrowed from this observation by Addison, who means to amplify, here, how the imagination can be "as liable to pain as pleasure":

> When the brain is hurt by an accident, or the mind disordered by dreams or sickness, the fancy is over-run with wild dismal ideas, and terrified with a thousand hideous monsters of its own framing [...].There is not a sight in nature so mortifying as that of a distracted person, when his imagination is troubled, and his whole soul disordered and confused. Babylon in ruins is not so melancholy a spectacle. (No.421: VI.372-3)

Since Collins did not leave behind a body of prose works on poetic theory, he is commonly regarded as sharing ideas set forth in the critical writings of his nearest associate, Joseph Warton, but the assumption is not entirely a fair one and is, finally, probably a misleading one. The advertisement to Warton's Odes on Various Subjects, published in December of 1746, was meant to preface a joint publication of the poems each had composed separately during the spring and summer of that year. Warton's prefatory remarks affirm the new poetic which Mark Akenside had already begun to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

formulate the year before in his Odes on Several Subjects, and in the year previous to that, in The Pleasures of Imagination, a poem titled after Addison's essay series. Warton, confronting a public accustomed to "didactic poetry alone," and "Essays on moral Subjects," argues that the fashion of moralizing in verse has been carried too far. Looking upon "Invention and Imagination to be the chief faculties of the Poet," he offers, in his attempt to bring poetry back "into its right channel," a "fanciful and descriptive" poetry in which "the imagination is much indulged" (qtd. in Lonsdale 419). Warton's poems celebrate, in their various depictions of allegorical personae, the abstract principles of the poetic for which he argued. Such odes as "To Fancy" and "The Enthusiast," construct from classical and native pastoral motifs the idealized literary settings with which to render the sensibility of "true" poetry's fanciful genius.

For Warton, the poet is meant to give verbal expression to the sensational effects, primarily visual, of what his imagination produces in a state of inspired rapture, the wild, enthusiastic heat of pure, creative excitement. The poet's visions, convincingly rendered for a reader to "see" in the mind's eye, as if real, should likewise convey the passionate transport of the author. In his later Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope, in which he insists that "a clear head and accurate understanding are not enough to make a Poet" and argues that "the sublime and the pathetic are the two chief nerves of all genuine poesy," Warton asserts, "The use, the force, and the excellence of language, certainly consists of raising, clear, complete, and circumstantial images, and in turning readers into spectators" (165). For Warton, as for Collins and other of their contemporaries, personification was the literary device most commonly applied to this end. Its vivid use

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

was thought to be the attainment of only the most gifted of poets: "To give form, and colour, and action, even to abstract ideas; to embody the virtues, the vices, and the passions; and to bring before our eyes, as on a stage, every faculty of the human mind...may be justly esteemed one of the greatest efforts of the creative power of a warm and lively imagination" (The Adventurer). Warton appears to be reiterating criteria for the ancient rhetorical standard of vivacity and life-likeness known either as *energeia* (vigor) or as *enargeia* (vividness), but certainly, whichever term is used, was meant to convey the kind of liveliness of style associated primarily with the veracity of sight, with mental images as convincing to the mind's eye as visual objects to one's actual sight, indeed, to that degree of illusion in which the mental image so appeals to the sense of sight that it seems as if one is in fact gazing with actual sight upon a real object.

In Collins' employment of prosopopoeia, individual odes address a single idea—pity, mercy, fear, simplicity, liberty, and so on—which, taking shape as an animated being in its own special environment of concomitants, is praised and appealed to as a semi-deity, a mediating power, to whom the speaker of the poem prays for inspiration. In this way, Collins' poet-speaker expresses belief in the poetically conceived products of imagination, which, appropriate to the faith of religious devotion, implies that literary creations, such as these personified figures, are linked to the ideal forms of the natural human qualities and passions they represent. This neo-Platonic strain in Collins was early detected by Laetitia Barbauld, who, in the introduction to her 1797 edition of Collins' odes, speculates that for him, "true poetry, being a representation of nature, must have its archetype in those ideas of the Supreme Mind which originally gave birth to nature" (xxii).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Barbauld's argument attempts to explain the indeterminacy of Collins' imagery, a dream-like quality, later admired by Coleridge, and again, by Mallarme. "In his endeavors to embody the fleeting forms of mind, and clothe them with correspondent imagery," Barbauld observes, "he is not infrequently obscure; but even when obscure, the reader who possesses congenial feelings is not ill pleased to find his faculties put upon the stretch in the search of those sublime ideas which are apt, from their shadowy nature, to elude the grasp of the mind" (xxii).

In Collins' poetry, the use of prosopopoeia, to the extent that it satisfied the desire of both himself and his contemporaries "to embrace a conception of the 'poetical character' that was manifestly at odds with the decorum and spirit of Augustan verse" (Wendorf xi), entailed presenting, as well, this character or type in visions that reflected its ideal conception. As such, the fully animated personification of a literary emotion or quality (such as Aristotle's pity, fear, or simplicity), though its figuration in the poem effectively demonstrates the poet-speaker's own impassioned fancy, nevertheless, appears to exhaust his imaginative power. Herein lie the crux of the problem for critics attentive to the ambivalence that is conveyed by the exclusive use of prosopopoeia, given the device's limitations as a reflexive figure, especially when used as a central device for claiming the power of creative genius. The poetic speaker, aspiring to be consumed by the particular passion that is the poem's subject, appears to "feel" this passion strongly enough to personify it in a visible manifestation but desires its power of inspiration for greater literary production. In order for this to happen, however, the projected persona would have to de-materialize, to become invisible again, in the process of re-entering the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

aspirant, so as to act within him as an invisible force, inseparable from his own agency as a creator of other genres. In other words, the aspirant desires to produce a work whose cumulative emotional effect—pity, let's say—actually precedes the idea, "Pity," which, when visualized in its personified form, functions primarily as a reified abstraction. The protagonist of Collins' odes, however depicted as enraptured by his passion to create a powerful literature of the kind epitomized in the works of a Sophocles, Shakespeare, or Milton, is uniquely aware before the personae that embody the various effects of such achievement that a greater ambition remains for him unfulfilled. Ironically, the successful employment of personification attests to the dilemma of the contemporary aspirant for whom the creative imagination remains an elusive power and functions in his poetry to intensify the futility of his ambition.

Collins' direct admission of the belated poet's vain pursuit aptly concludes his "Ode On the Poetical Character." In the poem's closing passage, the speaker, having announced his allegiance to the native Spencer-Milton line, stresses the impossibility of his ever entering the sacred province of the poet-seer whom he would follow:

> With many a Vow from Hope's aspiring Tongue,
> My trembling Feet his guiding Steps pursue:
> In vain--such Bliss to One alone
> Of all the Sons of Soul was known,
> And Heaven and Fancy, kindred Powers,
> Have now o'erturn'd the inspiring Bowers,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Or curtained close such Scene from every future View.(70-6)[7]

Every future view? Collins' central metaphor for poetic inspiration is the lost Paradise envisioned in Milton's poem. The contemporary poet's post-Miltonic exclusion from the "inspiring bowers," once enjoyed by the visionary poet, compares with the post-lapsarian condition of man in history. The speaker is not merely complaining that he lives in an un-poetical age; he evokes the fall of mankind in order to stress an unredeemable breach between past and present poetical consciousness, but one that determines the very desire of the aspirant to be united with the ideal "poetical character" which Milton embodies. This breach, which divides poetry from itself, is established according to the temporal and spatial limitations of a historicity, which, however firmly set in opposition to the poetical character's mediation of a-historical Truth, represents the threshold between the human and the divine which prophetic poetry aspires to transcend.

Why, then, should Collins' own fatal poet continue to aspire? His motive appears to lie in the conviction that the poetry of prophetic or Truth-inspired imagination is the only worthy poetry. Though Collins' post-Miltonic speaker claims he will never himself be embraced by divine Fancy's "cest of amplest power," his devotion requires that he assume the posture of faithful aspirant, as demonstration of that power's supreme value. His singular desire to be consumed by the divine spirit of true poetry implicitly confirms his separation from it; yet, if Milton's vision of Paradise provides Collins' fallen poet with an image of visionary poetry's own "inspired Bower," then, likewise, that which has been

---

[7] All quotations from Collins' poetry are from The Works of William Collins, Richard Wendorf and Charles Ryscamp, eds. (Oxford: Clarenden, 1967).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

forever lost or "curtained close[d]," may yet disclose itself as a Paradise within. The fallen poet's own imaginative impulse, aroused by his earnest desire to redeem the imagination's relation to truth, creates, if nothing else, an ideal image of the poetry whose power he worships and desires to possess. Thus, in the passage quoted below, Milton is made to inhabit the imaginary Eden of Collin's own making.

> I view that oak, the fancied glades among,
> By which as Milton lay, his evening ear,
> From many a cloud that dropped ethereal dew,
> Nigh sphered in heaven its native strains could hear:
> On which that ancient trump he reached was hung.... (63-67)

The "oak" of this passage not only conflates allusions to the oracle of Dodona and the sacred tree of Druidic worship, thus relating poetry to its archaic source in mantic power, but incorporates the tree of forbidden fruit, featured in the story of Genesis told by Milton. This oak, from which hangs the "ancient trump" of prophetic poetry, yields its wisdom to the reach of a Milton whose ambition reflects Eve's desire for apotheosis. Collins would remind us that the prophetic imagination is born through the fall. Accordingly, sublime emotion is structured, in Collins' poem, through the conceit of vain aspiration, in which the obstacle to divinity is heightened to convey the terrible terms of poetic transcendence: The aspirant's metrical "feet" tremble in awe before the loftiness of the tradition which both defines his limitations and engenders his desire to pass into its province. This motif reappears in "Ode To Fear." In its epode, Sophocles, master of tragic emotion, is depicted with "trembling eye" as he traces Fear's steps to enter the imaginary scene which

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

concludes his final play, Oedipus Coloneus.

Milton's Eden in Paradise Lost, re-configured as Collins' Eden in "Ode to the Poetical Character," with Milton himself the garden's principle occupant, represents the "fancied glade" of poetry in which God's own imagination is reflected. In the lines which precede those quoted above, Collins' contemporary poet describes this exclusive province as one of "rude access," alluding to Satan's view of Eden, "Access deni'd," as depicted in Milton's poem, when Satan first approaches its forbidding borders to tempt the "delicious Paradise" concealed within (IV.131-42). Collins' revision of Milton's description of Eden from Satan's point of view positions his speaker in the same attitude as the fallen angel:

> High on some Cliff, to Heav'n up-pil'd,
> Of rude Access, of Prospect wild,
> Where, tangled round the jealous Steep,
> Strange Shades o'erbrow the Valleys deep,
> And holy Genii guard the Rock,
> Its Gloomes embrown, its Springs unlock,
> While on its rich ambitious Head,
> An Eden, like his own, lies spread. (55-62)

By imitating Milton's Eden, as viewed by Satan, in order to convey the exclusion of his poem's contemporary speaker from the sacred province of divine poetry, Collins stresses the fallen nature of his poet-speaker's own ambition; but, he illuminates this ambition as one contingent upon the universal condition that Milton himself, as fallen as

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

any man, shares with him in relation to a historically lost Eden, one that can only be made visible in the richly ambitious imagination. Milton's postlapsarian approach to the blissful garden-state is thus made parallel in Collins' poem to the contemporary poet's belated vision of the glory that was poetry's past. Both Milton and his disciple are made to have in common the knowledge of an actual limitation, which conceived in historical terms, excites their ambition to cross its threshold, imaginatively. Milton may have succeeded in being the poet Collins' speaker can only hope to become, but this difference between them, which can only be established in retrospect by the contemporary poet, is a conceit which serves the idea of tradition. Milton's apotheosis is conceived by the contemporary aspirant to express the union of poetry with divine truth, dramatizing, moreover, the element of faith which identifies the prophetic insight of this tradition. For, like Milton, the poet who would follow in the tradition of prophetic poetry is uncertain, except through faith, that his own imagination is graced with the power to create fictions that embody truth. He can only be certain that human understanding is dark and trust that poetic "fancy" may organize the sensible equivalent of a knowledge that cannot otherwise be immediately apprehended. Milton, as I mentioned in Chapter Two regarding John Dennis' grounds for poetic reformation, asserts in "Of Education," that the end of learning is "to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright" (631) and he views the past achievements of great literary art in light of this task: "Poetry," Milton argues, "being less subtle and fine," than logic, "but more simple, sensuous, and passionate," should be studied to show "what religious, what glorious and magnificent use, might be made of [it], both in divine and human things" (637). In this regard, poetry

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

comprises, for Collins, a history of the human passion for creating artificial worlds that satisfy the mind's intuition for, in Addison's phrase, "Things more Great, Strange, or Beautiful, than the Eye ever saw." Thus, he combines and transforms elements borrowed from the poetic creations of his predecessors to compose a mythical vision of the archetypal poetical genius such persons embody for him.

The diminishment of reason, which appears necessary to the poet's imaginative vitality (Fancy, in "Ode On The Poetical Character," is called the "loved Enthusiast") is at issue in Collins' "Ode to Fear." As Burke famously observes in his discourse on sublime experience, "no passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear" (53). The power to create convincing illusions, required for literary effectiveness, resembles according to Burke's formula the same power which an overwhelming state of terror also inspires. The fear-stricken mind sees terrible images of things which do not exist. In his ode, Collins links the reflexive relation of natural fear and the imagining faculty to the solipsist circularity of the literary device, prosopopoeia, which he and his contemporaries cannot escape in their effort to bring poetry back to its "right channel." As Collins' ode progresses, however, and nears the speaker's final appeal to be possessed by the "divine emotion" whose "Spirit most possessed/ the sacred seat of Shakespeare's breast," it becomes clear that Collins is pressed to examine the difference between a natural emotion that produces its own frightening illusions, and the aesthetic equivalent of this emotion, which expresses its terrible visions in great tragic literature. The harassed creature, Fear, as she is personified in the strophe, seems nearer in kind to the frightened imagination of unenlightened "Cottage-Maids," made mention of in the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

antistrophe (60). The speaker prays not to be "o'erawed" by fear as they, haunted by visions of Halloween ghosts and goblins. He wants, rather, to be consumed by the superior "Dark Pow'r," the literary Fear that would inspire him in his task as poet both to interpret truthfully the tragic plays of his precursors ("Be mine to read the Visions old,/ Which thy awak'ning Bards have told"[54-5]) and to create tragedies of his own, which, however "strange," awaken the mind to an invisible truth ("And, lest thou meet my blasted view,/Hold each strange Tale devoutly true "[56-7]).

With the exception of Deborah Heller, not since Oliver Sigworth's defense of Collins' ode, some thirty years ago, against Laetitia Barbauld's baffled charge that Collins "could not, for any reward, wish to subject himself habitually to the distracting emotions of such a passion as Fear" (103), has serious consideration, regarding his choice of subject for this ode, been given to the influence of Aristotle's Poetics or of Collins' own play-writing aspirations. During the spring of 1745, when composing "To Pity" and "To Fear," in loose conformity to Milton's allegro-penseroso sequence, Collins is reported to have been working on a translation and extended commentary of the Aristotle and also writing one or more tragedies of his own. Soon after his arrival in London, in 1744, he became an insider of the Drury Lane scene, having befriended a number of well-known dramatists, many of whom, according to a close friend, John Ragsdale, "frequently took his opinion on their pieces before they were seen in public" (Carver 38). A few years earlier, while still at Winchester College, Collins, with fellow prefect Joseph Warton, erected a marble bearing Otway's name and the year of his death. Otway, a native of Collins' own Sussex, is again paid tribute in Collins' ode, "To Pity." The popular dramatist is honored by him

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

as the British equivalent of Euripides, about whom Collins notes, "Aristotle pronounces, on comparison of him with Sophocles, That he was the greater Master of the tender Passions." The speaker of "To Pity" concludes with a prayer that he might dwell, as did Otway before him, in Pity's temple and "There wast the mournful Lamp of Night,/ Till, Virgin, Thou again delight/ To hear a British Shell!"(40-2).

In "To Fear," the speaker acclaims Shakespeare as the British tragedian best succeeding along the line of Aeschylus and Sophocles and, likewise, prays to receive the creative spirit of Fear's terrible passion:

> Hither again thy Fury deal,
> Teach me but once like him to feel:
> Wreath my Meed decree, His Cypress
> And I, O Fear, will dwell with Thee! (68-71)

Though Ragsdale reports seeing the manuscript pages of Collins' translation in progress, nothing of his work on the Poetics, nor of any tragedy he might have written, remains. Nevertheless, enough is known about Collins' overlapping interest both in the ancient commentary and in the theatrical fashions of his own day to warrant a reading of "To Fear" with special regard to Collins' incorporation of dramatic effects into his odic form. If Collins had in mind the composition of his own tragedies, "To Fear" may have served as a vehicle in which to concentrate and refine his thoughts on the matter of tragic emotion, to name and pay homage to his precursors, and to express humility and devotedness before the task of playwright. But, if this be the case, he also represents in the poem the obstacle to any such playwright ambitions, as figured in the mode of descriptive-allegorical

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

personification.

In the opening couplets of "To Fear" the speaker's daemonic "Thou" is described as the astonished spectator of a numinous world revealed by Fancy, whose unveiling of this "unreal scene" suggests a theatrical un-curtaining:

> Thou, to whom the World unknown
> With all its shadowy Shapes is shown;
> Who see'st appall'd th'unreal Scene,
> While Fancy lifts the Veil between.

Fear's visionary realm reflects an interior state, objectified and projected outward in images, shadowy shapes, contained in a proscenium-style frame. It seems that these imaginary figures "appall" Fear's sight not merely because they are images of frightening things, but because they appear at all: Fear sees things that don't objectively exist, and that alone is frightening. Fancy's revelation is defined, in negation, as a world not known, a scene not real. Since language, unlike nature, can present to the mind that which does not exist, the speaker's magic words chant forth the terrible realm of non-being, exciting the apprehension which leads to Fear's own appearance before the speaker. Fear, conceived as inhabiting the objectively known and real world on this side of Fancy's veil, is invoked as a being who responds to the imaginary world as a threat to objectivity. Fancy's lifting of the veil "between" known and unknown, real and unreal, removes their separation. The two worlds, real and imaginary, become undifferentiated, and, as if on cue upon the speaker's line, "While Fancy lifts the Veil between," an exchange of real and imaginary occurs: Appalled Fear suddenly materializes as a visible being to the speaker, himself now

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

astonished to behold its vivid appearance.

Ah Fear! Ah frantic Fear!

I see, I see Thee near.

I know thy hurried Step, thy haggard Eye!

Like Thee I start, like Thee disorder'd fly, (5-8)

The self-reflexiveness of Fear, fleeing in terror at noises and shadows created by itself, is an idea Spenser represented in his allegorical portrayal of Fear in the Masque of Cupid (Faerie Queene II.xii) and again in his description of "subtill Archimago," who, upon turning himself into all manner of terrible forms through his protean magic, "oft for feare would quake,/And oft would Flie away" (I.ii.10). Likewise, as pointed out by Lonsdale, Dread, in Mirror for Magistrates, is illustrated as both agent and recipient,

With foot uncertain proffered here and there

Benumbed of speech, and with a ghastly look

Searched every place, all pale and dead for fear,...

Stoined and amazed at his own shade.... (qtd. in Lonsdale 480n)

Lonsdale finds a similarly reflexive figure in the opening lines of a sonnet by Sydney:

A Satyre once did runne away for dread

With sound of horne, which he himselfe did blow.

Fearing and feared thus from himselfe he fled.

Deeming strange evill in that he did not know. (qtd. in Lonsdale 480n)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

In his ode, "The Passions," Collins' portrayal of Fear is almost identical:

> First Fear his Hand, its Skill to try,
>
> Amid the Chords bewildre'd laid,
>
> And back recoil'd he knew not why,
>
> Ev'n at the Sound himself had made. (17-20)

However, compared with these treatments, in Collins' "Ode To Fear" the reflexive disposition of this passion is dramatized in the character of the speaker, who, seeing the imaginary being he has himself invoked, exclaims: "Like Thee I start, like Thee disordered flie." Fear, both the agent and the recipient of its own provocation, is portrayed in the speaker's identification with his own figure, as if Collins were personifying in the character of his speaker the reflexive nature of personification itself. Upon the materialization of Fear before his very eyes, the speaker's frantic identification with Fear mirrors Fear's own belief in the unreal shapes it sees. Sharing with his imaginary persona a propensity for viewing unreal scenes, he now conforms to Fear's frenzied behavior. Entering and participating within the scene of unreality which he himself invoked, he is both spectator and actor. Aiming beyond a merely visual image of Fear for the reader to scan objectively in the mind's eye, Collins attempts to procure a sense of the essentially interior (i.e., non-visual) condition of emotional experience. By resisting a routine piling up of emblematic attributes, and limiting his visual description of Fear to the suggestive "hurried Step" and "haggard eye," he enables the reader to identify immediately Fear's state of panicked horror. In this way, the symbolic efficiency of Collins' description avoids the static distancing of pictorial objectivity and moves with the energy of speech to convey the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

bursting forth of emotion in the sudden appearance of "Fear," whose halting flight is expressed in the speaker's stammering words of shocked recognition.

In Poetics, Aristotle advises the tragic poet to act out the parts and gestures of his dramatis personae when writing a play, in order to enter into vivid sympathy with them and, thereby, to create more convincing portrayals for his audience.[8] It is conceivable that these remarks by Aristotle may have influenced Collins to have his speaker mimic the behavior of his imaginary persona, Fear, perhaps as a way to identify the speaker's drama-writing ambition. Additionally, the speaker's identification with his persona in "Like Thee I start, like Thee disorder's fly," suggests, as Paul Fry notes, the lyrical style of the ode writer (132). The speaker "starts" and flies "disorder'd" in a typically abrupt and "frantic" pindaric transition, just at the point of rendering Fear's train of ghastly attendants: "For lo! what Monsters in thy Train appear!" (9).

The speaker's mimicry of Fear's flight from these "monsters" is now represented as a flight of fancy which follows in the speaker's description of Fear's train. The speaker, abruptly shifting from astonishment to reflection, backs off from his near proximity to Fear (For lo!). With his scope of vision now enlarged to include a pageantry of dreadful figures, the language of the poem changes from the recitative modes of incantation and

---

[8] Aristotle writes, "At the time when he is constructing his plots and engaged on the diction in which they are worked out, the poet should remember to put the actual scenes as far as possible before his eyes. In this way, seeing everything with the vividness of an eye-witness as it were, he will devise what is appropriate, and be least likely to overlook incongruities....As far, as may be, too, the poet should even act his story with the very gestures of his personages. Given the same natural qualifications, he who feels the emotions to be described will be the most convincing: distress and anger, for instance, are portrayed most truthfully by one who is feeling them at the moment" (II.2329).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

apostrophe to the descriptive language of visual comprehension and ordering, whereby the shadowy shapes of Fear's "unreal scene" are detailed and arranged before the speaker's eyes in a way that "turns readers into spectators." The remainder of the strophe displays a series of horrible vignettes dominated by the allegorical personifications, Danger and Vengeance. This section of the text, made thick with quotations from a wide range of literary sources, composes an overall *tableau vivant* of crowding horrors:

> Danger, whose Limbs of Giant Mold
> What mortal Eye can fix'd behold?
> Who stalks his Round, an hideous Form,
> Howling amidst the Midnight Storm,
> Or throws him on the ridgy steep
> Of some loose hanging Rock to sleep;
> And with him thousand Phantoms join'd
> Who prompt to Deeds accurs'd the Mind;
> And those, the Fiends, who near allied,
> O'er Nature's Wounds, and Wrecks preside;
> Whilst Vengeance, in the lurid Air,
> Lifts her red Arm, expos'd and bare;
> On whom the rav'ning Brood of Fate,
> Who lap the Blood of Sorrow, wait;
> Who, Fear, this ghastly Train can see,
> And look not madly wild, like Thee? (10-25)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Oddly, critics have complained that Collins' rendering of Fear's ghastly train fails to depict tragic agency. As Steven Knapp observes, Danger and Vengeance are merely on display as terrible beings; neither they nor their concomitants are shown to perform any deed of horror upon some victim (94). Yet Fear, whose defensive posture is that of one who feels imperiled, is herself the victim of this passage. The threat, not the occurrence, of pain and death inspires fear. As such, the entire allegorical passage concludes upon the verb "wait," expressing the suspenseful anticipation which informs the whole of Fear's dreadful imaginings. But more to my point, this Fear is precisely not the tragic emotion of dramatic poetry, whose sublime passion the aspirant wishes to "feel," but is both the frenzied source and recipient of false, however vivid, mental pictures of horror, suggesting both the modern ode-writer's remove from the source of Truth-inspired vision and (given the personified forms of Fear's dreadful imaginings), his limited creative ability in being only able to produce allegorical personae.

The rhetorical question posed at the end of the strophe, "Who, Fear, this ghastly Train can see,/ And look not madly wild, like Thee?" reiterates the speaker's identification with his figure, but the shift in tone, from frantic to calm, introduces an effusively compassionate disposition that prepares for a thematic change in the epode, where the subject is Greek tragic drama, and "gentle Pity" is said to claim her "mingled Part."

The self-victimized Fear of Collins' strophe is markedly absent in the epode. In her place we find, instead, the "grief-full Muse" who first, in "earliest Greece" (26), invoked the sacred Fear of tragic drama. The tragic Muse, whose "infant Tongue" first addressed Fear with this purpose, appears with her maids and matrons, the captivated

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

audience, who, "Silent and pale in wild Amazement," figuratively hang on to "her awful Voice" (27-8). Appropriate to the theme of verbal mediation over visual imagery, references to aural and vocal elements dominate the epode. In the second and third stanzas of the epode, Aeschylus and Sophocles appear as the bards who copy the tragic Muse, invoking Fear exclusively in their roles as tragedians. The invoking of this passion and the vocational calling of the tragic poet are inseparable aspects of the same voice. Thus, Aeschylus, in battle as patriot warrior, "Disdain'd in Marathon its Power to feel (31)," while Sophocles, whose Oedipus Coloneus is the subject of the epode's penultimate stanza, is shown to have only quit his honeyed pasture in order to enter the "baleful grove" of his play's tragic setting (34-37). The implicit fearlessness, in the natural sense, of a gentle-spirited Sophocles, roving "Hybla's dews" (an allusion, perhaps, to the "White Colonus" choral ode, which, appearing in Sophocles' final play, celebrates the natural beauty of his birthplace and the generosity of its inhabitants toward the exiled Oedipus) compares with the fearless courage of an embattled Aeschylus, who, "reached from Virtue's hand the patriot's steel (33)." These pastoral and martial features of the bards' lives, free of the elements of horror, respectively oppose the brutish hostility of nature, as depicted in the stophe's rendering of Danger's treacherous landscape, and the aggressive blood-lust of Vengeance. In so far as the classical dramatist's experience of fear is shown to be specific to the inspiration of poetry's tragic Fear, the aesthetic emotion he suffers is distinguished from the natural passion personified in the strophe. The speaker's concern, as expressed in the antistrophe, is that Fear, the "mad nymph," if not invoked through the inspired voice of the tragic poet, is bound to the chaotic scenes of its natural terror, finally

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

hearing only the call of drowning seamen:

Thou who such weary Lengths has passed,
Where wilt Thou rest, mad Nymph, at last?
Say, wilt Thou shroud in haunted Cell,
Where gloomy Rape, and Murder dwell?
Or in some hollowed Seat,
'Gainst which the big waves beat,
Hear drowning seamen's cries in tempests brought! (46-52)

In the epode, the glory of Fear's past relation to the divine visions of tragic poetry is evident where Collins has his Sophocles trace Fear's steps (an allusion to poetry's metrical feet) into the sacred ground dedicated to the Furies, the chthonic goddesses of vengeance. There, Sophocles enters the imaginary scene of his own tragedy, wherein, (according to Sophocles' text) blind Oedipus, himself having been instructed by the oracle to meet his end in this grove, at a secret spot, is destined to undergo the mysterious transfiguration that both vindicates and ends his mortal existence, amidst the god's fear-inspiring claps of thunderous approval. In Collins' rendering of this final scene of the play, Sophocles' apotheosis is incorporated into the completion of his Theban cycle.

But who is He whom later Garlands grace,
Who left a-while o'er Hybla's dews to rove,
With trembling Eyes thy dreary steps to trace,
Where Thou and Furies shar'd the baleful Grove?
Wrapt in thy cloudy Veil th'Incestuous Queen

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Sighed the sad Call her Son and Husband hear'd

When once alone it broke the silent Scene,

And he the Wretch of Thebes no more appear'd. (34-41)

Editors usually comment that Collins, in choosing Oedipus Coloneus to epitomize Fear, mistakenly implies that this is the harshest and most grim of Sophocles' plays. Collins, however, has recognized in this play's final scene a blending of sublime elements with which to better dramatize his thematic assertion of tragic Fear's divine origin. Additionally, Collins, who, true to his era, enjoyed the idea of turning scenes from plays into subjects for painting, was probably drawn to the especially picturesque atmosphere of tempest driven gloom essential to the dramatic action of Sophocles' scene. It is noteworthy that Warton, in an unpublished "Gathering Book," dated 1739 (when he and Collins first met at Winchester) composed a list of images evocative of sublime terror, which, under the dual title "Subjects for a Picture" and "Similies," included the entry "Oedipus and his Daughters in the Storm, a fine subject for a picture" (qtd. in Wendorf 29).

Oedipus Coloneus, the last of Sophocles' plays, written when he was ninety and set in his native Colonus, ends the Theban cycle and provides this truncated progress section of Collins' ode with a valedictory setting for tragic Fear's final appearance in the world of ancient drama. Blind Oedipus, a prophetic figure in Sophocles' play, here parallels the visionary Sophocles, who, "with trembling eyes," follows Fear to the dark conclusion of his hero's fate. In the scene from Sophocles, Oedipus, with his daughters, is warned to prepare for his end by a fierce onset of thunder and lightening, followed by the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

voice of the impatient god who calls out for him, more than once, not to delay. Collins' stanza collapses the god's manifold calling into the single "sad call" of the sighing Jocasta (whom he calls the Incestuous Queen). This radical departure from Sophocles' text is one that most critics view as an unintentional misreading of the play. It seems more likely, however, that Collins provides a deliberate revision. An indication of this is his purposeful inclusion of notes to the stanza. In one of these notes, Collins' intention is expressed by his redundant assurance to the reader that he does, in fact, mean to say that it is Jocasta's voice, and not the god's, that calls for Oedipus. The other note, which quotes, in Greek, the passage from Sophocles, also implies that Collins is both knowledgeable of his source and willfully deviating from it. Indeed, in his note he cuts the quoted material so that it ends just before the terrible voice is identified in Sophocles' text as that of the god (and clearly, not of Jocasta) calling Oedipus to his end numerous times. The Greek lines (1622-25) in Collins' note quote a portion of the messenger's account of the events leading to Oedipus' fatal disappearance. Amidst peals of thunder and flashes of lightening, the old father and his daughters cling to one another in terror and grief, weeping in a farewell embrace. In English these lines read:

> But when they finished wailing, and no more
> sobs were heard, there was a stillness;
> and suddenly a voice cried aloud to
> him, so that the hair of all stood up on their
> heads in panic fear, and they were afraid.

The remaining portion of the messenger's speech (1626-28), which Collins excludes in his

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

note, would show that he altered the play's content in his treatment of the scene:

> For the god called to him again and again
>
> saying: "Oedipus! Oedipus! Why are we waiting?
>
> You tarry too long!

In effect, Collins' deviation from the original incorporates the recognition scene of Oedipus Rex, whereupon the king's identity as son and husband to the queen is revealed to him, a revelation which invokes fear and also defines the tragic stage of Greek drama. Collins' bold substitution of the incestuous queen's sad call for that of the authoritative god, condenses the whole of Sophocles' trilogy and the prophetic unfolding of Oedipus' history from birth to death into a single apocalyptic disclosure of fate. Calling to Oedipus from beyond the threshold of his supernatural disappearance, Jocasta, shrouded in Fear's cloudy veil, echoes the "awful Voice" of Collins' "grief-full Muse" in the first stanza of the epode. In this fancied guise, Jocasta personifies Oedipus' own unknown, unseen origin and fate, which, sealed by the god in his mother's womb, suggests, as well, the source of Sophocles' tragic genius, a vocational calling which identifies him as the dramatic poet of Oedipus' story.

The speaker, in the final stanza of the epode, assumes, as do the mythical maids and matrons who listen to the tragic Muse's performance in the first stanza, the role of audience to Sophocles' tragedy. He recognizes Fear, "whose withering power inspired each mournful line" of the Sophocles, not by its "hurried step" and "haggard eye," but by the response of his own "throbbing heart," a contrast to the fearful mind's imaginative projection of menacing shapes, as embodied in the earlier mentioned "look" or appearance

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of frightened eyes depicted in the strophe ("Who, Fear, this ghastly train can see,/ And not look madly wild like thee?"). The hearing of the tragic voice, whose source is concealed in a cloudy veil of fear (a cloudiness that conflates storm and thunder with the subtle, visually obscure, form of imaginative experience) is sounded in the throbbing, hidden center of the body's emotional vitality.

> O Fear, I know Thee by my throbbing Heart,
> Thy withering Power inspired each mournful Line,
> Though gentle Pity claim her mingled Part,
> Yet all the Thunders of the Scene are Thine! (42-45)

Thunder, here the vocable/audible equivalent of verbal expression and significant of both poetic mediation and divine logos, may also refer to the spectacular effect of artificial thunder, employed in stage production to heighten the arousal of fear in the audience. Lonsdale (421n) notes "a curious unconscious echo in this line of Pope, Prologue for Mr. Dennis (16): "And shook the Stage with Thunders all his own." Pope's line is a satirical comment upon Dennis' invention of an improved method for making stage-thunder, and Lonsdale doubts that Collins, if aware of this meaning, would wish to include it. Yet, the sound of thunder in the final scene of Sophocles' play is more than a sensational effect; it expresses the will of Zeus spoken at the end of the tragedy. If Collins is consciously alluding to Pope's line, what reason is there to doubt that he may have been expressing approval of a theatrical device, invented by an enemy of Pope and intended to create a sublime effect of artificial terror for the stage of tragic drama? On the other hand, if he meant to echo Pope's derision of theatrical sensationalism, as a way to say that

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

thunder, real or artificial, belongs in essence to tragic Fear, and not to Dennis (nor to Pity), Collins' appropriation of Pope's line oddly subverts the mockery of both Dennis and stage-thunder, by repossessing for his own "scene" the primary association of fear and thunder, imitated by Sophocles on the Greek stage, and signifying a relationship between divine truth and poetically mediated emotion.

Oliver Sigworth cites the only English translation of Aristotle's Poetics readily available when Collins was planning his own translation. Sigworth quotes from this source (Aristotle's Art of Poetry, trans. Theodore Coulston, 1705) the crucial passage about tragic pity and fear, in which Aristotle explains *katharsios*. The Greek word, translated most often today as "purgation" is rendered in the 1705 edition as "refines in us": "Tragedy is then, an Imitation of an Action that is Grave, Entire, and hath a Just Length; of which the Stile is agreeably relishing, but differently in all its Parts; and which without the assistance of Narration, by means of Compassion and Terror perfectly refines in us, all sorts of Passions, and whatever else is like them" (100). While the modern rendering of *katharsios* may suggest the cleansing out or release of emotion, this earlier treatment suggests that tragic fear and pity together implement a clarifying process; the audience's passionate nature undergoes a change from gross to subtle, from murkiness to essence through the workings of their artistically controlled experience of terror and compassion. In this light, the tragedian's art is perceived as enabling the audience immediately to grasp, in an aesthetically refined emotional state, the mystery of human nature and destiny. If, in Collins' ode, the speaker's "throbbing heart" in response to tragic drama signifies this refined state, the complement of this profound emotional

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

experience is the inspirited vitality of the visionary poet's own impassioned breast ("O Thou whose Spirit most possessed/ The sacred Seat of Shakespeare's Breast" [64].) The poet-speaker of Collins' ode asks to be free of the personified Fear of his odic flight, frantic and disordered. He desires, rather, the in-dwelling power of tragic Fear, the divine emotion, whose "prophet" Shakespeare he acknowledges as being the last tragedian to embody its poetic voice.

> By All that from thy Prophet broke,
> In thy divine Emotions spoke,
> Hither again thy Fury deal,
> Teach me but once like Him to feel:
> His cypress Wreath my Meed decree,
> And I, O Fear, will dwell with Thee!

Collins' speaker does not pray to be scared out of his wits in order to prove he has a productive imagination; what he desires is the tragic poet's divine "Dark Pow'r," the obscure source of insight through which poet and audience are inspired to envision their collective identity and fate. However, upon invoking tragic fear he discovers that his poetic fancy can only produce an image of abject terror, powerless against its own monstrous and chaotic imaginings. The contrast between modern and ancient is thus worked through a distinction between the artless fantasies of natural fear, unredeemed by the poetic mediation of truthful insight, and the aesthetically transforming experience of tragic emotion, which guides the individual subject's terror into the universally awe-ful recognition, or *anagnoresis*, that assuages it. Collins would retain the oral/aural

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

immediacy of poetic language, its unique ability to arouse the "invisible" bonds of sympathy between individuals connected by their shared faith in a redeeming mythos, but lacking the vital support of a comprehensive and cohesive narrative context for the ordering of subjective experience, he is at odds to discover by what artifice the contemporary poet might see Truth beyond the emotive-sensory data served by an exclusively visualist rhetoric for poetic imagination.

The Apotheosis of Clarissa

Though I will not speak at length nor claim any expertise about 18th-century English drama, my discussion of tragic representation in Samuel Richardson's Clarissa and in William Collins' ode "To Fear" is partly generated by some assumptions about it. One is that the novel—and perhaps the English ode as well—rose in proportion to the decline of tragic drama, while being greatly influenced by theatrical techniques and conventions, whose illusions of immediacy might intensify the reader's emotional responses. Another is that it was difficult if not virtually impossible to compose and perform tragedy which was not potentially laughable—whether by genuinely comic turns or by deliberate or unintentional farce—and that a similar tragi-comic confusion is reflected in both the novel and the ode, but with greater finesse and subtlety than could be conveyed on the stage. Ian Donaldson argues that between 1710 and 1780 the principle characteristic both of drama and of dramatic criticism was uncertainty, but one so pronounced that it became the century's most common theatrical joke. The joke consisted variously of a dramatic speaker observing that it was difficult to know whether a play was meant to be tragic or

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

comic. Donaldson provides numerous examples but cites as the most refined version the whole of John Gay's burlesque, the aptly titled, "The What D'Ye Call It" (1714-15). The preface patiently explains that "The whole Art of Tragi-Comi-Pastoral Farce lies in interweaving the several Kinds of the Drama with each other, so that they cannot be distinguish'd or separated. As Gay hoped would happen, the audience of the first performance reacted with "extreme emotional confusion: there was laughter, 'sedateness,' and tears," Gay himself reports (Donaldson 162-3).

The confusion of tragic and comic sentiments in drama might have arisen, in part, from the Restoration conceit, poetic justice, wherein a tragedy was made to conclude allegorically upon an allusion to the fortunate Fall. Hence, at the same time Christian audiences are reminded at the end of a tragic play about the resolution of universal history in everlasting joy, the moral pattern and purpose of fictional narrative is deemed inseparable from the tragi-comic paradigm of true history. As a subtext for grandiose tragic themes, the progressive, comic turn of Christian epic no doubt undermined the conviction with which a neo-classical hero or heroine of the stage, however straightened by Roman fortitude, might fall on the sword, scenes of peril and death unintentionally appearing ridiculous by virtue of seeming excessive in their gravity. Moreover, if sublime passion is the playwright's and actor's goal, as was often the case, the excess of which is bombast—as was often warned against—then the physical limitations of the live stage would have increased the likelihood of a tragedy riddled with unintended farcical elements. Perhaps the stage, with its live actors and spectacular scenery, as palpable as unreal, in an era which both pursued and disdained the confusion of the imaginary and the sensory,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

exposed in the most stark of terms the disturbing contingency in narrative fiction between the allegorical and the empirical.

The giddy tension with which one might anticipate an inversion of the ridiculous and the sublime might yet be more successfully maintained in arts other than theatrical and yet refer more profoundly to the Christian reversal or substitution of glory and humility, which underwrites the sublime aesthetic. The very term "sublime" re-focuses, accordingly, from denoting the ultimate power and effect of literary art, to its use as a rubric for the exquisitely strained psychological ambivalence commonly expressed in such oxymorons of the period, as "pleasing dread," "agreeable horror," and "terrible joy." Both Richardson and Collins dramatize the conflicts of sublime terror, in which the utterly dark and wretched condition of the soul prepares its grounds for exultation, hence, the violently concentrated experience of sublimity, in terms of exhilarating melancholy, magnificent abjection, liberating terror, or awful clarity.

When the seemingly inexhaustible trial of Clarissa's virtue finally exhausts itself, the argument of Richardson's novel is at last arrested in the icon of tragic purity, to which Clarissa is herself reduced at the same time she is elevated, a figure in death of terrible rapture, which justifies all that preceded it, as if she were the tragic muse of her own terrible story. Collins' poet-speaker in the ode "To Fear," is rapt in the allegorical personification from whose reflexive hysteria he seems unable to release himself, in order that he might conceive a dramatic tragedy in place of his solipsistic lyric. He is afraid he might not possess the tragic genius that "feels" as intensely and wholeheartedly as he thinks is necessary for the noble task of playwright. In considering the aesthetic

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

translation of pain into literary form, one might view Richardson's heroine and Collins' poet-speaker as if each was an inversion of the other's apotheosis of terror, ravishment, and madness; and the genre of descriptive-allegorical personification, or prosopopoeia, is the common ground which justifies my breach of protocol in here yoking together the heroine of a novel and the speaker of an lyric: Clarissa appears only to recover her sanity after the rape by mastering her own transformation into an emblematic figure—a tragi-comic muse. She is now Christ's bride, her funeral attire the wedding frock, the bed her coffin. On the other hand, Collins' belated aspirant, fearing madness and desiring to be released from his lyric, realizes that in order for the mere icon of tragedy, which he configures in his lyric, to dissolve into the action of tragic drama, he must cease identifying his dramatic imagination with the daemonic persona, Fear, to whom he prays but in whom it is trapped. Clarissa, however, who cheerfully decorates her own coffin with such rich emblems of eternal life as that of the tail-biting serpent, seeks in self-containment an end to action, and, as the whole of her life shrinks into her dying chamber—a spare tableau of symbolic attributes—she herself resembles a type of the descriptive-allegorical personification, which might have appeared in the neo-classical ornaments of the period.

Richardson's novel, the full title of which is Clarissa or the history of a young lady: comprehending the most important concerns of private life and particularly showing the distresses that may attend the misconduct of parents and children, in relation to marriage, begins in *media res* with its innocent heroine already being swept into the violent maelstrom of other people's vicious passions—avarice, lust, envy, anger, and pride—the destructive force of which runs counter to her will and shall carry her to an end now

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

beyond her ability to imagine or comprehend it. In the book's first letter, Clarissa's loyal confidante, the practical-minded Anna Howe, advises her to chronicle the events that preceded a scandalous duel between Clarissa's brother, James Harlowe, and her rakishly charming suitor, Robert Lovelace. "Write to me therefore, my dear, the whole of your story" Anna insists, "[...] in so full a manner as may gratify those who know not so much of your affairs as I do [, for] if anything unhappy should fall out from the violence of such spirits as you have to deal with, your account of all things previous to it will be your justification" (L1:40). Some 1400 pages later, then, it is Anna who exclaims at the sight of Clarissa, perished from hunger in her coffin, "And is this all!—is it all of my Clarissa's story!"(L 502:1402).

In her study of the politics of starvation, Maud Ellmann evokes Miss Howe's horror at the wasted life which had once impressed her with its glorious vitality and seemingly boundless capacity for goodness. Miss Howe most likely represents the sensible young ladies of Richardson's contemporary readership, gripped in horror at Clarissa's fate. While awaiting the final installments of his book, Richardson's readers begged him to end it "happily" with a reconciled pair of lovers—Lovelace reformed and Clarissa his redeemer. But Richardson's fictional history is a pilgrim's progress, not a romance. Its Christian argument is made in the Reformationist spirit of Cromwell's faded era and is addressed to a generation in which no Clarissa—she being something of a throwback—is likely to appear. And that, I think, is the point, for Richardson is rebuking his readership for its part in having forfeited moral and religious strength in pursuit of material wealth and political power; or, rather, for having so radically separated and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

crippled the mediation between worldly and spiritual values. However, like Howe, Ellman wonders about the story which might have been written had Clarissa recovered after the rape in a socially regulated instead of religiously sublime way, perhaps, in reconciliation with both Lovelace and her family—as if another story than the one Richardson wrote could have been written, and as if the one written was, in fact, written by Clarissa alone and not a letter-writing host of various witnesses and reporters, dissemblers and strategists. Yet, a reluctance to view the ending of the novel as inevitable seems itself an inevitability, one that Richardson must have anticipated, given the ever-enlarging multiplex of narrative perspectives his epistolary form permitted. The epistolary form, moreover, allows a greater illusion of naturalness and empirical veracity than does an omniscient third-person or singular first-person narrator, in so far as it imitates dramatic narration without being hampered by the temporal-spatial limitations of the stage. For, as with letter-writing in general, every character in Richardson's novel is a story-teller who is also performing a role in his or her own letter, as a character.

The veneer of performance or acting which letter-writing puts forth presupposes the reception of its pretense as such; the letter-writer's artifice is thus perceived as "natural," a fictional fail-safe which both increases and safe-guards the impression of empirical veracity. If the argument of the novel, which is not bound to its epistolary form, is dismissed, then indeed there appear plenty of options for the heroine other than dying, which are provided by the author himself in the guise of his characters: Clarissa could have married Lovelace, or, perhaps, Belford would become her protector, or, certainly, she might have lived with Anna and Mr. Hickman after their marriage, and grown to be a

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

saintly old maid, as pious and "useful" as ever. Or perhaps, as happened in many of the tragic plays of the period, a mere accident of fate might have occurred to turn the story comic—the death of her father, lets say, which might have urged the rest of the family into a speedy reconciliation, just in the nick of time. Anything is preferred to the dreadful momentum of Clarissa's death as long as Clarissa seems as real to the reader as she is to Miss Howe, and as integral a part of the complex social network which the novel's range of voices represents. That a genuinely lovely, affectionate, intelligent youth, such as represented in Clarissa, should be turned into the tragic lady of Virtue Starved is, of course, merely repugnant to readers who do not follow the book's argument but are swallowed up into its mirror of modern life and the passions aroused by that reflection.

Unlike its argument for death, in which allegory rules, the novel's duplication of real life is a subjectively fragmented continuum of motives and responses, a constellation of competing interpretations, alternately true and false, in which there are, indeed, as many alternatives to Clarissa's death as there are characters with personal moods and inclinations. The epistolary, as such, seems an especially effective device for reflecting a life all sprawling and un-methodized. For it offers an insight which few novelistic forms can portray. The reader is actually present at the crisis; the characters do not relate completed experiences; they themselves live in a fragmented world in which the beginning and the end are yet to be determined, there being no discernable framework, no known objective, no final state. Each letter is a stage of mental progression from a point in time toward another point in time which is itself only a stage of progression. Thus each letter is a representation of the character's entirety, his or her identity being caught permanently

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

within the moment in which he or she is exposed in the performance of the letter. However, through the course of this lengthy and unruly epistolary, Richardson is laying the religious-allegorical foundation for Clarissa's apotheosis within that ephemeral, chaotic, and fragmentary communication which writes to the moment: The argument of the novel emerges plainly after Clarissa's rape, uncontradicted by anything that precedes, when the point of focus shifts from Lovelace's mastery over Clarissa's circumstances, as reported in letters written to Belford, to Clarissa's realization that she has been profoundly deceived by Lovelace, as reported in letters written by herself to him and numerous others, but also, and importantly so, by letters written to Lovelace by Belford, who, more than any other character is the outsider who directly witnesses and penetrates to the truth of Clarissa's beatification.

The imminent derangement of her psyche after being raped is first illustrated in a visual icon, typographically, across the printed page of the novel, where, in a letter from Lovelace to Belford (L 261:888-98), which represents the torn fragments of her incoherent writings immediately after the rape, the rendered scraps, whose contents are by turns overwrought and stuttering, lucid and powerful, appear to have fallen out haphazardly on those pages of the novel and become arrested in a topsy-turvy collage of typographical chaos. Thereafter, however, Clarissa is reborn in sublime self-mastery, rhetorically so. The transformation is made evident as the turning point at which, in a moment of utter composure, Clarissa writes to Lovelace that she is leaving for her father's house. She means, of course, that she is dying, but the briefly assuaged Lovelace mistakes her to mean she is reconciled with her actual father, which, in fact, has become an

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

impossibility. Clarissa's authority, in conjunction with her clear grasp of the truth about Lovelace, which had hitherto eluded her, emerges in conjunction with the ability to speak truths ironically, in substitutive figuration, that is, to say one thing and to mean another—while not lying. In learning to tell the truth fictitiously, without lying, Clarissa becomes an author superior to Lovelace, who remains an unredeemed modern, enslaved by his imagination, a self-described "master of metamorphosis," who brags of his talent for shaping lies to the nearest approximation of the truths they are meant to conceal A lord, he can appear as one, but true nobility belongs to Clarissa. For, she exhibits the nobility of soul with which the Longinian genius for literary expression is identified, so powerfully transparent in communication is her tragic speech, that her benighted family is terrified to receive her letters, accusing her of possessing a "bewitching guile" capable of "moving passions" in them. The Harlowes cannot see that Clarissa *is* what she communicates, which is not to say, that, prior to being raped, she is conscious of and can bear all the truth there is to know about her feelings and responses to Lovelace and the circumstances in which she is ensconced. The alienated and clever Lovelace, however, plays with signs and hides behind them. Perverting the meanings of conventional codes and mores, he skillfully manipulates the operative gap between what something is supposed to mean and what people want to believe about themselves. A social monster of cynical expectations, he perceives in the common trust of language a weakness he can exploit, and his power is executed by controlling the context for his words and actions in relation to the possible range of automatic responses of which most narrow- or merely simple-minded people are capable, then by giving the performance that will yield, accordingly, the response he

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

desires to manipulate: "What a horrible thing that my talents point all that way—when I know what is honourable and just, and would almost wish to be honest!"(L 103.413).

A perceived relationship between her newly emerging rhetorical power and the starvation which accompanies the slow process of her dying has recently inspired critics, such as Ellmann and Donnalee Frega, to view Clarissa within a broader discourse of starvation, in terms both political and aesthetic. Drawing upon an historian's analogy in 1802, in which the recent Act of Union between Ireland and England was referred to as a "brutal rape" and Ireland the "heiress whose chambermaid and trustees had been bribed while she herself was dragged, protesting, to the alter," Ellman is reminded that Richardson's own heroine "escapes a forced marriage only to be raped by the man who promised to protect her,[...]protests her fate by going on a hunger strike, and dies before she can enjoy the concessions that her sufferings have won" (71). However, Ellmann mistakenly views Clarissa's fast in terms of political resistence and pressure, as if Clarissa meant for the spectacle of her emaciation to shame her enemies and to squeeze from them a just redaction of their malicious treatment of her, along with an abundant, restorative recompense—which would make it possible for her to eat and to live as a normal girl again. Indeed, Clarissa's starvation is not a hunger strike as Ellmann would have us believe—Clarissa is not the coltishly spirited Sophia of Fielding's comedy, childishly stamping her foot and sending away her vittles in pert revolt against her father—a show of defiance which is certain only to elicit proof of the gruff squire's momentarily concealed tenderness for his own beloved girl. Rather, in the slow, excruciating period of Clarissa's starvation after the rape, Richardson's heroine is simply unable to eat,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

inexplicably—except as a *consequence* of having been used virtually as a whore by her family, then kidnapped, drugged, and raped by Lovelace, then arrested and imprisoned in a dunning house, all the while the depth of Lovelace's deception becoming as plain to her as the harshly final words of her father's refusal to acknowledge her existence. She complains to the scolding apothecary that she has no appetite and vomits up whatever nourishment she forces herself to swallow. Estranged from the family whose love she desperately hungers for and repulsed at her rapist's proposal of marriage, the threadbare and starving exile shall at last embrace her fate as purposeful, her death as significant. Indeed, the idea that mortality in *extremis* is the threshold through which life passes into speech might well be the tragi-comic significance her starvation articulates.

Not surprisingly then, Clarissa's only food is allegorical—the incarnate Word, or spiritual bread, of the Eucharist, which she readily consumes on the eve of her death—a feasting in the midst of fasting which evokes the forty-day hunger of Jesus in the wilderness, ministered to by angels before his crucifixion, itself a fasting and ministry which alludes to the forty-year exile of the Isrealites, fed by heavenly manna, each of these biblical occasions terminating in the pronouncement, that, "Man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord" (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4; Luke 4:4). On such occasions of self-reflexive literality, in the face of doubt or temptation, the biblical Word pronounces the very gap or mortality which it fills. Drawing upon Caroline Bynum's historical analysis of the fasting female saint, Donnalee Frega argues,

> If Clarissa's saintly behavior concerning marriage, money, family, and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> friendship are treated as isolated themes, she will indeed appear an inconsistent, even a hypocritical, character; however, once her food-related behavior is posited as a central theme in her renunciation of the world and considered from both a psychological and a religious perspective, her behavior in other areas falls into consistent patterns. Clarissa's apparent rejection of physicality, wealth, and sensual pleasure becomes an acceptance of the new possibilities of physicality, an intensely sensual spirituality that allows her to influence the physical world in a number of ways. (96)

I'm not sure what specific influences Frega means, here, but her point appears to agree in spirit with my observation, that, from the fragmented perspective of an external world which bears no witness to the truth of her experience, Clarissa, once raped, disappears into her sensibility, concluding a process of interiorization marked by an exile that had begun with the pain that was inflicted by her family and expressed to them by her, but which at the same time they pretended not to perceive as either extant or genuine. Indeed, Clarissa's fasting is never a willful holding out for gain—which is what her family, who have always misread her to be a manipulative little seductress and self-serving faker of virtue would believe is the case. Rather, her starvation, in allegorical terms, substitutes the lack of virtuous support and sustenance in the social milieu upon which she depends and is the inevitable outcome of having been commodified and violated beyond repair, of there being nothing left in the world of material means, commercial or biological, by which she is able to convey the vital goodness which is her value. Finally, it is the grief that

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

starves, so that she dies in joy, having shaped her legacy, so that, if nothing else, she can at least appear, literally, in having become the idea or reflection of herself. Starved, she is the incarnate figure of her own identity, an embodied literariness, a self-reflexive nothing. Clarissa dying is the appearance of a rapturous aesthetic of virtue in tragic form, which, comically, then, so far as art is itself essentially comic, preserves virtue in the image which replaces the world's loss of virtue. As tragic image, or loss represented, Clarissa's virtue is preserved in its idea, alone, as life transfixed in that death through which a vital culture repeats the image of itself. Sublime reproduction in cultural terms, as aesthetic imagery, both substitutes and remembers the material-historical narrative which does not survive through biological-cultural reproduction. The sublimely artificial death of Clarissa procures an abstraction from her life of the modern Christian values which informed her sensibility, and thereby tragically configures a spectacle of contemplation for her acquaintances, as well as for Richardson's reader. They might see in the absence which presents itself in her spectral form of goodness, what her life should have been, and would have been, had Clarissa never been made a commodity and subsequently raped, but had been allowed by her family and friends to thrive materially in terms of her vital sexuality, which are the terms represented in the textuality of Richardson's conception. Clarissa is written into existence as a writer so that she might transcend the text by writing herself out of it, hence, leaving behind only the sublime impression of her freedom.

Lovelace, on the other hand, a consummate deceiver, whose self-consciously rhetorical letters display the classical range of elocutionary gambits, proves to be a figure of false sublimity, when, finally unable to seduce Clarissa, even at her most vulnerable, he

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

can only prove by raping her that his motive has only and always been not to persuade her according to her will, but to coerce her against it, hence, that he lacks the very agency which Clarissa herself embodies. Afterward, as if through a subtle inversion of the rape itself, Lovelace feels himself penetrated by Clarissa's powerful "intellect," for, indeed, in the reduction of these characters to a level of pure allegory, she stands as a vehicle of the truly sublime, and is the female figure of patrimonial manhood Lovelace is denied. Impregnated by her mind, Lovelace is changed, but not reformed, insofar as he now idolizes the icon of his grief, and prays not to God but to Clarissa for his salvation, hence, remaining hysterically, fanatically trapped within his passions. He hopes she is pregnant with his child, so that he might begin anew; he seeks to resolve in the creative power that is literally true of sex, the unbearable paradox of this ultimately unviolated, unsubdued rape victim. Desiring to retrieve "one charming boy"(L 268:916) from her, he frantically wishes to realize himself. This wish is a belated fantasy, a fascination with fatherhood which entertains his desire to be linked to the power and authority she virtuously defends. Indeed, as Clarissa dies, a bride of Heaven, the "conjugal pivot" turns viciously against him, and Lovelace is faced with the horror of a "matchless woman!" united not with himself but with God the Father, against whom he cannot compete.

For the paternally orphaned Lovelace, whose boundless wealth and privilege is spread through a diffusion of uncles, aunts, and cousins, there is no father, neither earthly nor heavenly, and thereby no central fount of power and authority. An aristocrat, he immediately recognizes in Clarissa an inborn grace and nobility, which exceeds her family and her class. But, with a mixture of awe, envy, and humiliation, he objects, "Is not, may

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

not her virtue be founded rather in *pride* than in *principle*? Whose daughter is she? And is she not a *daughter*? If impeccable, how came she by her impeccability?" (L 110:426). Thus, he puzzles over the enigma of her virtue in its fruitful relation to the patriarchy supporting it. Amazingly, the power to produce a "Clarissa" belongs to the Harlowes: She is her doting grandfather's extraordinary progeny. And the imperiousness of her ambitious brother is inseparable from the threat seeded in her virtue. Explosively, Lovelace conflates his powerlessness to displace Clarissa's fidelity to her family with the humiliation he once suffered from an earlier lover's infidelity, the very rejection he long ago "vowed to revenge against as many of the sex as shall come into my power" (L 31:143), which now fuels his compulsion to destroy Clarissa's filial piety.

Clarissa's friends and family, and the reader, whom these characters also represent, contemplate in the dying Clarissa an aesthetic idea that is born from grief alone. In appearing as the tragic spectacle of loss, in which Clarissa's virtue triumphs, Clarissa is yet a bare, translucent abstraction of the possible, which, in and of itself, is impossible to reproduce except as meaning. Ellman's comparison of the fatal hunger strike in 1981 of ten Irish Republican prisoners with the apparently willful starvation of the dying Clarissa Harlowe is helpful in showing that, like the imprisoned hunger-strikers whose starving "bodies were transformed into the images of meanings rather than the instruments of acts" (71-2), the fate of Clarissa's raped and heartbroken body is that its ruin should be viewed as the mortal threshold in which culture aspires and through which an enculturated goodness passes in reproducing the images of life which inform life. Clarissa's character terminates in an image of virtue liberated from the empirical and fragmentary material-

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

historical base which is represented, in part, by the novel's epistolary exchange and which constitutes the social consensus of rights and privileges, of codes and mores, through which Clarissa found herself unable to act, an allegory of unfortunate philosophy—imprisoned and isolated from the world. Sadistically denied the means to live, to flourish, and biologically to reproduce according to the cultural ideal which had been so well fostered and maintained in her, Clarissa's legacy is transfixed in the spectacle of her rapture in death and reminds its viewers of the fortunate Fall, of death as supreme virtue. She must insist upon that death in order that her virtue—repeatedly doubted and denied—be seen as true, in being nothing but itself, absolute. Richardson's unwavering Christian argument insists upon an ideal of Protestant saintliness which Rita Goldberg identifies with the conduct manuals of the earlier seventeenth century. These "offered...a sturdy, practical Christianity in which belief and practice were thoroughly intertwined;" however, the subsequent "separation of the Christian code from the ordinary business of marketplace and workshop gave the notion of spirituality a new apartness" (47). Consequently, it may be possible to date the "spiritualization" and idealization of women from this period, when the separation of traditional virtues from practical life became more evident, a phenomenon, which, as Goldberg notes, Raymond Williams observes is especially reflected in Richardson's novel.[9]

In starving themselves the Irish Republicans became allegorical beings, reduced in the singular obsessive point of the fast to the fact of their starvation. Clarissa too is

---

[9] See Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (St. Albans, Herts.:Paladin, 1975) 84.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

become a specular figure, an emblem which turns on an inversion of her identity which is precisely suitable to the rhetorical turn, or irony, of the allegorical figure. Clarissa, unable to live out her virtuous, rather exemplary Protestant motto, to be "Rather useful than glaring," a prohibition to which Anna Howe refers in the book's first letter, shines at the threshold of death as a figure more glaring than useful. A once cheerful and virtuous girl full of innocent promise and good will becomes a spectacle of those qualities on trial, until, finally raped by Lovelace, she is at last completely unable to act in any sense that is not literary. In her final days, she hardly resembles the Protestant saint of good works; instead, her holiness is disturbing both to onlookers and readers in that it evokes the medieval practices of the fasting religious orders, a dark and a self-consuming confusion of pleasure and pain which appears as the terrible and macabre disintegration of the boundary that distinguishes nature and art. Donnalee Frega, who treats the question of hunger or starvation in Clarissa in terms of female hagiography, notes the heroine's "tendency to discuss her pain in terms of pleasure" (98). Clarissa's fasting, Frega writes, "from food, from vice, from love and from generosity—also constitutes a feast, no less physical than the sensual pleasure she had denied herself, 'Most happy has been to me my punishment here!--happy indeed!' " (98). In the final days before her death Clarissa carefully composes herself as an emblem of virtuous dying (much as a contemporary portraitist might conceive his subject in terms of signifying attributes to resemble an allegorical persona, posed and dressed in the attitude of an immediately recognizable sentiment) and is even self-conscious, somewhat embarrassed to be seen indulging the artistry of death with such a transparent liking, as when Belford interrupts her while she is

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

cheerfully employing her coffin as a writing table. That image of writing, which is ghastly to him in its breech of decorum, aspires to a kind of allegorical description, so clearly has she reduced her story to the argument by which it is written, and by which she writes herself—out of existence.

Fielding's Man of Mazzard Hill

At least since William Empson's influential defense, nearly fifty years ago, critics of Tom Jones have answered the challenge of readers who find its Man of the Hill as tiresome an interruption of their reverie in the novel's conduct of action as the didactic essays of its intrusive narrator. While several inquiries into its thematic and formal materials have yielded sound explanations as to why this episode, in which the reclusive old misanthrope recites his personal history to Partridge and Tom, *should* be regarded as essential to the reader's understanding and enjoyment of the novel, the very effort to redeem its merit is contingent upon the prior complaint of digressiveness. But while these corrective arguments are relatively current ones, the commonly established objection that the Man of the Hill is an episode "foreign and impertinent" to the novel's design cannot be said simply to reflect a previously dominant "critical taste nurtured on the conventions of bourgeois realism'," as one critic suggests (Miller 258). Certainly, the degree of reader tolerance for digressive narration varies with different periods in the history of prose fiction, but Fielding's novel was written prior to the entrenchment of expectations so wholly counter to the appeals of both epic and romance—from which both Mazzard Hill's

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

sage hermit and digressive narration are borrowed. And still, when Tom Jones was published, this digressive episode, introduced in Book VIII as "a very extraordinary adventure" and comprising five of its chapters, was perceived as a narrative flaw. Any reader, baffled by Fielding's literariness in drawing from past traditions the artificial modes with which to construct his modern "history," might as well fault the aesthetic rationale of the book's epic-romance structure, with "its variety of episodes and its constant extensions beyond the immediate scene" (258), if he is to object that one of its episodes behaves episodically. Here we might consider how Fielding's compositional standard permitted as much variety of incident as could be contained in the service of a unified argument. In his favorable review of Charlotte Lennox's The Female Quixote, for instance, Fielding is generally agreeable to the novel's picaresque tradition, but requires the modern writer to temper picaresque diffuseness by means of epic structure. He praises Lennox's novel as "a regular Story," which, though not quite perfectly so, pursues "Epic Regularity" well enough to distinguish it from "the loose unconnected Adventures in Don Quixote; of which you may transverse the Order as you please, without any Injury to the Whole" (Covent Garden 12-13). Given such a structure, it would seem that readers are not likely to complain of an incident's digressiveness unless it appears uniquely out of joint with how the various other episodes are linked up to one another and to the whole.

Since those, who, with Ian Watt, would call the Man of the Hill an "excrescence" must also agree that the author of Tom Jones generally "exhibits a remarkably fine control over a very complicated structure" (268), it is probably the relative effect of Fielding's accomplished weaving together of the novel's several, disparate elements, but not the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

reader's own critical limitation or bias, which disposes the reader to fault the author for appearing to stray from that control, by means of a comparatively lengthy and elaborate hiatus in the novel's material continuity. In the following response to Tom Jones, conveyed to Samuel Richardson by the two young daughters of Aaron Hill, what we find, then, is a wholehearted approval of Fielding's artful contrivances of plot made all the more pointed by the girls' displeasure with the Man of the Hill:

> It is an honest pleasure which we take in adding, that (exclusive of one wild, detach'd, and independent Story of a Man of the Hill, that neither brings on Anything, nor rose from Anything that went before it) All the changeful windings of the Author's Fancy carry on a course of regular Design; and end in an extremely moving Close, where Lives that seem'd to wander and run different ways, meet, All, in an instructive Center. (qtd. in Schonhorn 146)

I would propose, in contrast to the above complaint, that the instructive center of the novel is precisely illustrated by the "flaw" of its centrally located episode, which stands as an allegorical representation of the novelist's own argument throughout.

Following Empson, sensitive and informed analyses of the episode have gleaned such ample appreciations of its richness and complexity, that to persist any longer in dismissing the Man of the Hill as irrelevant would be as foolish as to pretend that difficulties for the common reader are removed, de facto, by the critic's mastery of the means to penetrate them. However, when Empson first argued that "far from being 'episodic' the incident is meant to be such an obvious pulling together of the threads that it

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

warns us to keep an eye on the subsequent moral development of Tom" (40-1), his emphasis upon any such intention to guide the reader fails to account for why, at the conclusion of the old man's recital, many of those readers are more distracted than guided (or, perhaps, like Partridge, have merely fallen asleep in their chairs). As Sheldon Sacks maintains in arguing that Fielding's cause is best served by showing how digression might perform an aesthetic service that could not otherwise be performed, "no 'discovery' of the relevance of ideas in a narrative digression negates the fact that it is a digression" (212). If one agrees with Empson that Tom Jones "certainly becomes more interesting if you attend to its thesis; even if the thesis retains the shimmering mystery of a mirage" (34), then to ignore or subdue the digressive function of the old man's recital might also result in losing a significant aspect of the "structure of ethical thought" (34) of which it is central.

Certainly the episode is unique, given the dynamic inversion which permits the perception of it, at one extreme, as irrelevant to the novel's plot and, at the other, as central to its argument (i.e., Empson's assertion of it as "the keystone at the middle of the arch" [41]). Indeed, the disproportionate measure of the interpolated tale's exaggerated length and scope of digression appears necessary to the purpose of deliberately abstracting important themes otherwise advanced implicitly through the novels' action, in parts and by degree, each significant event depending upon another in completing a complex structure of moral considerations. Thus critics have noted that the Man of the Hill episode functions as a paradigm or interior parody of moral views that reflect the major concerns of the novel (Coley). Its tale within a tale, operating in alternately exclusive and inclusive ways, enters Tom's story midway to divide schematically the novel's structure into poles

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of action and idea, which, set in reflective, parallel relation to one another, strain the reader's apprehension of the book's "instructive center" through the old Man's neither especially entertaining nor philosophically sound moral tale. To this I would add, that what the hermit and his tale provide of thematic relevance to the whole of Fielding's ethical argument is intrinsic to the episode's digressive format. As a disconnected incident of substantial elaboration in a novel that otherwise contrives to link up all of its "changeful windings," the Man of the Hill is set up as an anomaly as if deliberately to provoke questions about the nature and purpose of Fielding's design and its teleo-historiographical style of mimesis. We might even consider the episode's apparently flaw-like inclusion in light of what the narrator of Tom Jones observes about the design of human nature, of which "the finest composition as well as the finest china, may have a flaw in it; and this, I am afraid, in either case, is equally incurable; though, nevertheless, the pattern may remain of highest value" (68).

Where the narrator warns readers, "not too hastily to condemn any of the incidents in this history as impertinent and foreign to our main design, because thou dost not immediately conceive in what manner such incident may conduce to that design" (398), he urges us to regard its plot as the coherent development of a complex strategy of parts unified by the action of a single purpose. Even so, the Man of the Hill incident is so complete in itself that readers have thought to excise the whole of Tom's encounter with the hermit would require little or no adjusting of the incidents which precede or follow, let alone disturb the novel's overall structure (Goldknopf). As such, this one incident, notoriously blamed as failing to suit the action, is the one in which the very issue of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"design" is raised, and with no small irony: The Man of the Hill, at the conclusion of his narration, excludes from his singular worship of God and His Creation the one part which he regards as flawed—Mankind. However, Mankind, its nature, role, and fate, is, of course, the comic-epic subject of Fielding's history. How perfect that the isolated misanthrope, whose own history intends to argue the unworthiness of the human subject, should appear in the novel's middle section as the vehicle of a digression that readers are tempted to dismiss as most extraneous to its plot. By virtue of the hermit's "want of variety" (as Tom himself puts it), in living without human intercourse the hermit opposes the principle of inclusiveness that is demonstrated by his very presence in the history of Tom's life while he virtually argues his way out of that history.

As author, Fielding requires of his reader a prudent faith in reading his history of Tom Jones analogous to faith in Providence, likewise, a faith which would complement Fielding's intention to compose the world of his novel as a mirror of human history in the God-created world, which is, after all, a mystery to its human creatures—including the one creature who acts as the omniscient narrator of Tom's story. Because, quite unlike the Man of the Hill's story about himself, Fielding's story of Tom is exemplary for its appeal to a worldly and compassionate perspective, its effectiveness is contingent upon a pragmatic view of its subject. As such, the story's happy ending is revealed to be not only a consequence of its hero's virtuous action but also of his native-born temperament and other fortunate circumstances. The peculiarities that distinguish one "true" history from another are consistent with an outcome that must differ as well and that cannot, thereby, stand for the fulfillment of a purpose intended by the ongoing and universal condition of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

History, whose end remains obscure. Those who would insist that the episode of the Man of the Hill mars an otherwise perfect plot, might reconsider their criterion in light of what Fielding says about his novel, generally: "This work may indeed be considered as a great creation of our own; and for a little reptile of a critic to presume to find fault with any of its parts, without knowing the manner in which the whole is connected, and before he comes to the final catastrophe, is a most presumptuous absurdity" (398). Yet, however pleased the reader is to discover "when arriving at the final catastrophe" that the several parts are indeed suitably fitted together toward that end, the Man of the Hill and his lengthy story stand out as inconsequential in having neither mounted nor removed obstacles in the way of finally disclosing Tom's true identity and facilitating his union with Sophia. As Sacks argues in observing that we are not led to doubt the facts of the old man's history (consisting of character, motive, and circumstance in ways parallel but uniquely different from Tom's), but to question the quality of his insight and the validity of his emphasis and interpretation, the incident is typical of Fielding's use of digressive narration to open a window onto a world consisting of several alternate schemes to the path of his protagonists' destinies. These, adding variety to Fielding's novel without disturbing the logic and consistency of its main story, create "the illusion that his central characters exist in a 'separable' world peopled with men and women who neither influence nor are influenced by the central activities of the novel, though the inhabitants of this world are beset by problems, usually solved unsatisfactorily by them, similar to those faced by the important characters in the novel" (197).

But the device is not only at work in the Man of the Hill episode, it is also shown

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

in reverse as countered by the digressive narrator's unacknowledged self-limitation in presuming that his story can stand as universal pattern, that the trials of his private history ultimately pertain in their discoveries to the final truth revealed in his divine meditation, which, having "admitted [him] as it were into the conversation of this ineffable, incomprehensible Majesty," his "mind exercised in studies so high, so important, so glorious," make him privy to the very scope and purpose of Creation itself as a pattern of perfection antithetical to "so foolish and so vile an animal as mankind" (368). As seen from the ersatz sage's comprehensive view at the top of Mazzard Hill, contemptible, fallen humanity must by definition, and as proved by his tale, be excluded from his "conversation" with the elements of God's pristine order. In contrast, the reader's obscure sense of his tale's valid connection to Fielding's story of Tom mirrors in turn its narrator's and the reader's own limited apprehension in grasping the Creation of which human variety is indeed part. Such limitation admits to the whole of Fielding's enterprise a humility, which, discharged in the very effort to comprehend life's scope and variety, is a humility denied by the conclusiveness of Mazzard Hill's digressive narrator. Fielding selects the material of the Man of the Hill episode so carefully that its central figure, who can only falsely project a divine perspective in determining that mankind is the one exception to God's perfect design, is himself comparable to that "little reptile of a critic," mentioned above, who, presuming to know what should or should not suit Fielding's own intention, might exclude some part of its own design—and why then exclude the Man of the Hill narration?

The old man's story of his life is the only payment (but for a dram of brandy) he

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

has to offer Tom and Partridge in return for having been rescued by Tom from thieves, and, ironically, in view of his having chosen to live outside the society he loathes, it is one that engages him in a prolonged interaction with these two friendly visitors. Tom, curious to know the events which led to the man's strangely isolated condition, solicits his autobiography, but, finally, neither the recluse nor his life's story are of any material consequence: Fielding's two principal characters depart from his company as unaffected and unenlightened by it as if they had never met him; and, though he is certain that without Tom's brave intervention he would have been murdered, even conceding that his lonely retreat can no longer insure his protection against mankind, the old man will not budge from thinking the human race uniformly evil and his withdrawal from it a moral triumph. Since the episode begins and ends with violent skirmishes in which Tom behaves heroically, we see that Tom's innate compassion is unspoiled by any cynicism following his exile from Paradise Hall. He first saves the old man from his vicious attackers, and, afterward, upon their descent together from Mazzard Hill, Tom dares, once again, to risk his safety, now for the sake of Jenny Waters' release from the cruel Northerton. Here, however, the selfish misanthrope of Mazzard Hill coldly forgets his debt to Tom and, withholding assistance, instead sits idly by, thus proving himself to be rather ignoble in his assumed posture of moral superiority over the rest of mankind. Because each of these violent scenes demonstrates both human depravity in the character of base predators and human innocence in Tom's brave defense of the predators' victims, the old man's refusal to live among his fellow creatures appears illogical, the consequence of his being blindly driven by fear; ignoring the evidence of Tom's behavior, he chooses against goodness,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

favoring only proofs of evil in the service of his naturally suspicious and fearful disposition.

Though points of significant comparison are made between the eccentric stranger's tale of youthful misadventure and Tom's unhappy circumstances, since neither the old Man nor his tale bear any material relation to the unfolding of the main action, the episode intervenes to create the illusion that the plot of Fielding's novel is temporarily arrested. The reader, treated in this interim to the hermit's condensed full-length history, with its own beginning, middle, and end, is obviously meant to compare it with Fielding's main enterprise but is also made to observe two of Fielding's principle characters, Tom and Partridge, listen and respond to the hermit's tale as "readers" themselves, and, even, as in the case of Partridge's own intrusively digressive ghost story, as readers who respond to tales with related tales of their own observation. Because the episode's scene of action is primarily that of telling, hearing, and interpreting a story, what the hermit's tale provides of thematic relevance to the novel's didactic purpose is connected as well to Fielding's interest in the social context of narrative and readerly activity.

The episode's narrator/reader paradigm is also inflected by its historical context—the 1745 Rebellion—an historical-narrative frame introduced and treated primarily in the novel's middle books. Suffice it to say that the hermit's anti-Jacobite sentiment connects agreeably with Tom's own, the hermit's youthful participation in Monmouth's 1685 insurrection the evidence of a continuing saga now reflected in Tom's decision to fight against the current rebel forces. The topic provides the occasion for Fielding indirectly to indulge his own famous opinions on the matter, here astonishment at

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the enduring "madness," suggestive of romantic infatuation and excess, infecting Protestant-Jacobitism. Dismayed to learn now from Tom of its most recent manifestation in the '45, the old Man "fell down on his knees and blessed God, in a loud Thanksgiving Prayer, for having delivered him from all Society with Human Nature, which could be capable of such monstrous Extravagances" (363).

This sweeping political-historical connection between Tom's story and the hermit's tale, which gives their unique stories an epic scope, makes evident, as one critic notes, Fielding's intention "to sublimate the individual character, such as Tom at a particular time (the 1745 Rebellion) to 'Man in History'" (Takasi 42). If, as such, Fielding "wants the whole work to be a survey of all human experience and, as a result, to make the reader more comprehensively understand his moral aim" (42), the contemporary frame also positions the individual reader of Tom's story as that of a participant in the larger History mirrored in the novel. Fielding's reader is urged to view his story's plot as unfolding along the larger continuum of a plot he shares with the novel's fictional characters, a scope of action that is represented most broadly in the Man of the Hill episode to distinguish it from other incidents in the novel which critics also treat as digressive (though not especially problematic) and find it useful to compare: Most notably, these are the narrations of Broadbrim the Quaker and of Mrs. Fitzpatrick, in which are echoed, respectively, the novel's themes of paternal authority, filial devotion, and marriage.

Broadbrim's cruel account of his daughter's elopement is both much too brief and pointed in its satirical profile of the contemptible Quaker and his irritating effect on Tom, to warrant any complaint, or even much notice, of its digressive intrusion. Even so, like

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the Man of the Hill narration, the Quaker's recital "neither satisfies expectations previously established, sets up probability for future action, nor is referred to later in the novel" (Sacks 194). This, however, cannot be said of Mrs. Fitzpatrick's unhappy marital history, which, told to Sophia, is yet unfolding and here provides essential background to an emerging sub-plot, introducing minor characters who do influence the outcome of Tom's story. However, as Henry Knight Miller has shown, the Man of the Hill tale and that of Harriet Fitzpatrick are thematically comparable since both warn of worldly deception and pose the same crisis of trust in their respective narrators' counseling of despair to the frustrated hero and heroine when each is most vulnerable. More than tales of warning, these histories would tempt their hearers "to doubt the good governance of the world, to attribute all to Fortune" (267). In arguing that the aged misanthrope and Harriet Fitzpatrick play similar narrative roles, Miller argues that the Man of the Hill episode is consistent with the novel's repeated pattern of associations and contrasts, but this ignores the difference between these tales that make the latter no less digressive for being part of that pattern: Unlike the hermit, who intervenes in no way to influence the main action and whose story does not advance a minor plot sequence, Harriet Fitzpatrick is an instrumental character whose personal history intersects with that of Tom and Sophia. She is the cousin and girlhood companion of Sophia, whom the latter meets coincidentally on the road to London while each is anxiously fleeing domestic oppression. Overjoyed to find each another, they naturally exchange their tales of woe, and, since the reader already knows why Sophia is on the run, her cousin's circumstances are revealed in detail by the recital of her marital history. Thus, the reader learns along with Sophia that

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Harriet is in flight from an abusive husband but unlike Sophia discovers that she is escaping from the same Mr. Fitzpatrick, who, in pursuit of her, had earlier burst upon Tom and Jenny Waters at Upton Inn. Harriet's unhappy tale explains Mr. Fitzpatrick's behavior in the previous scene, while contributing to the reader's understanding of Harriet's reason for assisting Sophia's escape from marriage to Blifil, and, later, for changing her mind once she concludes that Tom is a rake and that Squire and Mrs. Western would reward her for implementing Sophia's return home. For what her history reveals of Harriet's vanity and duplicity toward an understanding of her future actions toward Tom and Sophia, and, because, at the point of its recital, the past story of her life is yet advancing toward its resolution in the same plot-frame as the novel's main action, Mrs. Fitzpatrick's narration is too well knit into the main story of *Tom Jones* to serve as an example by which to correct the digressiveness of the Man of the Hill tale. His is the past history of a long resolved fate, that of a moral pessimist, who, once worldly, is now as fixedly detached from the scene of human affairs as he is from the main action of Fielding's story.

The loosely established parallels between Tom's life and that of the hermit's tale (in which he is himself the youthful protagonist) function as points of balance, less substantive than formal, and help to construct the illusion of a universal point of reference in true history, outside Fielding's novel, by which to make emphatic the more significant contrasts of moral character which culminate in the opposed tales' antithetical conclusions about human nature. While these are differences that arise in continuing to draw for the reader a clearer picture of Tom's native virtue, the reader's focus is turned from

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

immediate engagement in the particulars of Tom's story to consider more abstractly the general issues of human destiny, moral obligation, and redemption, which frame both stories. The time of the episode's placement within the action is crucial to its paradigmatic function, distancing the reader from the main action just at the point when the question of resolution for the main action looms largest. Between knowing how and why Tom came to be estranged from Paradise Hall and speculating about the hero's future, the reader is positioned with the commencement of the Man of the Hill episode to consider the outcome of the very design into which that interpolated tale now intrudes with its parallel scheme of misadventure and woe. The hermit's story, meant to explain and morally justify his path into seclusion is told when Tom is most despondent and self-pitying in his own involuntary exile: he introduces himself to the recluse only as "the most unhappy of mankind" (341). The episode begins with Tom and Partridge stranded in the cold dead of night at the foot of Mazzard Hill, the latter daunted now by his fear of ghosts, and the former, given to the more genteel and poetical experience of sublimely pleasing dread, desiring to enjoy a picturesquely sublime reflection of his own melancholy: "Partridge, I wish I was at the top of this hill; it must certainly afford a most charming prospect, especially by this light; for the solemn gloom which the moon casts on all objects is beyond expression beautiful, especially to an imagination which is desirous of cultivating melancholy ideas" (336). A mutual identification is set up between Tom and the stranger, the former urgently curious to discover some meaningful revelation in the old man's history, the latter remarking sympathetically to the unhappy youth, "I must say, in what little hath dropped from you, there appears to be some parity in our fortunes: I hope,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

however, yours will conclude more successfully" (341). Their seeming parity is reversed, however, as it becomes clear that the stranger's history reveals causes quite different in nature from those of Tom's present misery and cannot stand as a universal pattern by which either to instruct Tom or even to justify its narrator's cynical withdrawal from human society. While the account of his earlier life's desperate and unethical solutions in coping with miserable circumstances is generally pertinent to Tom's dilemma as he flounders between country and city, now intent to remedy his fate, now overwhelmed by grief, at the end of the episode it is left for the reader, not for Tom, to conjecture that, unlike the hermit in his youth, Tom's nature is disposed toward the balance of reason and passion that is crucial to discovering the happy resolution of his own story.

Rejecting the stranger's conclusion that human nature is evil, for instance, Tom, though unfairly suffering the consequences of Blifil's betrayal and Allworthy's misjudgement, is not tempted to blame his present unhappiness on their failures, and he has heard the old man's story with a warm heart but also a clear head: he disinterestedly counters that such a sweeping conclusion is unwarranted by the narrow evidence of the old man's limited experiences, with, moreover, only the worst kinds of people, further, that because even an individual's wickedness is oftentimes accidental rather than characteristic, bad behavior alone is not sufficient proof of a single man's nature, let alone of all humanity; and, finally, that, in citing the former deceptions of his friends as reason to condemn all men, the old man fails to see that he himself was not an unfortunate victim of their depravity, but, in choosing his companions imprudently, he was the active agent of his own decline. Since the reader is as capable of Tom in discovering the facts of the tale against the teller's false,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

self-serving conclusions, what matters is not that the reader should agree with Tom—after all, what choice does the reader have? More important is that Tom's sagacity as a reader of the Man-of-the-Hill's tale is on display for Fielding's own reader to see, not merely as further revelation of his hero's virtuous potential, but in demonstration that histories are moral arguments, the best of which are faithful to the balanced operations of reasoning, compassion, and faith—qualities reflected in Tom's own readerly disposition, if not in the story he has just heard.

Wolfgang Iser views the episode of the Man of the Hill as one of those pauses for reflection between the novel's significant events, which Fielding promises to provide the reader as "an opportunity of employing that wonderful sagacity, of which he is master, by filling up these vacant spaces of time with his own conjectures" (qtd in Iser 51). Fielding's reader, generally speaking, "is not merely told a story; he has constantly to observe and deduce" (51), and Iser identifies Fielding's technique of reversal and contrast as one which succeeds in making sure the reader is "sufficiently activated" (51). But he discovers that the Man of the Hill episode is uniquely problematic in its function as a vacant space in the text. In choosing it as an example of how reversal and contrast work to increase the reader's "obligation to form his own judgement," Iser must concede that the episode really doesn't work toward that end, after all. Indeed the tale "transforms the intention of the main action into its very opposite, in order to give the reader a clear view of what he is supposed to see," as when "the Man of the Hill reduces human nature to incurable corruption, at [the] very moment the hero realizes its 'utmost diversity'"; but, "If this intercalated story of the Man of the Hill is tedious—as many readers find—the reason lies

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

in the fact that the contrast is too clear-cut. The conclusion suggested to the reader is predetermined, and practically leaves no room for him to maneuver" (50).

Iser's critique, not unlike any other serious study of the incident's features, reminds us that the reader of Fielding's novel is bound to be frustrated if he resists its author's robust moralistic drive—Fielding's clear didactic intention, as William Empson noted, in devising the plot of *Tom Jones* to illustrate a theory of ethics. Because the contrast between Fielding's own lofty moral purpose and that of Mazzard Hill's philosopher is telescoped in the latter's intercalated tale, the novel's diffusely employed technique of reversal and contrast, as drawn both within and across its several episodes, is abstracted and concentrated—an aspect of this episode's distinctly paradigmatic function—into a representation of the technique's operation; the reader here observes this novelist's method of reversal and contrast in action instead of actively participating in the method. If he is led by the nose to its conclusion, then Fielding's method, on the whole, is indeed a rhetorical device, which, operating through an appeal to the reader's pleasure in his own powers of critical insight and assessment, is nevertheless structured in its epistemological dynamic to serve the conclusions the author himself intends. This overtly didactic function of the episode exposes, deliberately, I think, the novel's overall construction of argument and elaboration in order to assert—despite what is seemingly contradicted by the episode—that readers must critically limit the extent to which a fictional design is structured to govern their judgement and must require, both of their "historians" and themselves, diligent attention to the non-fictional world as their primary source of reference.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Martin Battestin, asserting that the prospect atop Mazzard Hill makes emblematic Fielding's central argument of prudence, observes that Tom's own gaze from the hill's summit at the episode's conclusion, to the south and to the north, allegorizes the meaning of his past and the problem of his future. The reader, if not Tom, is being made aware that Tom's quest for Sophia (i.e. for "wisdom") is identical to the maturation process that will come to fruition once Tom is able to temper his passionate nature—thus resulting in union with Sophia. Battestin shows that Tom's survey from the hilltop of that vast terrain below renders in spatial terms the association of prudence with distant things—the remembering of things past and the foreseeing of things to come being crucial to the operation of judgement in estimating the consequences of one's actions. In contrast, the sage hermit's literal distancing of himself from the very scene of action and consequence in the world, in order to avoid the risk of its dangers and the pain of disappointment, is a rash, escapist solution, a false prudence, for its effort to obliterate the very potential for error is a destructive act of hubris, not a tempering of the inclination to hubris; as such his alienation is an impossible, pompous and ridiculous attempt to distance himself from his essentially human motivations.

Hindsight and foresight, the subtle uses of memory and reasoning toward a realistic assessment of the actual conditions that both restrict and make possible a desired end, is relevant to matters, which, raised by the narrator in his chapter essay to the Book (VIII) that includes the Man of the Hill, especially concern the aesthetic judiciousness of the novelist in determining the imagined limits of his fiction. He rejects for his purpose as historian the epic tradition's inclusion of the marvelous—its incredible creatures,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

supernatural beings, and impossible feats—but promises scenes and characters that impress the reader as both possible and probable, able to be imagined as existing within the actual world, even if outside his normative range of observation and experience. In retaining the epic as his model, while correcting its irrational excesses, the narrator agrees to include the marvelous only in terms of what his modern reader would find credible, however extraordinary. With an appropriately satirical bent, then, what Fielding offers is the strange, hoary apparition of a white-haired, bearded ancient, who has inadvertently rejected his own humanity in high-minded contempt for the species to which he belongs, and, who, having eschewed all contact with his kind, except for a housekeeper (whose appearance, suitably, resembles that of a fairy-tale witch) covers his unusually large frame in animal skins and only walks by night—a demon figure to the locals.

Fielding conveys his distaste for romantic forays into the superstitious and the supernatural by including in his story this learned ascetic, who, having ensconced himself in the woods in order that he might avoid human intercourse and only contemplate divine things, represents in his misanthropy that affiliation with both sub- and super-human qualities which Fielding's own ethos as a storyteller rejects. The Man of the Hill evokes the mythic and the legendary in his mixed resemblance to the unworldly folkloric and all-too-human melancholic types after which he is fashioned, a combined hermit-priest and embittered former world-traveler, whose wisdom instructs the young hero on demonic forces, or, as an analogue of Virgil's Cumean Sybil, a seer envisioning for the reader a seedy urban underground which forecasts the hero's passage into London. But Fielding cannot be said to employ these conventions other than to parody them. Tom, shown to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

have no use for what this character offers, is neither enchanted nor tricked by the recluse and his tale. Fielding's hermit, steeped in the disciplines of philosophy and theology, was led to his bookish interests by a repugnance for the world which is summarily dismissed by Tom as wrongheaded. In his dire refusal to consider the possibility of human goodness, the misanthrope demonstrates, on the one hand, the untempered disbelief of a purely empiricist bias earlier derided by Fielding's narrator in remarking of those who "have so little Historic or Poetic Faith that they believe nothing to be either possible or probable, the like to which hath not occurred to their own Observation" (302). Yet, mule-like in his egoistic insistence, he cannot see that Tom's goodwill towards him is evidence contrary to his misanthropic assertions, as when he also disregards the significant instances of human kindness and virtue related in his own story as a youth.

Finally, the old man is an emblem of the unenlightened fatalist, controlled by the dark fears and distrust, which, shaping his private suspicions, are reflected back in the superstitious imaginings of the folk who mistake him, in his obscurity, for a ghost or goblin, as Partridge first does. A figure borrowed from myth and romance, but disciplined as a fictional object by the rules of probability and possibility which are the base of Fielding's "history," the Man of the Hill is summarily exposed, stripped of his demystifying effects; his idealism, the wildness of his appearance, and the euphoria of his spiritual meditation are symptomatic of the ultimately alienated condition which permits to excess the quite ordinary human tendency to skepticism and despair. Even his litany of the cruelties and deceptions which led him to justify the extreme estrangement of himself from society is far from exotic in its circumstance and detail. A sort of reformed *picaro*, he is a

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

gentleman's son and former Oxonian of no little privilege, and his decline as related in his story of petty thievery, sexual debasement, gambling, betrayal and drunken debauchery are typical of the vices which might tempt his ilk.

The sage old man's prosaically fatuous core is also exposed through the humorous interruptions of his tale by Partridge, who, before he was able gradually to perceive harmlessness in the man's genteel if rather austere manner, at first "no sooner saw the Gentleman, than the Strangeness of his Dress infused greater Terrors into that poor Fellow than he had before felt..."(340). Partridge's frequent and insipid intrusions upon points of irrelevant detail (or in urging more luridly entertaining ones) succeeds in deflating the hermit's pompously toned recital, and these intrusions continually elicit from the well-mannered Tom endearing expressions of gentle exasperation and good-humored pleas for Partridge's attentive silence—to no avail. An enthusiastic but distracted auditor, the indecorous Partridge is likewise an amusingly incoherent story teller in this scene. When hearing that the school chum from whom the hermit had once stolen money did not pursue legal charges, Partridge responds off the mark in concurring upon the wisdom of that decision: He himself would be afraid of seeing the ghost of any man hanged upon his evidence! To prove that such a fear is indeed warranted Partridge relates the story of a friend who was haunted by a man he helped to convict for stealing a horse, only inadvertently mentioning the unfairness of the trial. What Partridge manages to prove is that his friend, a guilt-ridden and heavy drinker, mistook in the dark a white calf for the dead man's spirit. The foolish tale, a kind of shaggy-dog story, elicits loud laughter from Tom, in giddy relief from his having politely listened to the hermit's solemnly controlled

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

history. In more subtle ways, as Samuel Longmire notes, Partridge's ridiculous anecdote provides a significant ethical perspective on the Man of the Hill. Partridge's fear of ghosts leads him both to ignore and misconstrue the plainest of facts regarding his friend's besotted vision, making it impossible for Partridge to see that the tale he has told can only contradict his own argument that ghosts exist and that it suffices merely to prove that his fear alone has convinced him of their reality. Likewise, the old man's pessimistic application of his own story, generalizing from several bad examples that mankind is wholly depraved, but also having ignored what he actually relates, besides, of his own and others noble impulses, "arrives at a conclusion that is untenable from the evidence of his narrative; however, the old Man with his education and experience, seems more culpable morally that the simple Partridge" (425).

If we compare, not the separate histories of Tom and the Man of the Hill, but their distinctly opposed narrators, then Fielding's moral authority and noble purpose as a story-teller is proved by virtue of his own hero's rejection of the old Man's dubious wisdom and cynical interpretation of human nature. The hermit, though claiming to have been long redeemed and satisfied in his spiritual quest, unwittingly reveals that his misanthropic retreat is the final error in a history of habitual errors of judgement he has made, concluding in the total solipsism which at last makes his story irrelevant—not only to Fielding's exasperated reader—but to Tom, the one certain member of the hermit's audience, with whom the youthful, despairing protagonist of the hermit's tale might have the most in common. We see behind his ecstatic vision of the Good a foolish, self-righteous skeptic, enslaved by his fearful contempt for natural human weakness and frailty.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Contrary to what the hermit would have Tom believe, virtue, we are shown, is not manifested through the withholding of one's prudent participation in the profane business of human affairs but is precisely defined in terms of such participation. The story teller of Tom's quest for his place in the world offers to his reader a comedy of contemporary life, which, on a scale of epic proportion, shows what virtue is both possible and probable within the world when the best of human nature, however incurably flawed, is recognized and trusted to discover its rightful course. Fielding's reader, thus invited to participate in Tom's fictional "history" and called upon to act imaginatively with the same power of insight, emotion, and judgment as would be required in the actual arena of human affairs, is practically disposed toward a moral contemplation and understanding that religious and philosophical meditation in the abstract cannot alone provide.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

CHAPTER FIVE

Saving Poetry in Aurora Leigh:

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Novel Approach to Biblical Ends

An enormously popular book in its day, Aurora Leigh was repeatedly issued for decades after its first printing, until just past the turn of the twentieth century, when its readership all but completely vanished, along with any significant critical view of the work. Were it not for the successful establishment in recent decades of a feminist academic discourse which acts, in part, as subsidiary of the larger, increasingly dominant sociological disciplining of aesthetic mediation, current interest in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse novel (or novel poem) would no doubt be as slight as would editions be rare, the occasional scholar having to blow the dust off a crumbling library volume of the 1900 edition of her Complete Works in order to read the poem at all. As such, the feminist critical and curricular attention paid to Barrett Browning's most ambitious poem can hardly be said to redeem aesthetic interest for having retrieved the work from oblivion. For, whether in spite of or because of its feminist recuperation, and unlike the perennially engaging romance from which it borrows, [1] the once-beloved poetess' nine-book, 10,058-line, semi *Bildungs*-, semi *Kunstler*-, spasmodically lyric, blank-verse, autobiographical *roman* of a Victorian poet-heroine hardly invites the relish of today's reader of novels, and

---

[1] Aurora Leigh, as numerous critics have observed, appears to borrow variously from a number of contemporary French and English novels, which, by the evidence of her letters, Barrett Browning is known to have read with relish: Madame de Stael's Corinne; George Sand's Consuelo; Charlotte Bronte's Vilette and Jane Eyre; Eugene Sue's Les Mysteres de Paris; Honore Balzac's Le Cousin Pons. Cora Kaplan refers to the poem as "an elaborate collage of typical themes or motifs of the novels and long poems of the 1840's and 1850's (iii).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

is especially unappealing to the connoisseur of verse (an ever more rare sort of reader), who might enjoy a long narrative poem, but would find this one difficult, if not ridiculous, to engage with other than camp enthusiasm. "We laugh, we protest, we complain—it is absurd, it is impossible, we cannot tolerate this exaggeration a moment longer," writes Virginia Woolf. But, *we*, who live a century after Woolf, most likely cannot, any longer, as Woolf claimed she and her contemporaries could at least still do, "read to the end enthralled" (I.215).

By now largely regarded as "less a poem than an historical document," Aurora Leigh is more often than not presented to its current examiners as useful for studying "the subtle history of woman's invisibility in literature" (Reynolds x). Relevant to interest in the oppression and resistance of nineteenth-century women writers "just beginning to come to terms with the exclusions and prohibitions that hedged about their aspirations" (Reynolds x), Aurora Leigh narrowly thrives in its academic environment as a woman's book, written by a woman, for women, and, especially, for women writers. As such, the radiant laurel which once crowned its author in her day is now quite as tarnished as when Woolf observed, some seventy years ago, "...fate has not been kind to Mrs. Browning as a writer. Nobody reads her, nobody discusses her, nobody troubles to put her in her place" (I.210).

Yet, as any campus bookstore browser might instantly discover upon glancing at advertisements printed on one of its many recent paperback editions, Aurora Leigh was once praised by such important contemporaries as John Ruskin, who proclaimed it the "perfect poetical expression of the Age" (XXXVI.247-8), and George Eliot, who

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

marveled, "No poem [of our time] embraces so wide a range of thought and emotion, or takes such complete possession of our nature" (306). Algernon Swinburne at the end of the century remembers its indelible impression for "any lover of poetry who at the time was old enough to read it," a "unique work of audaciously feminine and ambitiously impulsive genius....one of the longest poems in the world, and...not a dead line in it" (XVI.4). Such large pronouncements of recognition, made in the era for which it was written, evoke the extravagant and involuted epochal self-consciousness out of which Aurora Leigh builds its own apology for the epic poem as a formal version of currently lived history—Barrett Browning's fictional Aurora representing the ambition to represent the age, the "age" an abstraction for the fleeting present, wherein the modern poet-heroine stations with didactic fervor both the social relevance and aesthetic value of her ambition. [2]

Like Baudelaire, perhaps, Barrett Browning's exemplary poet aspires to a difficult modernity, which, pertaining to "a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present," is yet an attitude toward the ceaseless movement of the ephemeral, the transitory, and the

---

[2] While the problem of accommodating poetry to contemporary subject matter had been a topic of concern in literary circles, it pertained less to an abstract historical discontinuity between present and past than to the class distinction between cultures, popular and elite, an economically and politically empowered Protestant middle class, which had risen by means of a perceived break with antique modes and an intellectual minority of aesthetes and scholars for whom the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian philosophical and literary traditions provided the primary materials of civilized continuity. Matthew Arnold, who, in his Preface to Poems (1853), rejected the notion of the poet leaving the past for matters of present import, loathes the argument as an appeal to novelty and popular taste. Arthur Clough, aware that "people much prefer Vanity Fair and Bleak House," urges poets to write more "of the actual, palpable things with which our every-day life is concerned," if they are "to gain the ear of the multitude" (from Victorian Scrutinies 154-5, qtd. in McSweeney x).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

contingent, which "makes it possible to grasp the 'heroic' aspect of the present moment." Indeed, "it is the will to 'heroize' the present" (Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 310). Of course, there is a problem with this comparison of Barrett Browning and her French contemporary: Barrett Browning's method for heroizing the present, at least as explained in Aurora's argument in favor of writing the present-day era in epic-verse form, is so literal in its aspiration to make contemporary life heroic by writing about it in an imitation of heroic poetry, and, thereby, to modernize epic genre, and so contingent upon nostalgia for the heroic past as to nullify the effort. For, while urging the modern poet to represent the age as it is, Aurora yet invokes (explicitly, in Book V) the long dead verse-epic as the best means for doing so. Thus, in so far as the present is heroized by representing it in epic form, a genre of mythic-historical presentation associated with the past, the present is self-consciously reborn as an "age," a period of historically prescient relevance, and, being made discontinuous with itself, thereby, is actually removed into the past-time continuum of an irretrievable eternity.

How then does epic heroism constitute in the scheme of Aurora's modern poetics the exemplary vehicle for transfiguring the present, especially as epic is framed in Aurora Leigh by a genre of self-presentation, the personal memoir and journal, which, in turn, legitimizes the lyrical inscribing of the era as self? Its autobiographical mode and the lack of irony with which Aurora Leigh wears its sublime inversions, blank pentameters, and purple similes amplify the sincerity of its attempt to be modern, to be in the milieu of the moment, a sincerity which only dates the poem and further obscures our sense of the pressures to which it was responding, social and aesthetic. Clumsy and earnest in its

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

passionate adaptation of Miltonic genre and style to material which also incorporates the newsy currents of sensational pulp, Barrett Browning's hybrid of epic and novel concurs with the debased mysticism, which entertained the affluent Victorian middle-class with pious images of its success—Coventry Patmore's domesticated angel sufficing as exemplary metaphor for such edifying flights of fancy. As a popularizer of sorts, Barrett Browning is fascinated in Aurora Leigh by a contemporary, secular spiritualism that floated its icons in a vulgar dissemination of romantic sentiment; as a believing Christian and scholar, devoted to the ancient Greek, Latin, and Hebraic texts of her spiritual discipline and faith, she attempts to justify the difficult ways of True Poetry to a Christian nation fleeing the visionary source of it cultural inheritance—even as Milton once boldly adapted sacred Scriptural history to a pagan literary-historical genre, upon justifying the ways of God to men.

Conceived in the spirit of accommodation, Aurora Leigh aspires to redirect modern despair in unregenerate transitoriness through a narrative of return and retrieval, a movement of recurrence not only associated with lyrical poetry's aural, rhythmic, and figural repetitions, but which also stands in principle for tradition itself. While the poem is sensitive to the spiritual discomforts of the modern, its representation of that discomfort is represented in the conflict between the opposed lovers, Aurora and Romney, she a romantic esthete, he a scientific social reformer. The distinction and opposition between the empirical-rational masculine figure and the aesthetic-affective feminine one are equally symptomatic of the renting apart of a once unified historical purpose, both within and away from the spiritual tradition to which it is metaphysically bound and to which it must

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

turn again for guidance. It is that return to which the return of epic refers in the poem. Tradition, for which the epic is emblem in Aurora Leigh, operates self-referentially as the retrieval that occurs at the border of loss. It preserves meaning by imitative repetition, conducted in sequence, as an order of time—not simultaneously, as an order of space—so that change is countered by a model of memory and anticipation, of meanings which last in the duration of temporal movement through differences, which are marked in past, present, and future terms of passage. Further, the ceaseless and paradoxical self-referentiality upon which the sense of an objectively real historical continuity depends is abstracted in the purely conceptual realm of eternity and everlastingness, the absolute point of reference for the meaning of "meaning." Generally speaking, the abstractions "eternal" and "everlasting" pertain, as such, to the idealized endurance of trans-temporal memory and anticipation to which images of afterlife aspire for palpable sense—in allegory, emblem, symbol, and metaphor—upon picturing deathless, undifferentiated joy or pain, heaven or hell. And it is precisely in the ecstatic evocation of the everlasting and eternal heavenly afterlife—specifically, in the New Jerusalem of the final apocalypse—which is precisely where the plot of Barrett Browning's contemporary story ends, triumphantly, much to the consternation of twentieth-century feminist interpreters.

The hero and heroine's ecstatic lovers' reunion is eclipsed by reference to that static, Scriptural representation of ecstasy, which, in turn, stands for the continually redeemed and redeeming power of their Christian faith. The concluding stanzas of Aurora Leigh conflate the ending of Aurora's personal story and the Book of Revelation in a way consistent with the religious defense of modern poetry, according to which Aurora's

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

personal story is structured. In her study of how biblical typology influenced the structures of Victorian autobiography, which is relevant to my position that Aurora Leigh argues the salvation of true Poetry through its imitation of biblical structure, Heather Henderson reminds us that, in the Bible,

> two time schemes are at work, one based on narrative sequence and one based on recurrence. In the former, meaning develops through progressive accretion of new information; in the latter, patterns of repetition determine significance. The point about repetition in both Hebrew scripture and Christian typology is that in each case the layering of history augments meaning (6).

Even as biblical structure underwrites the argument in Aurora Leigh for art to address the contemporaneous scene in terms relevant to the work of salvation in history, so too the poem asserts the Bible as the ever-contemporary historical paradigm for meaning-making activity. In re-presenting its Scriptural source, Barrett Browning's narrative does not compete with the Bible, openly or subversively; instead, the translating, poetic subject reiterates and, thereby, continues the tradition of the original, sacred text, embodying in her own interpretive activity—i.e., the writing of a book—the Bible's self-transfiguring motive. As the type of "True Poet," Aurora's character defers to the selfless poetic identity, or historically continuous and communal Self, of the Christo-centric narrative which enables her to write meaningfully. Indeed, Aurora's characterization is rooted in the mythology of the impersonal, universal Poet of whom the individual poet is a particular, ephemeral manifestation, each embodiment of the True Poet

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

distinguished by his native-born temperament as well as by his era's distinctive peculiarities of faith, doubt, and need. As such, the principles of poetic election which apply to Aurora's development and success simply do not pertain to ordinary women writers trafficking in the literary business, and to read Aurora Leigh as if it were championing the right of women to pursue the career of author is to misread the poem. The poet, as Aurora, is rather like the disguised deity of myth and legend, whose mundane form is sometimes shed to reveal a terrible splendor, so that Barrett Browning's pseudo-autobiographical poem proceeds as a discourse in self-erasure, wherein the personal is subsumed in the greater order of being, ecstatically, as conveyed in Shelley's West Wind, and by Keats' "negative capability," and to which T. S. Eliot refers in noting that the artist seeks to escape his personality through the making of his art. As such, Aurora's and Romney's final recitation of Scripture from the Book of Revelation performs symbolically the poetical self-erasure which eschews solipsistic autonomy and makes it possible for the poet's speech to resonate meaningfully because linked to a larger design. The historical process of redemption, as with the process of critical self-evaluation, is indeed erased in the biblical scene of Final Judgement, which configures in totality the final eclipsing of even the true Poet's speech, and since Barrett Browning writes figuratively, not as a novelist but as a poet, the concluding scene of revelation in Aurora Leigh stands for the redemptive end of poetry, which she argues throughout.

Where its chronologically ordered narration shifts from memoir to journal halfway through the poem, thereby dividing the poem into the temporal halves—past and present—of a continuous progression of events and creating a threshold through which

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the events of the previous half may be reflected in those of the current half, Aurora Leigh imitates the disjunction of the Bible's Old and New Testaments which makes possible the self-reflection of its typological narrative. [3] The key resemblance between the Bible as epic and Barrett Browning's own novel-poem (the idea of epic also being mirrored in the "long poem" authored by Aurora, the writing of which Aurora reports in Book V, upon just having finished and prepared it for publishing) resides not in symbolic parallels which may be drawn between incidents or characters in the poem and similar ones in the Bible. It consists rather in the prophetic, harmonizing modes of opposition, resemblance, and transfiguration upon which Aurora Leigh and the Bible depend as narratives of salvation. The typological mirroring of the New Testament in the Old, the doubling-up of narrative figures which enables us to imagine a history that repeats in order simultaneously to progress, secures for Barrett Browning a model of poetic story-telling as redemptive activity. The "new," in which innocence is redeemed, yet turns for proof in seeing itself foreshadowed in past events, in the "old," dark and terrible remains of error and grief from which the present marks a point of departure and resolution. Like the typologically structured spiritual autobiographies which it resembles, fictional Aurora's life is a model Christian story in which "certain motifs predominate: Edenic childhoods and lost Edens, fall and exile, journey or pilgrimage, crisis, conversion, renewal and return" (Henderson

---

[3] See George P. Landow's study of biblical typology as a dominant model in the poetry, painting, and criticism of the Victorian period, Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art, and Thought (Boston, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980). Landow defines typology as "a Christian form of scriptural interpretation that claims to discover divinely intended anticipations of Christ and His dispensation in the laws, events, and people of the Old Testament," adding, "When we modern readers fail to recognize allusions to such typology, we deprive many Victorian works of a large part of their context"(3).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

9).

From Books I to IV, Aurora writes her past until she reaches the present, which is when she began its history. Thereafter, first breaking in Book V for a meditation upon art and life, Aurora continues in Books VI to IX to write her life's events, but now, necessarily, in the time of their occurrence. In her account of the past she begins with the romance of her parents, who, recognizable as literary stereotypes in the gothic mold, are each a mask of one of the opposing temperaments identified with the Protestant North and Roman-Catholic South. Though a Florentine commoner, her mother is an exquisite beauty of ethereal, other-worldly grace, too delicate to survive "the mother's rapture" which "slew her" (I.35).[4] Her father, once a dour English nobleman, touring Italy, is instantly transported upon his first sight of her at church among a procession of solemn virgins, "Transfiguring him to music" (I.89); Therein he suffers a lover's conversion and sheds his former, dull-spirited way of life, even forfeiting his right to the Leigh inheritance. Infant Aurora is born into an unconventional, festive, even glamorous household, tucked into the idyllic Tuscan countryside, but, tragically, she is orphaned early, at ages four and thirteen, first by the death of her mother. In a manner consistent with her father's eschewing of English norms, Aurora's unfettered imagination develops through a strong-willed, idiosyncratic, and passionate temperament. In her Italian girlhood, isolated from society, she is either steeped in reading the books of her father's rich library, or, when not running free through the pathless forests and hills—wild Nature

---

[4] All excerpts quoted from Aurora Leigh are from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh, ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

having had become her surrogate mother---she sits staring with spooked reverie at the painted portrait of her mother's pale, crimson-gowned corpse, the morbid icon of worship for her grieving and sullen father. So used to being unrestricted in her motherland, the adolescent Aurora is gravely disheartened, humiliated, and poised for rebellion when, being sent upon his death to her father's disapproving family in gray, chilly England, she is harnessed under the tutelage of a stern maiden-aunt, who forces upon her the tedious and frivolous tasks of an English lady's education. A disobedient Aurora discovers, however, in deliciously stolen hours of reading, that poetry liberates her from the confinements of her loneliness and grief. Consequently, she claims the poet's vocation on her twentieth birthday, for which sake she turns down the proposal for marriage from the only man she will ever love (her cousin Romney Leigh) and, in so doing, wastes the opportunity for re-inheritance of the powerful and rich estate her father had forsaken for the love of her mother and their wonderful life in Italy years before.

As the present-time Aurora who sits down to record her past life, the maturing poetess begins her memoir seven years after turning down Romney's proposal when, though now a successful poet, she is at last struck by a sense of irretrievable loss for having let a life with him slip away. By the time the telling of her past catches up with the present events of her life, in Book V, Aurora realizes she must attempt a radically new and difficult artistic path, and so she embarks upon writing an heroic poem of contemporary life. With Romney only present in her mind, as the beloved muse to her epic endeavor, she re-enters her present circumstances with renewed vision. Thereafter, the post-memoir events of her life continue to write the poem, apace of their happening,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

until Romney's unexpected return three years later. Only when the lovers' reconciliation is complete does Aurora's true character as Poet reveal itself, and then, in terms of biblical apocalypse, and only after Romney reports to her in the language of the Eucharist, that he suffered a spiritual conversion through her poetry. Poetry, its religious motive revealed within a romantic framework, is hence married to the healing power of a divine compassion.

Contrary to the argument of feminist critics for whom Aurora's reconciliation with Romney, along with its Scriptural allusions, amounts to a defeat for Aurora's poetic ambition (and, thus, presumably, indicates the disintegration of her personal and artistic autonomy), the ending indeed brings to satisfaction the poem's religious-aesthetic argument, according to which Aurora's poetic ambition was structured all along, with poetry configured as essentially religious in its truth and religion as primarily poetic in its telling of truth.

Recently, critic Ranen Omer justly complains, that, in tending to ignore Barrett Browning's Christianity, feminist critics of Aurora Leigh have misread Barrett Browning's intention because they have pursued "criticism that has become radically secular and eager to impose its own ideology on the text" (99). However, in asserting that Barrett Browning's religiously motivated poetry "aesthetically and spiritually disguises her own remarkable effort of self-will," and, further, that she "seems to have found a higher justification for her art by linking it to Christ" (119), Omer presumes that her poetic temperament could have or should have existed independently of its religious emotion. What such a position dismisses, or merely cannot fathom, is Barrett Browning's profound

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and accomplished aesthetic and intellectual integration of that emotion. In Aurora Leigh, poetry and religious emotion are inseparable. In the passage from a letter to Robert, which Omer quotes as follows, Barrett Browning asserts that plainly: "...all high thoughts look towards God...the deepest mysteries, not of fanaticism but of Christianity, yes *doctrinal* mysteries, are,—as approachable by lofty human thoughts & melted human affection,—poetical in their nature" (119).

A determinedly "postmodern" reader (such as Omer claims to be) is bound to reel with impatient discomfort at the religious imagination, which, at the end of Aurora Leigh is revealed to be the poem's ordering principle, especially if that reader arrives there having mistakenly assumed, or been led to believe by its feminist champions, that Aurora's willful self-assertion against the social conventions which threatened to oppress or impede her artistic development were itself the point of Barrett Browning's story. Unsympathetic with a metaphysics of identity in which the dominance of symbol and metaphor appears to bind meaning to a closed system of reference, and preferring to read fictional events literally or as prefaces to historical possibility, such a reader will necessarily conclude, as Omer does, that "Barrett Browning's epic comes to a grindingly determinate end at which we find that Aurora does nothing but (to paraphrase Marx) 'revisit the past and rethink the historical process which has been 'completed' " (100). Indeed, in citing reasons for an upstart wave of scepticism about the poem's supposed emancipatory claims, Omer is certainly correct in noticing how and why the joyous biblical conclusion of Aurora Leigh must displease some progressive hard-liners, disgruntled because "The apocalyptic narrative can accommodate spiritual yearnings but not material or historical evolution"

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

(107). For, "the postmodern reader," Omer continues, "the presence of the Book of Revelation within a feminist poetic narrative creates a disturbing textual contamination" (117). Certainly, the mystical orientation of Barrett Browning's poem is at odds with an ideology of rational, revolutionary-scientific politics which the poem did not court in the first place.

The unrecognized problem with Aurora Leigh, however, is not that it fails to argue and to illustrate a secular emancipatory rhetoric, but that it employs a literary conceit which obviously can satisfy neither the expectation of the novel reader nor the materialist-rationalist, feminist, progressivist school of literary criticism which allies itself with that reader. [5] For, though its plot is complex, its setting contemporary, its detail realistic, its topics timely, such novelistic elements appear in a poem which has little to do with the formal and thematic motives and solutions of the novel-writer, then or now. The narrative of Aurora Leigh is, rather, an extended form of descriptive allegory, a self-consciously artificial conceptual-symbolic order of representation into which the empirical-historical elements of novel-writing do not function as they would in a novel, but appear in order to stand as attributes of the novel. As attributes which signify modernity by virtue of their association with a modern activity (novel-writing), the poem's novelistic elements suffice in presenting contemporaneousness in the abstract. Intended emblematically, the self-conscious, artificially "modern" Aurora Leigh satisfies a religious motive quite distinct from the empirically grounded novel since what the poem argues is the ever-timely

---

[5] See Deirdre David's Gramscian critique, in which she argues that Barrett Browning's identification with epic poetry estranges her from the woman's novel and from the middle-class objectives of personal autonomy, political equality, and empirical-rational thought, which the popular contemporary form serves.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

relevance of Christian faith; moreover, it argues that the very concept of continuous relevance, to which the tradition of the modern may be reduced, is central to the poetic of the Christian ethos.

Not surprisingly, then, Aurora Leigh increasingly baffles, disappoints, and embarrasses the feminist readings which have introduced it in the twentieth century as "an autonomous poetry aspiring to an independent female vision" (Omer 99). For, as poet, Aurora's freedom is limited by an order of reciprocation, in which she exercises the will to recognize, to surrender to, and to fulfill her calling—or not to do so. Since Aurora enthusiastically embraces the poet's career, choosing the vocation which she hopes has chosen her, the central issue of the story concerns whether, indeed, Aurora is an authentic, elected poet, or whether she is deluded about her calling, and to what extent either possibility is contingent upon her gender. Since those are the questions the text itself raises, they are what I shall consider here in discussing its epic argument and resolution.

To the critic who plainly objects, that Barrett Browning "could not bring herself to create a heroine who could triumph without ultimately submitting" (Omer 120), it should be said that neither could she create a male hero as such, for, like Aurora, he too would have to triumph in the submission of his will: what the true Poet transcends cannot be reduced to limitations imposed by social convention, but consists of those which the confining ego secures through continuous struggle, often against the perceived obstacles of a social order which its aggression actually mirrors.

The significant point of transformation in Aurora Leigh occurs in the middle book, when Aurora, as the already accomplished and acclaimed poetess, denounces as ineffective

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and false the pretty, conventional verses she had been writing for the last seven years. Now turning away from an art which only imitates art, she is determined to write an unblinkingly realistic—but epic-style—long poem set in her own time, a work of imagination which she hopes will accurately reflect contemporary life. At the same time as this change in her aesthetic orientation occurs and marks a new course in the direction of Aurora's poetic career, the narrative of her life shifts as well—from memoir to journal, from past to present. Continuing to write her life, now as it occurs, the narrator, who is also the self-examiner, cannot know the outcome of what she is writing. But, as Helen Cooper shows in her schematic representation of the poem's plot, the events recorded as memoir in the first four books return for resolution, either thematically or in narration, in reverse order in the present-time scheme of the last four books (153). The events of Book I are retrieved in the final Book IX, those of Book II in Book VIII, of Book III in VII, and of IV in VI. As for Book V, in which the aesthetic re-orientation of Aurora's poetic role is centered, the issues raised in her discussion about art in this middle book are raised again in the final one, thus causally linking the revelation at the end of the poem to the transformation of consciousness which occurred as a re-beginning at the center of the poem, where, as is made clear in the end, such resolution was made possible.

The obvious biblical corollary for the poem's centrally positioned, past-present threshold, is the redeeming advent of the god-man in Jesus Christ, through which a looping, circular-progressive plot is structured. The period of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, which divides world history into the old and the new dispensations, looks back to the original Fall while anticipating the Second Coming. The latter return of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Christ, which is foretold in the Book of Revelation as the final act of transformation, ends history in a moment of total recovery—"I am the Alpha and the Omega." In Barrett Browning's poem, the past events remembered in the first half of the poem return in the poem's second half as sites of narrative resolution, which, retrospectively having been foreseen in the past events, are now to be viewed—as constituting the meaning, influence, and explanation of the past. Beyond the immediate conditions out of which they were generated as original occurrences, the return of such past events in forms of present-time resolution indeed define the present as the mode which continues the telling of the story.

Consistent with Henderson's argument that autobiography "implies a search for salvation," in which "conversion remains the structural focal point," Aurora Leigh represents salvation as the process of coming to self-knowledge by means of a break with the past. The break is really a conversion, initiated when, beginning her memoir, Aurora must be conscious in a way that is distinct from the self she writes about. In confronting the former version of who she is, she writes herself out of the past, into the present, and toward the future.

Early, in Book II, Aurora remembers having claimed the poet's vocation on her twentieth birthday, the same day that her philanthropic cousin, the activist aristocratic, Romney Leigh, proposed marriage with the certain expectation that she would accept. She rejected him, however, not just because she feared that he, an insufferably earnest political reformer, was more obsessed with a plan to implement his social theory than he was in love with her, wanting only a helpmeet to assist his utopian experiments; she denounced him especially because he had just infuriatingly dismissed her poetical career as

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

worthless and self-deceiving. In the poem's penultimate Book VIII, which Aurora pens after ten painful years of trial and travail, some three years after she wrote the account of that eventful birthday, Aurora records that she and Romney have just confessed old wrongs and asked forgiveness of each other. Romney, no longer driven by misguided social schemes, reveals that his estate burned to the ground upon an uprising of his phalanstery's strained, low-born inhabitants, his eyesight lost from an injury in the melee, accidentally inflicted by the most wretched of them. Blind Romney, having recovered from his devastation by gleaning spiritual light from Aurora's famous epic poem, now eagerly credits her poet's vision with redemptive powers. Aurora, who is finally matured beyond her early narcissism (and not exalting in her fame but dreading life as a lonely poet-spinster), indeed, is able to administer God's love in works of poetry which, in turn, inspire good works.

The early argument between Aurora and Romney in Book II sets up the conflict between contrasting types of intellectual focus and value: literary and political, imaginative and discursive, personal and public, critical and technological, apprehensive and comprehensive, prophetic and journalistic. At the end of the poem, there emerges an ultimate figure of the intellectual hero as the useful reconciler of spiritual and material realms, envisioned through the maturation and reconciliation of terms, masculine and feminine.

Romney, in Book II, had challenged Aurora to conceive a poetry capable of addressing an age "half blind/ With intellectual light, half brutalized/ With civilization[...] / [...]shrieking east and west/ Along, a thousand railroads, mad with pain/ And sin too!"

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

(II.199-204). In a fury of loathing for the deceptions of the age, he invokes the cure of Christian monotheism and purports the need for true visionary leaders, capable as Moses, to write the poem of history. Thus, Romney identifies the poetry he thinks Aurora capable of writing, not with the prophetic poet of biblical epic, but with the indolence and disorder he associates with a pagan despair made obsolete by Christianity. Christian art must be "Direct, indubitable, real as grief," else, "leave us to the grief we grow ourselves/ Divine by overcoming with mere hope/ And most prosaic patience" (II.155-7). Better no poetry than the false poetry of ignoble escape. Likewise, Romney regards the pathos of the socially conscious poetess as childish weeping, useless to the task of implementing reform while only indulging self-congratulatory expressions of charity, the powerfully inspired religious prophet or secular poet of social-historical vision constituting, rather, a masculine force. He argues that women, over-emotional and subjective in what they understand, lack the mental powers to grasp, and to shape in poetic form, the principles of universal destiny, to conceive the pattern of human suffering writ large. The world, ill comprehended by women, must remain uninfluenced by them (II.221-2). So, he dismisses together poetry and the woman poet, the woman in particular, not for her lack of literary talent, skill, and polish, but for her lack of redemptive, visionary power: "We get no Christ from you [women]--and verily/ We shall not get a poet, in my mind" (II.224-225). Romney, burdened by his own too comprehensive vision of history ("The sweat of labour in the early curse/ Has (turning acrid in six thousand years)/ Become the sweat of torture" [II.166-8]) is himself maddened, racing against time to conceive at once a global system by means of which to influence its course.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Incited by Romney's violent, verbal attack, Aurora will eventually disprove the worst part of his argument, which damns poetry and woman, when she writes the redeeming, contemporary epic (conceived in Book V) which he thought no longer possible to write. Likewise, she will confirm the best part of it, founded in his recognition and admiration of her personal, distinct virtues, by proving that, indeed, the pathetic lyric of the "poetess" and verse conventions which appeal in their fanciful and ancient motifs to a stagnant age of ruined faith and lost communal spirit are too limited a medium for a woman of Aurora's passion and intelligence (II.180-199, 209-243). Thus, much to Romney's delighted surprise in the end, the quest to write the age heroic is proved a feat precisely suited to a woman poet courageous enough to approach a task greater than her limitations. Even as Christ would only appear in the world in the guise of a mere carpenter's son, and even as he would turn, in Crucifixion, the most isolating and subjective of human personal conditions—i.e., the suffering of pain—into the very mode of compassion, for uniting God and man, and man and man, so too a mere woman poet, "personal and passionate," must conceive the wretched present, its suffering and passion, in epic form and meter. The present-time condition of secular leadership, as represented in the poem, especially urges this inversion of roles, for the modern man of scientific and political reform (as configured in Romney's authoritarian manager) has abandoned his patrician legacy and left the mythologizing (or historical) service of its poetry to waste itself as nostalgia, in the effete fantasy life of enervated elegists and inferior women. Eventually defeated and exposed as a false leader, finally bereft of both his actual estate and his imagined utopia, a fallen Romney can at last benefit only as a man like other men,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

virtually anonymous in his need for compassionate recognition among his fellows. Thus, he is one among the multitude who are transfigured by Aurora's sensational and affective powers, even as he is the only one who matters to Aurora—that is, as her beloved, not as a leader or a partner in social reform. Working in modes of experience and through the recuperative power of imagination to lighten the heart with love for its own life, as it is and lives, Aurora's prophetic poetry invokes the divine presence which Romney's historical-progressive vision had depersonalized upon forsaking the true spirit of Christianity which he sought to justify.

Likewise, in order to justify writing a contemporary epic, Aurora argues in Book V from a leveling principle, but one intended to personalize or individualize human potential: Epic heroism, here reduced to the lowest common denominator, means no more or less than to be as "man," i.e., to be as human. In defense of epic as the ever viable form by means of which to continue as poet, Aurora proclaims, "All actual heroes are essential men / And all men possible heroes" (V.151-2), a sentiment further embellished by a figure in which the epic poem is imagined to arrive as the "morn" (the dawn being, of course, emblematic of herself, as the era's aurora). Possibility is thereby configured as the anticipation of return, a redemption: "...every age,/[...]Looks backward and before, expects a morn/ And claims an epos" (V.152, 154-55). For Aurora, if the poet's "sole work" is to represent the age (V.203), that work is the "living art" of the soul, identical with the life it records and presents (V. 221). [6] Thus, as if the poet-historian's

---

[6] Here is a dilemma of subjectivation for the poet-savoir who lives in the midst of her subject. Since she means to be neither a journalist nor a social scientist, in what sense is she both separated and engaged, poetically? Perhaps Michel Foucault provides a clue in his own "dream[ing] about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

documentary task were itself the defining feat of heroism, Aurora would record with unflinching attention "life" as lived by real men and women, thereby angling the vain reflection of their Victorian drawing room mirror into an occasion for reader and writer to practice self-examination and moral reckoning (V.200-22), to scrutinize together

> ...this live, throbbing age,
> That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
> And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
> Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
> Than Roland with his knights at Roncesvalles. (V.203-7)

The pretense of contemporaneity, to which Aurora's writerly ambition aspires, strains further where the actual historical element of literary ambitiousness is lodged in the most fervent struggle for recognition at the moment, namely, the Victorian woman's pursuit of the author's career. Aurora's notion that the time is ripe for poetry to regain its bardic power, to write the myth of modern ambition, is thus worked out through her defiance of the social conventions that deny her a writer's career—let alone deny poetry its prophesy and the age its glory. Though she is meant to resemble the modern heroine of contemporary fiction, Barrett Browning's Aurora is fashioned as an allegorical figure of poetical genius, at times resembling more the conventional daemon of the terminally belated ode writer (though, here, the female semi-deity is reified as the character of a

---

oeuvre, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgements but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep....It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms" ("The Masked Philosopher" 323).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

novel!). Indeed, as genre, Barrett Browning's hybrid novel-poem might best be viewed as an elaborately extended ode to the continuing relevance of the prophetic verse tradition.[7] If it must borrow its frame of relevance from the contemporary fiction of the prose novelist, its failure is the inability to recognize this irony.

Again, critical problems with Aurora Leigh inevitably arise upon the confusion resulting from a conflict between the expectations of novel-readers and poetry-readers. For instance, as a novel-reader one might conclude that Barrett-Browning is "boldly challeng[ing] contemporary expectations" (Reynolds 311, n2) when the tragically blinded Romney proposes marriage to Aurora while pleading for her to "work": "Shine out for two, Aurora, and fulfil/ my falling-short that must be! work for two, / As I, though thus restrained, for two, shall love!" (IX. 910-12). It might appear, that, "Romney here reverses the nineteenth-century conventions of activities associated with the constructions of gender; the woman will work, rather than love, and the man will love instead of work" (Reynolds 311); however, in terms of poetical imagery, he is specifically retracting the error he made ten years before. He then denied that a woman poet's career should be regarded (no more or less than any poet's career) as true work in the world, and he then maintained that spousal love is secondary to the compatibility of married couples as social workers. Moreover, though in Book II he spoke about the work of philanthropic reform, in Book IX he speaks of work in the Christian sense of gospel. Thus, Romney identifies

---

[7] See Ann Williams, The Prophetic Strain: The Greater Lyric in the Eighteenth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), for her argument that Wordsworth's lyric-epic, The Prelude, arrives after a century of development in which lyric gradually became "various and flexible enough to accomplish all those functions of poetry which earlier had belonged to the narrative and dramatic modes--to epic, tragedy, satire, pastoral, or elegy" (1-2), resulting in a variety of generic hybrids.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Aurora's work of love-inspired poetry with Christ's salvific work in the world, in contrast to his own once ill-conceived social work. In addition, the very reversal of love and of work in gendered terms denotes a rather conventional lover's conceit: man as woman and woman as man together reciprocate, paradoxically, each as the absence which is wholly present in the other, as reflections of the other, and thus together embodying in miniature the harmonious turns and balances of the opposed contraries which structure the cosmic order of Aurora's Christian imagination.

Aurora is sensitive to the need of the age to be viewed and to view itself as an era of heroic consequence because of an irksome self-doubt which she herself suffers. If she is to write the age heroic, Aurora's claim to the prophetic tradition must yet begin in this private despair, as grounds for renewal. She is grieved for having given up the man she loves and, further, she is sick of the perfectly lifeless lyrics (impeccably crafted ballads, pastorals, and sonnets) which have so far made her a successful poetess of the kind Romney despises. Thus, spurred on to write through solitude her contemporary epic, Aurora proves her mettle against Romney's criticism of their era as one so distinctly unheroic in temper, so lacking in moral grandeur and spiritual health, as to be unfit either to perform noble feats or to produce the poetical forms which imitate heroic action (II.149-172, 198-209).

Dorothy Mermin points to the despair of Barrett Browning's male contemporaries, such as Hallam and Arnold, melancholy and withdrawn because oppressed by their sense of belatedness and disappointed by a nation that was hostile, in Hallam's words, "to the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

poetic impulse" (9).[8] For the woman poet, however, according to Mermin, "there was no lost heroic age to be regretted, no female tradition that could make a modern woman's poetry look inadequate or out of place" (9). For such a woman, contemporary life is a world uniquely rich in opportunities, and, configured in Aurora, she is the new poet of a dawning era.

Even were this the case, a clear and important distinction, between Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh and Aurora's own long poem, is easily muddled when readers allow the prescriptive poetics for which Aurora argues in Book V to suffice as Barrett Browning's justification for Aurora Leigh, as if deftly to enfold Barrett Browning's own book—Aurora's autobiographical narrative, which is the book we are reading—into the non-pages of the book her fictional heroine reports having written. The latter book is Aurora's epic work of journalistic realism, whose justification she argues in Book V, and which Barrett Browning's reader cannot of course read but is supposed to imagine as having not only been written by Aurora and read by imaginary contemporaries of the Victorian period, but gloriously hailed as the ultimate epic of the modern era. Such an enfolding of the two books, Aurora's and Barrett-Browning's, masks the real book's

---

[8] Mermin's quotes from Hallam appear in "On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson," The Writings of Arthur Hallam, ed. T.H. Vail Motter (New York: MLA, 1943), 182-98. As for Matthew Arnold, he urged in a letter to Arthur Hugh Clough, just seven years before Aurora Leigh was published in 1856, "Reflect...in spite of all the nonsense some people talk, how deeply *unpoetical* the age and all one's surroundings are. Not unprofound, not ungrand, not unmoving:—but *unpoetical*...My dearest Clough these are damned times....the height to which knowledge is come, the spread of luxury, our physical enervation, the absence of great *natures*, the unavoidable contact with millions of small ones, newspapers, cities, light profligate friends, moral desperadoes like Carlyle, our own selves, and the sickening consciousness of our difficulties"(Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough, ed. H.F. Lorry [Oxford, 1932], 99, 111.).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

profoundly significant structural shift in time, from past to present, and in mode, from memoir to journal, which ends the narrator's initial intention toward recollective self-reflection and proves that Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh is not to be confused with the long poem Aurora is supposed to have written with such great success, and which she does not begin writing until she has already narrated the first four-and-a-half books of Aurora Leigh. [9]

Aurora, having already "written much in prose and verse/ For others' uses" (I.2-3), announces in the first lines of Book I that she now begins to write a book she intends for her own use, a private, self-inquiring meditation on her life. Thus, writing an autobiographical narrative in verse, she says she hopes to paint in words a self-portrait, which will distinguish and solidify her identity. Indeed, the narrative is told in its first half as a remembering, through which Aurora composes and preserves a coherent image of herself:

> As when you paint a portrait for a friend,
> Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it
> Long after he has ceased to love you, just
> To hold together what he was and is. (I.5-8)

The elegiac tone of this admission and its simile hint at Aurora's secreted grief about

---

[9] Few commentators have observed the discontinuity in narration, between the first four and the last five books of the poem, perhaps, because, as one critic notes, the narrator is equally "preoccupied with her own inner experience" throughout (McSweeney xxv). See C. Castan, "Structural Problems in the Poetry of Aurora Leigh," Browning Society Notes, 7, no. 3 (December 1977): 73-81; Helen Cooper, Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Woman and Artist (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1988), 153-55; Alison Case, "Gender and Narration in Aurora Leigh," Victorian Poetry 29, no. 1 (Spring 1991), 17-32.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

having spurned her own true love seven years before, a grief which compels her to write this story of her personal and professional growth, a motivation about which the reader is not aware until her story catches up with the present in Book V. For, as Aurora reports at the end of Book IV, she and Romney bid each other what seemed a final farewell, hopeless of their ever pursuing a common path together. In Book I, the purpose of the self-reflective portrait, which might retrieve for oneself the definition of an otherwise disintegrating identity, is compared with the finite image in miniature of a man's former beloved, which he preserves against the fading memory of both the woman whom he no longer loves and himself as he once loved her. For Aurora to regain an image of herself (as loved) in sightless Romney's inner eye will prove, in their reunion at the end of the poem, to be no less gratifying than she intends for this reverie of her self-disclosing and self-preserving memoir to effect.

Thus, in Book V Aurora rethinks her writerly ambitions in light of her failure to gain Romney's approval of her as both poet and woman (V.1-42), and, challenged by his persistent questioning of the whole enterprise of poetry in their modern time, an enterprise which he has long regarded as useless and effeminate folly, lacking in moral courage and stamina, she determines to write the epic poem which will raise their era to see itself in heroic light. She aspires, despite her perceived shortcomings as a woman, to "Never flinch" in doing so,

> But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
> Upon the burning lava of a song
> The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age. (V 213-16)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Indeed, the underlying fantasy of Aurora Leigh is the dream of renewal through a vindication of romantic poetry's passionate, sensual, feminine character, thus infusing a rigorously intellectual, masculine purpose with lyrically intense, or rather, explosive "feeling," a full throbbing heart in a nurturing breast.

Aurora's faith in the poet's transforming power, in reflection of an era she herself sees as materialistic, cynical, dry, dreadful, and stifling, aligns with her faith in the incarnate Word. Christ is her example, as is Nature redeemed by Christ. The true poet is able, because of Christ's redemption, to mediate Truth through the pure experience of her sensual and passionate nature:

> [...]Earth (shut up
> By Adam, like a fakir in a box
> Left too long buried) remained stiff and dry,
> A mere dumb corpse, til Christ the Lord came down,
> Unlocked the doors, forced open the blank eyes,
> And used his kingly chrism to straighten out
> The leathery tongue turned back into the throat;
> Since when she lives, remembers, palpitates
> In every limb, aspires in every breath,
> Embraces infinite relations. (V 103-12)

At the end of Book V, reporting that she has finished the work, to which she refers as "my long poem,"and has left the manuscript with her publisher, Aurora leaves London for Italy, her native home. Where Aurora's memoir ends and her journal begins, Aurora

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

breaks with the past, but the break initiates a resurrection and return at levels personal and literary. For, not only does she set about to elevate her era by representing it in a form which "the critics say[...]died out" (V. 139). She returns to her motherland, where, as witness to the selfless mother-love of the innocent waif, Marian Erle, an allegorical figure resembling the Virgin Mary and complementing Aurora's own resemblance to Revelation's prophetic Woman Clothed in the Sun, she finally returns to and is resurrected in betrothal with Romney. Thus, Aurora's writing of her modern epic occurs as a crucial point of termination (for the better) in Aurora's story. For it will heal a devastated Romney and return him to her, redeeming both their lives, even as a multitude of other readers claim it redeems their own.

Shorn of her allegorical function, Barrett Browning's daring poetess might appear as the prototype for the woman's right-to-write movement, seeking power through self-representation (Kaplan, Showalter, Leighton); however, such a practical feminist aim can hardly be said to draw its strategy from epic verse, the genre in which Aurora is herself supposed ultimately to have succeeded. It would turn, rather, to variants of the autobiographical mode in which Aurora Leigh itself is written, memoir and journal having sufficed in postmodern feminist *ecriture* as the means through which the silenced might speak, displacing the oppressive literary forms which presume to speak in place of that other (DuPlessis). The legacy of the grandmother text, which a feminist reading has bequeathed to Barrett Browning's poem, urges women to write about themselves, evidently as women (thus, somewhat paradoxically, with the universal attitude of representative women), and thereby at the margin of dominant, male literary activity. In

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the jargon of post-structural feminism, the inscribing of female private spaces within conventional linguistic structures would implicitly disrupt the master narrative of which the epic—Homeric and biblical—is iconic.

The not-so-grand subversiveness of female voicing, however, is not what Aurora has in mind when resolving midway through her memoir/journal to depict modern life in epic verse and so to aim for higher than woman's narrow lot. As expressed in the following declaration of her heroic task, in the shift of pronoun from the singular first person "I" to its exalted plural "we," then with aspiration momentarily plummeted, back to the singular "I," before swooping upward again, it appears that Aurora's plural term of self-reference need not refer in the collective to "woman" or even to "poet," per se, but might denote in the abstract an elevation of scale, from local to universal, which pertains to her transformed identity, from personal speaker to impersonal soothsayer. In resembling a royal "we" of the divine elect, she assumes the sacred persona of art's "essential Good":

> [...]This vile woman's way
> Of trailing garments, shall not trip me up:
> I'll have no traffic with the personal thought
> In art's pure temple[...].(V.59-62)
> [. . . . .]
> [. . . . . .]Art for art,
> And good for God Himself, the essential Good!
> We'll keep our aims sublime, our eyes erect,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Although our woman-hands should shake and fail,

And if we fail..But must we? —

Shall I fail? (V.69-74)

Yet, for the readers of Aurora Leigh, who, of course, cannot read a poem which exists in reference only, Aurora's poem is present only as a mystery of absent words, of mute speech, as a book which never existed to be read or heard. Since the contemporary epic-verse narrative about which Aurora writes is not an actual book in the actual world, one might say that Barrett Browning's effort in Aurora Leigh to justify renewed epic is effectively erased. The only voice available to the reader of Aurora Leigh is the personal, female "I" who narrates it. According to Aurora's own argument, echoing Romney of Book II, it is this private femaleness which typically fails (or never attempts) to write in the epic form to which Aurora now aspires. In fact, since Aurora Leigh only actuates the fantasy of a modern epic poem for the contemporary reader to imagine (Aurora's own written and published "long poem" not to be confused with her autobiographical narration as speaker of Barrett Browning's own long poem), it casts doubt about whether the epic is in fact still possible, and so it undermines, intentionally or not, the primacy of masculine narrative which the epic comes to represent.

Nevertheless, such slippages to which linguistic structures and literary forms are heir do not alter the fact that Barrett Browning's Aurora sincerely champions the patristic literary tradition to which she wishes to contribute, and the efforts to align Aurora Leigh with feminist perspectives that oppose this tradition mean that little critical attention has

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

been paid to its narrator's most obviously expressed commitment.[10] In light of the poem's neglected objective, which is to shape a heroic view of poetry in terms of religious faith, the autobiographical theme and structure of Barrett Browning's book expands the personal scope and relevance of the poet's redemptive imagination, to a grand scale of historical purpose and meaning—partly by default, given Barrett Browning's own lyric disposition. If Barrett Browning cannot—if no poet can—write the epic poem she imagines Aurora to have written, she can write in Aurora Leigh what such a poem, were it written, would mean to the collective of poet and public.[11] Likewise, Barrett Browning's own narrative of modern life, delivered through fictitious Aurora's autobiography, lacking epic scope and limited in its first person voice, never actually claims epic stature, its epic formalities of blank-verse and extended simile, again, performing allegorically to represent the idea of an epic, which is not the same as being an epic. But in imitating the aspiration to achieve poetical grandeur in the novelist's de-mystified setting, Aurora Leigh wants to

---

[10] One exception is editor Kerry McSweeney, who argues that "the essential context in which Aurora Leigh must be placed if it is to be understood and fully savoured is not feminist...[but] high Victorian"and, comparing Barrett Browning with Ruskin and Carlyle, "a cultural prophet inscribing a secular scripture," McSweeney writes of her religious inspiration and motive: "The most powerful symbol of the twofold life [spiritual and natural] is Jesus Christ, of whose divinity Barrett Browning was in no doubt. Rather than any antecedent texts concerning women, it is the Bible, which she read daily over many years 'in as simple a spirit as I can' in order to acquire 'a stronger apprehension' of what she already knew" (xxxii, xxiii.). Also, Deirdre David provides a corrective to feminist criticism in her Gramscian argument that Barrett Browning's poem does not waver in its anti-feminist conservatism and devotion to the patriarchal, elitist literary tradition (cf. n4).

[11] Perhaps Nancy Miller's argument about fantasy scenarios in the woman's novel pertains where Aurora's plot of poetic ambition is resolved in the implausible event of her extraordinary success with a masculine genre ("Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," PMLA 96 [1981]:41-42).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

perform nobly for its own audience of readers, raising them to a level of moral consciousness embodied in Aurora's ideal reader—Romney: "One man--and he my cousin, and he my friend,/ And he born tender, made intelligent,/ Inclined to ponder the precipitous sides/ Of difficult questions...." (V.32-5).

If its value as a manifesto of feminine authority is to be advertised without acknowledging the classical, biblical, and native romantic-gothic literary influences from which Barrett Browning drew in imagining the frame for her poem's female subject, then, as one influential feminist editor and critic of Aurora Leigh makes evident—while attempting to argue otherwise—what the poem's non-canonical status actually signifies is triumph over any aesthetic critique which might grant it, at best, only minor status as a work of literary art (Reynolds).[12] For to view the poem as slight of aesthetic interest is to reckon that it must indeed fail, by virtue of its female identity, the masculine poetical standard, which, by definition, is opposed to a woman's book. Margaret Reynolds explains, "Aurora Leigh may not figure in Harold Bloom's canon, for he privileges the aesthetic, and charts only the cultures and the texts that have made Western civilization the way it is" (x). Such an inherently flawed book succeeds subversively since it implicitly rejects, or bypasses, or exceeds the one and the only critical-aesthetic tradition, which is

---

[12] The commentary of Reynolds, whose own Norton (1995) and Ohio (1993) critical editions would appear to disprove her assertion that Aurora Leigh remains unrecognized as a primary text of the nineteenth century, discloses a troublesome paradox, endemic to an exclusively feminist positioning of the work. Contrary to the observations of editor Kerry McSweeney in the introduction to the Oxford 1993 edition, that two decades of feminist reading resulted in placing Barrett Browning's verse-novel "where it belongs...in the canon of major Victorian literary texts" (xxxi [cf. note 7]), Reynolds is jealously reluctant to let go a grip which both fears and insists that "women's texts are only permitted to appear [in the canon] provided they are not read as women's texts" ("Allusion in the Verse Novel: Experimental Bricolage" 557).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the masculine, for which there can be no distinctly female voice of authority. But if Aurora Leigh, in being perceived now as a woman's book, must mean that it be excluded from the canon of a literary history which Reynold's identifies as male, it can then be argued, as Reynold's herself rather enthusiastically proposes to be the case, that

> [...]Aurora Leigh makes the canon for a new culture. For women are a civilization still in the making. A country without a history, without art. A country making its own laws, its myths, its histories. Aurora Leigh is one of those myths. When its uses are no longer so urgent, it will fade into history. But until then Aurora Leigh speaks to us because it is empowering, because it is encouraging and cheerful, because it is necessary. (xi)

What does it mean to say that "women are a civilization in the making"? Why would Aurora Leigh fade into history once the supposed canon of its making is fulfilled? What kind of literary canon would that be which has no literary memory, unless a natural or divine, a non-literary body—literally a body—freed of the "Word" and, therefore, of its relation to the past?

Reynolds' grandiose strategy for the poem's meaning in terms of revolutionary feminist thought imposes upon it an historical agenda which wholly contradicts the religious idea which Barrett-Browning's poem justifies, even while neglecting to claim the Judeo-Christian teleology in which its own mythologizing of Aurora Leigh is rooted. Reynold's messianic political orientation is evident in her prophesy of Barrett Browning's book as a sort of secular turning of word into flesh, the literal inscribing of an historical

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

event in the nineteenth century which initiated a revolutionary feminist process now still continuing toward completion at some point in the near future. At such a future point of termination history will finally bring to bear the cultural-ideological transformation that its poet is supposed to have deliberately aimed to create. The fulfillment in real time of that feminist historical purpose thereby would, according to Reynold's formulation of the book's mythic function, make the book, Aurora Leigh, itself obsolete. Incorporated as a way of life, its message would disappear from view as an external point of reference, its aim presumed to be anti-literary to begin with.

Reynolds' utopian-feminist reverie resonates with the millenarian fervor of a low church evangelist, her radical position traceable to the much abused prophesy in the Book of Revelation of the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth (20:2-6), supposed immediately to commence with his Second Coming, during which time only the sainted followers of Christ would live, thriving peacefully. The historical optimism of the scriptural millenarian has long been regarded by scholars of historiography as the equivalent, if not the precedent, in religious thought for nineteenth-century utopian progressive theories, such as were identified with the communist and socialist ideologues—Fourier, Comte, Cabet, etc.—to whom Barrett Browning disapprovingly alludes in Aurora Leigh.[13] Reynolds argues from a secular-material vision of salvation not

---

[13] For the influence of Revelation upon radical egalitarian poetical and political utopianism, see Norman Cohn, The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and the Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages, rev. ed. (New York, 1970); also, Ernest Tuveson, Millennium and Utopia: a Study in the Background of the Idea of Progress (Berkeley, 1949). For recent studies of feminist utopian literature, see Marleen S. Barr and Nicholas D. Smith, Women and Utopia: Critical Interpretations (Boston, 1983); also, Frances Barkowski, Feminist Utopias (Nebraska, 1989).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

unlike the cultural-political revolutionary constructs to which Barrett Browning objected in life, and against which her heroine argues in Aurora Leigh, upon challenging the legitimacy of the social science championed by Romney.

In urging the notion of Aurora Leigh as a text whose effectiveness is contingent upon the anticipation of its eventual disappearance—once the "civilization" it would have contributed toward making is established—Reynolds not only denies the poem's deference to Scriptural history as primary epic, but fails to recognize that her own polemical view of the work's historical task is derived from that biblical mythology. How else, but through a denial of Barrett Browning's explicit identification of the redeeming poet with Christ, might one imagine a futuristic woman's culture projected through the "myth" of Aurora Leigh as progenitor?

Among those to have read the poem while it yet retained a glimmer of its old appeal, Virginia Woolf did not imagine a progeny of pen-wielding granddaughters when she pretended dismay at the absence of successors to Aurora Leigh. Rather, in allowing that Barrett Browning's poem showed how the poet, with the novelist, might plunder the "spoils of modern life" (I.214), Woolf complained that no Georgian versifiers had experimented further with Barrett Browning's hybrid genre, in which poetical figuration and meter were combined with the modern story-teller's realistic, mundane detail, to represent contemporary social scenes and characters in a language of concentrated intensity and passion. Yet, consistent with Woolf's gentle chiding at its enthusiastic if naive violations of decorum—Barrett Browning having written her novel-poem as if the formal limitations which adhere in fundamental differences between writing prose and writing verse could be set aside—Woolf's sly dismay at there being no literary successors

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

to Aurora Leigh was keyed to emphasize the fading into history of the very milieu in which such a hybrid could be so conceived, accomplished, and acclaimed. So that if one is not left with the thought that further pursuit would be anachronistic, the experiment's biological analogy forces a comparison between the infertile product of a horticultural or other splicing and the inability, likewise, of Barrett Browning's married genres to produce literary offspring. In a similar vein, Althea Hayter, commenting freely before the advent of second-wave feminist discourse, praised Barrett Browning's occasionally electrifying precision in capturing the isolated image or scene from life, but qualified such descriptive genius by remarking that Barrett Browning's "want of narrative technique sometimes leaves one aghast" (163). Hayter argued that instead of a verse-novel, "what Aurora Leigh should have been was a work of a genre which did not exist when she wrote it—the genre of The Waste Land, of modern human situations held together not by a plot but by a web of imagery and association" (163). However well taken, especially for suggesting a way to examine Barrett Browning's unexplored role in the connection between Victorian and modernist poetics, Hayter's point, like Woolf's, emphasizes Barrett Browning's attraction to the novelist's modern subject but neglects to inquire about Barrett Browning's need in Aurora Leigh to tell a life's story, to formulate a temporal continuum of the kind which the novelist employs in turning a chaotic synchrony of events, both extraordinary and mundane, into a series of meaningfully connected actions—a true narrative, in other words.

In Aurora Leigh Barrett Browning commits herself to the story teller's problem of constructing a teleology, of conveying purpose disclosed in action through time and toward a point of termination in full revelation. But because her precedent model for

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

teleological development is biblical typology, the story unfolds through a primary breach of continuousness which initiates progress through a turning back or conversion. Indeed, the disjunctive structure of Aurora Leigh, in so far as it imitates at various levels of development a pattern of redemption, is key to the point of its contemporaneity, the religious purpose of which is evident when Barrett Browning confessed to Robert her intention to "write a sort of novel poem...running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms and the like, 'where angels fear to tread'; and so meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age, and speaking the truth of it out plainly" (I.31). Arguing vehemently in a following letter, she condemned the belief that art, of necessity, should imitate the "antique moulds." Rather than concede to aesthetic feebleness or to the notion of "a world too worn out for poetry," she exhorts the artist to bury the dead images of the past and to discover new forms of art in life as currently lived: "Let us all aspire...to Life....For there is poetry everywhere...[and] Christianity is a worthy myth,& poetically acceptable" (I.43).

In striving for contemporaneity in Aurora Leigh, Barrett Browning's ultimate literary paradigm is the Bible as the living book of perpetual relevance. Therein lay the challenge for the modern Christian poet—to be rooted in tradition while forever new. The myth upon which Barrett Browning's argument depends, in justifying the use of epic form and verse to write of contemporary themes, is the story of salvation in Christ's love, the historiography of which is complete from the Book of Genesis to the Book of Revelation, but whose history continues as a present-time condition in the work of each generation.

Barrett Browning strove to rid the epic tableau of its martial furniture and to stuff it with Victorian drawing-room pieces because the characters of Christian epic are, indeed,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the contemporary persons of her world. These subjects of Aurora's epos, ill-suited to the representations of a warrior-king culture, are the readers and subjects of novels, journals, and newspapers, the technocratic and mercantile managers of domestic welfare, of capital investments at home and abroad, urbane heroes and heroines of the middle-class hearth, committed in politics, economics, and education to a Christian paradigm of self-improvement. As poet, Aurora commits herself to the inspiriting, incantatory, visionary language which transcends the novelist's imitation of life, but would re-inform it, conveying the unmediated union in Christ of word and work, of poetry as gospel. The contemporary scene of the novelist's story and the epic poet's visionary inscape might be easily reconciled if the poet's perception and pathos combine to magnify the reader's social vision, strengthening the common pool of reference and deepening the well of compassion from which the reader's sense of moral duty derives and upon which it continues to depend. The epic element of mythic-national identity combines with the novelist's current scene and romantic marriage plot to shape in historically large terms the significance of Aurora's faith in poetry's timeless relevance.

Thus, form and content unite precisely where the poem's narrative continuity is centrally disrupted, even as the events of the story proceed fluently and coherently. The autobiographical shift in Book V, from memoir to journal, occurs upon the charged transition in Aurora's career from lyric to epic poetry, which signals consistent layers of profound change throughout—from contemplative withdrawal to active participation, from recollection to anticipation, from idle play to meaningful work. Likewise, as Aurora's career shifts in purpose away from the false, enervating themes of imaginary escape (about which Romney condescendingly remarked in bidding her farewell, "[Do

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

not] tire too much with following, out of breath,/ The rhymes upon your mountains of Delight" (IV.1204-5), an allusion to Parnassus, perhaps, and relevant to the disfavor with pagan motifs later expressed by Aurora herself [V.112-15]),[14] the poem's change from memoir to journal conveys the change of Aurora's poetical character from inert to influential in the world of human affairs, identifying the contemporaneity and documentary focus of the poet, as historian, with the redeeming, epic activity of Christianity in the world.

By the retrograde movement of its narrative structure, which returns the narrator to the present through her memory—even as the present anticipates a future outcome rooted in past revelation—the poem formally imitates its story of redemptive transformation, again, imitating the primary biblical epic which divides history into the bipartite correspondence of man as fallen and redeemed. Though the reader is able to grasp in coherent linear progression the sequence of events in Aurora's life from beginning to end, the disjunctive transition in the middle book from memoir to journal bends that course of progression to show its parallel, circular path of retrieval away from false

---

[14] Perhaps Milton's description of the fallen angels' entertainment in Pandemonium, as poetical activity parallel with the ancient world's pre-redemptive escape from despair, inspired Barrett Browning's reference in Book V to the mythological motifs which no longer hold sway: "[...]Now/ We want no half-gods, Panomphaean Joves,/ Fauns, Naiads, Tritons, Oriads and the rest/ To take possession of a senseless world/ To unnatural vampire uses" (V.112-116). Milton's poem imagines the devils who, "By false presumptuous hope,[...]/Disband, and wandering, each his several way/ Pursues, as inclination or sad choice/ Leads him perplexed, where he may likeliest find/ Truce to his restless thoughts, and entertain/ The irksome hours[...]/[...]Others more mild,/ Retreated in a silent valley, sing/ With notes angelical to many a harp/ Their own heroic deeds and hapless fall/ By doom of battle; and complain that fate/ Free virtue should enthral to force or chance./ Their son was partial, but the harmony/ (What could it less when spirits immortal sing?)/ Suspended hell, and took with ravishment/ The thronging audience[...]"(II.222-7, 546-55).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

poetry, false love, false identity and toward the true poetry, true love, true identity from which there was a fall.[15] The plot of Aurora's own story, from the event of her parents' first meeting to her reunion with Romney, while distinct from the structure of its telling in her journal, illustrates the redemptive pattern of that structure; in turn, the very act of poetical speech as self-narration relates to the autobiographical plot which it narrates as a metaphor for history as salvation.

Aurora Leigh ends at daybreak in the Tuscan countryside where the at-last-united lovers, rapt in joyous declaration and eager to begin life anew as "wedded souls" anticipate their glorious future by together envisioning the New Jerusalem of the Apocalypse, and they imagine that realm in the exact terms in which Scripture describes it, finally, in unison, quoting Scripture itself. What they see is the heavenly city, as precisely described by Isaiah, and reiterated in the Johannine prophesy, "coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, wherein...there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Rev. 21:4). The clear-sighted, clarion-voiced poetess and the sightless, spiritually awakened former socialist, together awash in blissful tears, blankly stare into the morning horizon to see only that impeccable city rise in their inner eye. They perform a lover's duet, in turns reciting the names of its twelve gemstone layers. The poem's conventional marriage plot, at the level Barrett Browning means to compose a modern domestic romance, merges with the messianic archetype of Judeo-Christian history, which provides the epic frame of action for her hero and heroine.

---

[15] cf. n9, Helen Cooper.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Their supremely redemptive activity appears to be, thereby, neither Aurora's writing a masterpiece nor Romney's masterminding a utopia. Redemption is implicit, rather, in the devoted labor of their service to each other as man and wife, which evokes in its biblical context, the words of the Lamb, whose sacrifice makes "all things new," as "Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev.21:5-6). All other kinds of love, as Romney pronounces upon iterating the nuptial rose of Solomon's hymn, will issue naturally from their marital union. Their initial error, some ten years prior, was to have put the love of work before the love out of which meaningful work emerges. For, after the example of God's love for his creation, comes the espousal love,

> Which still presents that mystery's counterpart.
> Sweet shadowrose, upon the water of life,
> Of such a mystic substance, Sharon gave
> A name to! human, vital, fructuous rose,
> Whose calyx holds the multitude of leaves,
> Loves filial, loves fraternal, neighbour-loves
> And civic--all fair petals, all good scents,
> All reddened, sweetened from one central Heart! (IX.882-890)

Contrary to the reading of feminist critics, such as Gilbert and Gubar, for whom the poem's final vision of the New Jerusalem conveys the intention of Aurora to influence Romney in the devising of political and social reforms, Aurora's poetical vocation can hardly be said to aim at a progressivist egalitarian re-structuring in terms of class and gender. Rather, with the Bible as its epic-historical model, Aurora Leigh appropriately

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

concludes with a parallel between its final book and the final biblical book of Revelation, whence the typological parallels of the Old and New Testaments merge in a final scene of reconciliation. The visionary appearance of the post-historical city, the New Jerusalem, refers Barrett Browning's readers to perfectibility not in this life, but in the afterlife. The spiritual balm and nourishment which Romney draws from the poet-prophet's vision provides him access to the paradise within, which is the visionary faith in Christ's love by means of which Eve in Milton's poem is able with courage to lead Adam out of Eden, into history, and toward the redemption of their offspring. The divinely delivered, "new," eternal megalopolis is a figure of the reunion of God and regenerate man, which, following the destruction of heaven and earth, is meant to replace Eden with greater splendor. The millenarian vision of an earthly, peaceable kingdom should not be confused with this post-historical New Jerusalem, and it is doubtful that Aurora's contemporary readers would have confused them in their reading of the poem's last speech.

Moreover, Barrett Browning's final words are neither Aurora's nor her own, but the Word of biblical prophesy. Thus, at the end of Barrett Browning's poem, the reader is called upon to recite with its hero and heroine a passage of Scripture which the reader, their contemporary, is assumed to know by heart. As such, Aurora concedes her voice to the divine authority, which she ministers to her audience—while requiring them to do the same.

In helping to remedy human error by means of prophetic mediation, Aurora does not presume, as Romney believed possible before his phalanstery fell to ruin, to reconfigure and thereby cure a material condition out of which such error is born. Her

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

work as poet involves the faithful maintenance of Christian love against the continuous erosions of vice. Her prophetic vision sees in contemporary life the continuing relevance of biblical history and opposes contemporary, secular efforts to institute anything resembling the utopian reforms for which Romney was punished for trying. This is evident in Aurora's healing role, by means of which she compensates his punishment, and in the poem's candid disparagement throughout of the kinds of social and political systems which her readers would identify with millenarian radicalism. The history lesson Romney learns is faith in the living myth of Christ's redeeming influence, of God's active grace inspiriting Christ's followers until the end of history and the post-historical arrival of New Jerusalem. Even as the stories and characters of Homer and Virgil, Roland and Malory, exemplifying irrelevant pagan myths or outdated gothic legends, might be rejected in favor of the heroic act of Christ as it unfolds in ordinary life, ever extant within and viable to the end of history—so, too, there exists no future era of perfection, distinct from the present era; rather, each age is a renewal of life in its fullest capacity. Aurora's argument in Book V for writing epic depends upon that idea of perpetually inscribed renewals of spirit, in love's own sensuous rose.

The conflicting religious and secular teleologies which Barrett Browning's treatment of socialist and feminist issues evokes, are reflected in the opposed exegetic approaches to the Book of Revelation which have dominated the controversy of millenarian thought since the medieval period, and which would have been commonplace in some version to Barrett Browning and her contemporary reader (Carpenter and Landow; Landow; Harrison). The orthodox, allegorical interpretations of Augustine and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Aquinas endure in treating the biblical millennium as a figure for the already extant reign of Christianity, or the Church, Christ's redeeming sacrifice thus mediated by the gospel until the end of history. This view denies the possibility of collective biological, historical, or material evolution, or progress, as a consequences of the Crucifixion. The world, though informed by the gospel, is thought not to proceed, as such, through Grace into a fulfillment of material or worldly good, but the individually saved soul will be completely fulfilled at the end-time, with eternal life in union with God. Thus, while the Crucifixion occurred in historical time and continues to generate the path of return from man to God, such a path is not itself manifested in progressive human improvement and material change (Reeves, "The Development"). This allegorical reading of the millennium preserves the static, bipartite history, which is divided according to the Old and the New Dispensation, one period dating from the Fall to the Redemption, the other from the Redemption to the Final Judgement. This segmenting of historical time according to the transforming event of Christ's sacrifice and the expected end of the world is opposed to the heretical view of a dynamic tripartite history, modeled upon the trinity, which emerged in the twelfth century with the teachings of Abbot Joachim of Fiore (West; Reeves, Joachim). The Joachite tradition treats the history of salvation as an organic process, in which the total progress of human history advances to fulfillment in stages corresponding to the three persons of the divinity. The final stage of the Holy Spirit as pure Intellect would simultaneously supersede and comprehend the previous two manifestations of The Father as Law and of the Son as Grace. The third stage, supposed to begin with the Second Coming and to last for the millennium prophesied in Revelation, thus completes salvific

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

history as the union of the divine and the mortal in complete earthly harmony.

For this final stage of millennial peace, Joachim's followers imagined in some detail an egalitarian society of absolute, communal understanding, of unmediated knowledge, wherein no external point of reference, written law, or verbal text, such as the Bible itself, even the New Testament, would need any longer to exist. Thus, equating Joachim's first and second stages of history with the Old and New Testaments, and believing that the millennial order was immanent, his followers also imagined that Joachim's own prophetic writings displaced the gospel of the New Testament. They determined further that these prophesies were predicted as the Eternal Evangel or Everlasting Gospel in the Book of Revelations (14:6-7). [16] Joachim's prophesy of a third stage in historical development, co-terminal with the millennium, would supersede the Old and New Testaments and manifest divine revelation in pure deeds of communal love, work, and piety. Through its various permutations, Joachite thought influenced the development of chiliastic currents in Northwestern Europe, which, by the nineteenth century appeared to culminate in the secular historical systems of Hegel, Marx, and Comte, as well as in communist-socialist programs of the kind which Romney's ill-conceived pursuit of a socialist utopia typified. Historians of nineteenth-century philosophy identify Joachim as the father of utopian socialist thought (Reeves, Joachim; McGinn; Cohn) or rather, as the progenitor of systematic historical paradigms for describing and predicting revolutions in the stages of

---

[16] The St. James version reads: "And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth and the sea, and the fountain of waters."

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

human progress toward spiritual perfectibility in wholly secular terms. Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, and George Sand, only a few of Barrett Browning's contemporaries known to have been drawn to the mysterious heretical text of the Joachite's Eternal Evangel (Reeves; Carpenter and Landow), were intrigued by the tripartite, organic-evolutionary historiography associated with Joachim's prophesy, even if Barrett Browning, a religious and political conservative, was not. It was certainly through an acquaintance with Sand's own charismatic mentor, the socialist mystic Pierre Leroux, as well as through Comte's positivism, that Victorians intellectuals would have made acquaintance with Joachim of Fiore, as an inspiration to the most current trends in radical progressivist thought. [17]

At the conclusion of Aurora Leigh, the union of Aurora and Romney overtly signifies the consummation of spirit and matter which, likewise, is a union manifested in Judeo-Christian history—in the covenant of Israel and Yahweh, in the incarnation of the divine Word in Jesus, as Christ, in the marriage of Christ and the Church, in the transubstantiated body of the Eucharist—a union of word and action, of being and doing, of concept and incident. The historically manifested marriage of divine and human

---

[17] Eliot, who was much enamored (as was Barrett-Browning) with the novels of George Sand, periodically enjoyed long conversations in 1848 with Leroux. She knew of his profound influence upon Sand's imaginary investigations into the earthly possibilities for spiritual freedom and social harmony in her novels, most obviously in Spiridion (1838-9 and Consuelo (1842-3) but to some degree in all her novels written in the 1840's. In her study of Sand's influence upon the Victorians, Patricia Thomson summarizes Leroux's gospel of humanity, thus: "In his socialism he envisaged the gradual and peaceful take-over of government by the proletariat and he preached a form of creative evolution, which stressed the absolute need of cooperation between men and women in this life; in the next theirs would be a collective immortality. He believed in the sanctity of marriage, but only if the sexes were considered equal, and he accepted the need in most men for a religion. As Christianity was defective, the philosophy of Leroux could fill the gap, with its congenial blend of meliorism and mysticism, pantheism and reincarnation, egalitarianism and feminism" (4-5).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

purpose, allegorized in espousal imagery and celebrated in the songs of nuptial ceremony, banquet, and bedchamber throughout Old and New Testaments culminates in the final union of the bridegroom Lamb and his bride, which forms the heavenly Jerusalem. The Old Testament invitation to love, in the Song of Solomon, is recalled in the New Testament's concluding exhortation, "the Spirit and the bride say, Come," which, following the words of the Savior, "I Jesus...am the root and offspring of David, and the bright and morning star," anticipates new life even as it evokes the old and, in turn, alludes to the espousal analogy of Psalm 19:4-5, which compares the rising sun to the bridegroom emerging joyfully from the bedchamber: "Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun, which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race." The ideal of marital love, by means of which Barrett Browning unites the novelist's modern scene of romance with the epic-historical scheme of Christian salvation, forms the keystone of her characterization in Aurora Leigh of Aurora and Romney as heroine and hero of Aurora's redemptive poetry.

Thus, the new world toward which Aurora and Romney turn at the book's conclusion is actually the same world, but always renewed in the spirit of Christ's salvation. In Romney's concluding words, the dawning of the epos is "the hour for souls" when "bodies, leavened by the will and love,/ Be lightened to redemption" (IX.939-40):

> [...]The world's old,
> But the old world waits the time to be renewed,
> Toward which, new hearts in individual growth

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Must quicken, and increase to multitude
> In new dynasties of the race of men;
> Developed whence, shall grow spontaneously
> New churches, new oeconomies, new laws
> Admitting freedom, new societies
> Excluding falsehood: HE shall make all new. (IX.940-9)

Here, the term "individual" distinguishes the idea of personal growth from that of collective evolutionary reform, while "falsehood," pertains to radical egalitarian-utopian systems which Romney denounces at the end of poem as "void," "absurd," "puerile" (IX.868-9). Romney's pronouncement of the world created anew with each generation of change, each an epos unto itself, is consistent with the natural, organic poetics that Aurora argues in Book V and with the vow the two lovers make in promising never to presume themselves empowered beyond human limits, to "Distort our nature never for our work" (IX.860). Aurora thus wholeheartedly embraces her woman's heart, her sexual need to love and be loved, as the human condition or limit essential to her mediative art. And so, she embodies a new poetics of the contemporaneous that retrieves the origin and the end of Poetry itself, as words being lived as life.

Such, of course, is the religious conceit in which spirit and flesh, gospel and works, become identically embodied in the divine word and mortal body of Christ. In a metaphor which compounds the image of transubstantiated bread and wine with that of the gospel of Christ as "daily bread" Romney praises Aurora's book by claiming that, having "won his soul," its words live in him as naturally as his own life is lived:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

[...it]is in my heart,

Lives in me, wakes in me, and dreams in me:

My daily bread tastes of it, —and my wine

Which has no smack of it, I pour it out. (VIII.267-9)

When Aurora receives her due respect from Romney at the end of the poem's final book, she is addressed by him in the language of apostrophe, as if he were invoking the conventional feminine muse of male inspiration; at the same time, rather confusedly, blind Milton's famous invocation of the Holy Spirit is also evoked in Romney's exhortation to Aurora. Of course, Romney is not himself presuming to be the poet; indeed he neither looks to poetry, per se, but to the insightful, calming truths for the poet especially bears witness:

Thank God, who made me blind, to make me see!

Shine on, Aurora, dearest light of souls,

Which rul'st for evermore both day and night! (IX. 830-2)

[. . . . . .]

Gaze on with inscient vision toward the sun,

And, from his visceral heat pluck out the roots

Of light beyond him [...]. (IX 913-15)

A soaring poet-heroine, depicted in terms both biblical and orphic, as the emblem for poetry's triumphant recovery of its true prophetic role in a progressive-modern era, Barrett Browning's Aurora is neither a utopian visionary, nor, as aristocratic Romney's cousin and wife-to-be, a representative of the actual, historical woman poet of her

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

time—or any time. In becoming a near divine, revelatory figure of human pathos, an "aurora" of embodied heat and light, she ultimately transmits through an androgenous interface of receptivity and *caritas* the spirit of the Christian poet, who, male or female, is a poet for all the ages of the redemption to come.

As the New Testament feminine prophet in place of the Old Testament masculine prophet, Aurora signifies the libidinal and aesthetic orientation of spiritual epiphany, against which is contrasted the technological and organizational vision of Romney's socio-economic and political utopianism. She and Romney by the end of Book IX achieve in their relationship to one another the ideal of equal and opposite partners, having moved toward each other in a mutual process of self-completion, the feminine of one completing the masculine of the other, and vice versa. Likewise, the blind materialist of the masculine, worldly order is led by the intuitive, nearly occult, power of feminine insight, which is otherwise disoriented and alienated without a worldly matter to inhabit, the polarity being one that inverts the conventional association of the masculine with the spiritual and the feminine with the material.

Thus, when Aurora lives all those years alone, without Romney, she is completed, her feminine spirit complemented, by its opposite in the "maleness" of her own pursuit of a writer's career, of financial self-sufficiency, of her rescue and long-term care of saintly Marian and her infant child. These masculine developments all bear upon Aurora's freedom from the social conventions which restricted the women of her time. But, without the actual male partner, whom she loves, she becomes unbalanced, more masculine than feminine in compensating for his absent masculinity, until her feminine

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

temperament begins, of necessity, to seek a stronger definition. This is illustrated when, upon receiving a steady stream of congratulatory and appreciative comments by the dazzled readers of her famous "long poem," the lonely writer begins to pine as a woman for womanly rather than worldly (ie., masculine) and artistic satisfaction:

> [....]I'm a woman, —it is true;
>
> Alas, and woe to us, when we feel it most!
>
> Then, least care have we for the crowns and goals,
>
> And compliments on writing our good books. (VII.740-43)

And, more, Aurora assumes a new humility:

> [....]I have written truth,
>
> And I a woman,—feebly, partially,
>
> Inaptly in presentation, Romney'll add,
>
> Because a woman. For the truth itself,
>
> That's neither man's nor woman's, but just God's;
>
> No one else has reason to be proud of truth. (VII.750-54)

Her liberation-apotheosis as poet depends entirely Romney's masculinity being completed in her femininity when, upon being made feeble with blindness, he confesses his dependence upon her love and her poetry (the two are conflated). In turn, she must back-track a little, must shed some of the too-burdensome and urbane masculinity which she has suffered in disciplining herself as a modern artist. She does this by recovering in *him*, in Romney's own candid reflection of her poetical sensibility, heightened by his blindness, the very femininity which her masculinity had been masking.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The conventional feminist interpretation of Romney's blindness, which compares it with Rochester's blindness in Jane Eyre, reads it as the handicapping which enables Aurora, herself culturally and socially handicapped as a woman, to be his equal, while forcing her to perform in a female role as his caretaker (Showalter). This, I would argue, among other problems, is a reading of Aurora Leigh which typically approaches it as a novel in verse and ignores its significance as a poetical allegory of devotional poetry's service to God and mankind, in which the esoteric, Swedenborgian influence of Barrett Browning's Christian mysticism dominates and shapes the borrowed motifs of her popular sources.

If Aurora's apotheosis is consistent with the Anglo-romantic tradition of poet-prophet, it grates against the poem's novelistic elements. The poem's allegorically rich conclusion makes not at all clear whether this poet who is elected by the aristocracy (ie., Romney) to compensate for the blindness of the age (conceived as the inherent, human blindness of any age) must indeed be a female writer, as Aurora is, or whether Aurora merely stands as a female figure to vindicate the feminine sensibility of the late, Byronic-romantic tradition. Indeed, the identification of poetry with the feminine yet complicates the clear difference in social distinction between the romantic male poet and the "poetess," the femininity of the former having little to do with the femaleness of the latter. The former, while in possession of a feminine aesthetic or sensibility of sensual and affective subjectivity, would not suffer as a woman poet, to be imposed upon by social and cultural restrictions of the kind to which Barrett-Browning was herself subjected.

Still, the essentially religious poetry which Barrett-Browning's argument in Aurora

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Leigh attempts to justify would vindicate the mystique of the Word through a feminine (if not a feminist) poetics, insofar as the affective and sensory vulnerability of the body asserts its claim upon the Christian tradition as one of pathos, deriving from the passion and veneration of Christ's body, as the holy vessel of divine receptivity.

Thus, Aurora's progress as a poet (from errant to redeemed) of the enthused sensibility appropriately begins on her twentieth birthday with reference to the early Renaissance typology of Christ as Dionysus. In a deliberately embarrassed pagan allusion to Dionysian abandonment, Aurora, garbed in dew-soaked, grass-stained, virginal white crowns her head with ivy pulled from the garden wall. (The bacchic significance of ivy is further amplified by her imagining its use to embellish a thyrsis.) But she is surprised in her reverie by the sudden intrusion of Romney, in whose sight she is caught: "[...]fixed/ My arms up like the caryatid, sole/ Of some abolished temple, helplessly/ Persistent[...]" (II.60-3). On that day, having rejected his proposal, she initiates a path through poetry of her return to him ten years later, now to obey the biblical imperatives of marital union and parental duty and to write her poetry through the sanction of their marriage. Hers is finally a spiritually enlightened, self-effacing love and she is a figure of the poet cleansed with tears of joy and counterpoised in the rising of Apollo-Christ. Thus, in the final scene in which the sightless Romney, as failed utopian socialist, declares his love for her, he, having been punished for his hubristic determination that man might construct through scientific, technological, and political reform a peaceable kingdom on earth, not only admits of material limitations which can be transcended by means of divine love alone, but reckons that a poetry inspired by faith in God's love, which his need for Aurora

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

as both poet and woman reflects, is itself a true source of guidance for fallen man:

> [....]O poet, O my love,
> Since *I* was too ambitious in my deed
> And thought to distance all men in success
> (Till God came on me, marked the place and said,
> "Ill-doer, henceforth keep within this line,
> Attempting less than others"—and I stand
> And work among Christ's little ones, content),
> Come thou, my compensation, my dear sight,
> My morning star, my morning—rise and shine,
> And touch my hills with radiance not their own. (IX, 900-09)

"Art's a service..." (915), Romney continues. The religious poet mediates as Christ-Apollo; he/she does not create, per se. As sincerest messenger of Truth, female heir to the Psalmist, to Solomon, and to the visionaries Isaiah and John of Patmos, Aurora represents a receptive or "feminine" literary temperament which combines the sensitive aesthete and the divinely inspired *vates*. In her non-aggressive role as Sayer, the poet transmits a connection by means of "feeling" between earthly bodies and the transcendent heavenly order. The "key," to which Romney refers in proclaiming Aurora's priestly vocation, her "service," recalls the biblical key to David's house, in both Isaiah (22:22) and in Revelations (3:7), and again in Matthew (16:19) as "the key to the kingdom of heaven" which is given to Peter's church. Aurora and Romney are thus overtly situated along the biblical-historical continuum of Judeo-Christian teleology, which approaches

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

through Christ's grace the full disclosure of divine perfection but which never can realize such perfection in the actual course of history:

> A silver key is given to thy clasp,
> And thou shalt stand unwearied, night and day,
> And fix it in the hard, slow-turning wards,
> To open, so, that intermediate door
> Betwixt the different planes of sensuous form
> And form insensuous, that inferior men
> May learn to feel on still through these to those,
> And bless thy ministration. (IX.919-23)

Love as the motive of conversion and transformation appears in Book IX to return full circle to the theme of spousal love, which in Book I pertains to the romantic union of Aurora's parents. In a parallel of type and anti-type, the latter couple, Aurora and Romney, fulfills the redemptive prophesy of the earlier Leighs, for the new lovers illuminate and resolve the dark and conflicted nature of the old lovers' tragedy, thus promising a happier future for themselves than was possible for the previous marriage. Aurora's parents, mated in an illicit Mediterranean setting of pagan lore and Roman-Catholic superstition, epitomize a romantically morbid fatalism which stands in contrast to the atmosphere of spiritual salvation and renewal accompanying the final scene of reunion for Romney and Aurora. Though "Love" was the only thing that mattered to Aurora's father after falling in love with her mother, he is yet a victim of fate and must turn into a hermit, retreating into isolation after the death of his youthful wife to suffer an

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

inconsolable and crippling grief. The transforming effect of his love promised life but proved tragically to be contingent upon his wife's short-lived existence, envisioning no purpose beyond it. Able at his death only to repeat the word "Love" (I.211-12) as if it were a magical token, he merely conveys to his daughter a cryptic concept, which is linked in her mind only to the loss of her mother and to his demise and evokes the unenlightened, narcissistic love of a fallen condition which Aurora and Romney will themselves transcend as a couple, united within a text of Scriptural allusion which both extends and strengthens their union by connecting it to a purpose or body of meaning beyond themselves. Even the sacred setting of Aurora's parents' first meeting, as reported in Book I, is thematically retrieved at the end of the poem in order to support the essentially religious nature of spousal love. Aurora's Italian mother was first seen by her future husband, an English tourist observing the curious spectacle of Catholic worship, as one of numerous white-frocked virgins ceremoniously stepping in solemn procession to receive the Eucharist. When their eyes accidentally meet, he is transfixed in such a way that, "[...]even / He too received his sacramental gift / With Eucharistic meanings; for he loved" (I.89-91) . The pagan motif of the eye-locked lovers is noticeably missing from the affair of Aurora and Romney, however. Indeed, upon their reunion Romney is sightless. Aurora and Romney instead gaze together as visionaries through the sunrise and into the apocalyptic New Jerusalem, thus occupying in their lovers' commitment the spiritually defined space of the biblical Word. Here, the church procession of Book I, alluding to the Book of Revelations' vision of the Saints clothed in white, who circle the Lamb of the New Jerusalem, returns without its Christian message obscured. Romney and Aurora's

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

marital union is subsumed in an attitude of Protestant Christian devotion to salvific work and the larger community, an attitude which departs in spirit from the medieval tragedy of her parents' isolating and obscure romance. Unlike her father and mother, riveted to their lovers' passion, the betrothed Aurora was never struck by Cupid's arrow, but discovered through persistent self-questioning the equally persistent sense of her friendship, loyalty, admiration, and respect for Romney, that she loves him as her sole partner in life.

If Aurora Leigh serves as an allegory of poetic conversion, transformation, and salvation through love, in which the benevolence of patristic authority is secured, not challenged, the poem completes itself in a religious mystical celebration which seeks, in *furia*, the pure, uncorrupted essence of that authority. Such an essential authority is, for Barrett-Browning, neither exclusively masculine nor feminine, but aspires beyond gender as an ideal condition of poetical truth-seeking (VII.752-4). As Deirdre David observes, "Aurora Leigh is certainly confrontational: its enemy however is not patriarchy but the middle-class materialism which found a convenient ally in patriarchal formations" (145). In claiming to possess by virtue of her poet's instinct the immediate sense of how things natural and spiritual are bound, Aurora early defines the poet as one

> Of the only truth-tellers now left to God,
> The only speakers of essential truth,
> Opposed to relative, comparative,
> And temporal truths. (I.859-62)

In fictitious Aurora, Barrett Browning represents the necessity of having continuously to be renewed in the imagination, of history as a perpetual dawning of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

spiritual vitality which occurs as the action of poetry--of poetic writing as the active presence of divine love. For, no less is at stake in Aurora Leigh than to define, weigh, and justify poetry itself, in terms as monumental as history and yet as intimate as any artless spasm which the affective and sensational moment might allow in generating the instantaneous, authentic flow of poetical genius:

> ...if a man could feel,
> Not one day, in the artist's ecstasy,
> But everyday, feast, fast, or working-day,
> The spiritual significance burn through
> The hieroglyphic of material shows,
> Henceforth he would paint the globe with wings,
> And reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree,
> And even his very body as a man —
> Which now he counts so vile, that all the towns
> Make offal of their daughters for its use. (VII.858-66)

In commenting on this passage David observes, "If the poet's visionary power, his special insight, could be enjoyed by all men, then society would transcend its degenerate, materialistic condition" (111), thus, ending the poet's mission to instruct all men to see as he does. David reasons as if Aurora meant for poetry to influence the development of an egalitarian, utopian society, wherein the poet's insight would be no longer special but commonplace. Quite the contrary, Aurora's rhetorical, conditional "if only," passionately expressing a wish that all men could see as poets do, conveys her belief that such is not

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and will never be the case. Here Aurora stresses the privilege of her calling and points to its indispensable mediative role in the fallen world, where poets are born as gifts from God, not made and programmed by men.

David Reide has noted in examining the argument for religious poetry which informs her entire oeuvre, that Barrett-Browning ("an ardent emotionalist in both religion and poetry" [124]) confronted early in her career an apparent contradiction between the secular and the sacred, upon experiencing a conflict between her religious and literary impulses. "The fundamental difficulty Barrett faced, then, was to reconcile her religious faith, which called for self-restraint and even self-effacement, with a version of romanticism committed to individual, even egotistical self-expression" (124). Eventually, Reide finds, she resolved to temper the exorbitant enthusiasms of both impulses, but it would appear that she succeeded only by sifting out and mixing their compatible strains: the sensually intoxicating Byronic passion of her high romantic aesthetics is joined with the equally emphatic affective ecstasies of her Christian faith, the one strain spiritually elevated, the other humbled to its earth-bound limitations. Reide's analysis is directed toward the contest of secular and devotional attitudes in Barrett-Browning's 1838 volume, The Seraphim and Other Poems. But in Aurora Leigh, finished almost twenty years later, it would seem that if she did not inscribe there a reconciliation of the secular and the sacred, she at least narrated the fantasy of a reconciliation.

Her poet-heroine would resurrect the fleeting present as divine, abstracting from Christian redemptive history a metaphysic of the eternal "now." In Aurora Leigh, the epic, as such, yet ameliorates the disruption in the present of a fall from the past,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"recapturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it" (Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 310). In returning to Foucault's example of quintessential modernity, we see that to heroize the present is no less necessary for Barrett Browning, whose Aurora "...distrust[s] the poet who discerns/ No character or glory in his times" (V.189-90), than for Baudelaire, deriding the modern painters, who, in "finding nineteenth-century dress excessively ugly, want to depict nothing but ancient togas" (310). For, more than the depicting of modern dress, the point is how modern dress reveals, according to Baudelaire, "the essential, permanent, obsessive relation that our age entertains with death" (310).

If Barrett Browning's religious sentiment in Aurora Leigh appears too conventional, too conservative to compare with the sophisticated ironies of Baudelaire, she might yet stand with him in their time as a devotional aesthete. Not unlike the decadent symboliste, she lived in a plenum of spiritual and material correspondences, availing herself of these in epiphanic intensities of the purely sensational and affective moment. In doing so, neither poet sought to "liberate man in his own being," but, in being modern they were compelled to "take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration," which, most important for our consideration of Barrett Browning's task in Aurora Leigh, "cannot be produced in society or the body politic, but only in...art" (311). If her poem fails aesthetically, perhaps that is because it really is less a poem than a theory of poetry argued in verse narrative. The question posed by the modern poet, since Tasso, of whether or not it is possible for the Christian era to write an epic poem, is answered by her in the affirmative, but Barrett Browning has not herself written that very poem which,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

instead, her reader is supposed to imagine is possible. Indeed, having written an allegorical personification of it, instead, she has put forth merely an icon of the poetic—a representation of poetry in the absence of poetry.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Works Cited

Addison, Joseph. The Works of Joseph Addison. 6 vols. Ed. George Washington Greene. New York: Putnam, 1854-1855.

Anselm, Saint, Archbishop of Canterbury. The Major Works. Ed. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans. Oxford; New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

Antoninus, Marcus Aurelius. The Emperor Marcus Antoninus; His Conversation with Himself. 8 vols. Trans. Jeremy Collier. London, 1702.

Arieti, James A. & John M. Crossett. The Dating of Longinus. University Park: Dept. of Classics, Pennsylvania State University, 1975.

Aristotle. The Complete Works of Aristotle. Ed. Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984.

Arthos, John. Milton and the Italian Cities. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968.

Ashfield, Andrew, and Peter deBolla, eds. The Sublime: A Reader in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.

Auerbach, Erich. Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages. New York: Pantheon Books, 1965.

Barbauld, A. L. Preface. The Poetical Works of William Collins with a Prefatory Essay. By William Collins. Ed. A.L. Barbauld. London, 1797.

Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. Aurora Leigh. Ed. Margaret Reynolds. W. W. Norton: New York, 1996.

Battestin, Martin C. Providence of Wit: Aspects of Form in Augustan Literature and the Arts. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb. Reflections on Poetry: Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's Meditationes Philosophicae de Nonnullis ad Poema Pertinentibus. Trans. Karl Anschenbrenner and William B. Holther. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954.

Blackmore, Richard. Essays Upon Several Subjects. 2 vols. London, 1716-1717.

Bloom, Harold. The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry. London: Oxford UP, 1974.

---. The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Poetry. New York: Doubleday,1961.

Boileau-Despreaux, Nicolas. "The Art of Poetry." The Art of Poetry: The Poetical Treatises of Horace, Vida, and Boileau. Ed. A.S. Cook. Trans. Howes, Pitt, and Soames. New York: G. E. Steckert & Co., 1926.

---. Oeuvre completes. Ed. Francoise Escal. Paris: Gallimard, 1966.

---. The Works of Monsieur Boileau (1701). Trans. J. Ozell. 2 vols. London: E. Sanger and E. Curll, 1712.

Brody, Jules. Boileau and Longinus. Geneve: E. Droz, 1958.

Budick, Sanford. The Western Theory of Tradition: Terms and paradigms of the Cultural Sublime. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000.

Burke, Edmund. A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful. Ed. Adam Phillips. Oxford; New York: Oxford UP, 1990.

Burnet, Thomas. The Sacred Theory of the Earth (1684). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1965.

Bynum, Caroline. Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Medieval Women. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Calvin, Jean. Institutes of the Christian Religion. 2 vols. Ed. John T. McNeil. Trans. Ford Lewes Battles. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.

Carpenter, Mary Wilson and George P. Landow. "Ambiguous Revelations: The Apocalypse and Victorian Literature." The Apocalypse English Renaissance Thought and Literature: Patterns, Antecedents and Repercussions. Ed. C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984.

Carver, P.L. The Life of a Poet: A Biography of William Collins. New York: Horizon Press, 1967.

Cassirer, Ernst. Kant's Life and Thought. Trans. James Haden. New Haven: Yale UP, 1981.

Chapman, George. Chapman's Homer, The Iliad. Ed. Allerdyce Nicoll. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998.

Clark, A. F. B. Boileau and the French Classical Critics in England. Paris: Champion, 1925.

Cohn, Norman and Rufus Colin. The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and the Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages. New York: Oxford UP, 1970.

Coley, William B. "Gide and Fielding." Comparative Literature. II (1959): 1-15.

Collins, William. The Works of William Collins. Ed. Richard Wendorf and Charles Ryscamp. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.

Cooper, Helen. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Woman and Artist. Chapel Hill and London:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

Cowley, Alexander. "Preface to Poems" (1656). Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century. Vol. II (1650-1685). Ed. J.E. Spingarn. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1957.

Crane, R. S. Rev. of The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in Eighteenth-Century England, by Samuel H. Monk. Philological Quarterly, XV: ii (April 1936): 165-7.

Croce, Benedetto. Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic. Trans. Douglas Ainslie. Boston: Non Pareil Books, 1978.

Crowther, Paul. The Kantian Sublime. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

Damasio, Antonio. The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999.

Davenant, Sir William. "Preface to Gondibert, An Heroick Poem" (1650). Critical Essays of the Seventeeth Century. Vol II (1650-1685). Ed. J. E. Spingarn. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1957.

David, Deirdre. Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot. Ithaca: New York, 1987.

Dennis, John. The Critical Works of John Dennis. Ed. Edward Niles Hooker. 2 vols. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939-1943.

Donaldson, Ian. "Drama, 1710-1780." Dryden to Johnson. Ed. Roger Lonsdale. New York: Bedrick, 1987. 161-192.

Dryden, John. The Essays of John Dryden. 2 vols. Ed. W. P. Ker. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

---. The Works of John Dryden (Poems 1681-1684. Vol II). Ed. H. T. Swedenberg. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Writers. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985.

Eliot, George. Westminster Review, 67 (1857): 306.

Ellmann, Maud. The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993.

Empson, William. "Tom Jones." Twentieth Century Interpretations of Tom Jones. Ed. Martin C. Battestin. Englewood Cliffs: Prentiss-Hall, 1968.

Ferguson, Frances. "The Sublime from Burke to Present." Encyclopedia of Aesthetics. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Fielding, Henry. The Covent Garden Journal. 24 (March 24, 1752). Ed. G.E. Jensen. New York, 1964: I.281.

---. Tom Jones. New York: Norton, 1973.

Foucault, Michel. "Technologies of the Self." Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault. Ed. L. Martin, H. Gutman and P. Hutton. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

---. "The Masked Philosopher." Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: New Press, 1997.

---. "What Is Enlightenment?" Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: New Press, 1997.

Frega, Donnalee. Speaking in Hunger: Gender, Discourse, and Consumption in Clarissa.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1998.

Fry, Paul. The Poet's Calling in the English Ode. New Haven: Yale UP, 1980.

Gibbon, Edward. "October 3, 1762." Gibbon's Journal to January 28, 1763, My Journal I, II, and III and Ephemerides . Ed. D. M. Low. London: Chatto & Windus; New York: W. W. Norton, 1929.

---. The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire. 3 vols. Random House: New York, 1975.

Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.

Goldberg, Rita. Sex and Enlightenment: Women in Richardson and Diderot. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP,1984.

Goldknopf, David. "The Failure of Plot in Tom Jones." Criticism.11 (1969): 262-264.

Harrison, J. F.C. The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP,1979.

Hayter, Alethea. Mrs. Browning: A Poet's Work and Its Setting. London: Faber&Faber, 1962.

Heller, Deborah. "Seeing But Not Believing: The Problem of Vision in Collins's Odes." Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 35:1 (Spring 1993): 103-20.

Henderson, Heather. The Victorian Self: Autobiography and Biblical Narrative. Ithaca, London: Cornell UP, 1989.

Heraclitus. The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments. Trans. Charles H. Kahn. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Hertz, Neil. The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime. New York:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Columbia UP, 1985.

The Holy Bible (Authorized King James Version). Iowa Falls, Iowa: World Publishers.

Homer. The Iliad, with an English Translation by A.T. Murray. 2 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP; London: W. Heinemann, 1924-5.

Iser, Wolfgang. Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974.

Jameson, Fredric. "Introduction/Prospectus." Minnesota Review. N.S.6 (Spring 1976): 53-58.

Johnson, Samuel. Lives of the English Poets. 3 vols. Ed. George Birbeck Hill. New York: Octagon Books, 1967.

Kant, Immanuel. Critique of Judgment (1790). Trans. Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987.

---. Religion within the Mere Boundaries of Reason and Other Writings. Ed. and Trans. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni. New York: Cambridge UP, 1998.

Kaplan, Cora. Introduction. Aurora Leigh with Other Poems. By Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Ed. Cora Kaplan. London: The Women's Press, 1978. 5-36.

Kelly, Theresa. "Fantastic Shapes: from Classical Rhetoric to Romantic Allegory." Texas Studies in Literature and Language. 33:2 (1991): 225-260.

Kintner, Elvan. The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning, 1845-1846. 2 vols. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP,1969.

Knapp, Stephen. Personification and the Sublime: Milton to Coleridge. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Landow, George P. Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art, and Thought. Boston; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.

LeHuray, Peter and James Day, eds. Music and Aesthetics in Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1981.

Leighton, Angela. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986.

Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry. Trans. Ellen Frothingham. New York: Noonday Press, 1957.

Leonard, Emile G. A History of Protestantism. Ed. H. H. Rowley. Trans. Joyce M. H. Reid. Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1968.

Leslie, Michael. "Edmund Spenser: Art and the Faerie Queene." Proceedings of the British Academy. 76 (1991): 73-107.

---. Spenser's "Fierce Warres and Faithfull Loves": Martial and Chivalric Symbolism in the Faerie Queene. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1984.

Lewalski, Barbara. Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

Longinus. On the Sublime. Trans. James A. Arieti and John M. Crossett. Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985.

Longmire, Samuel E. "Partridge's Ghost Story." SSF II (1974):423-6.

Lonsdale, Roger, ed. The Poems of Gray, Collins, and Goldsmith. New York: Longman, 1969.

Lowell, James Russell. Literary Criticism of James Russell Lowell. Ed. Herbert F. Smith. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1969.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

McGinn, Bernard. Visions of the End. New York: Columbia UP, 1979.

McSweeney, Kerry. Introduction. Aurora Leigh. By Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Ed. Kerry McSweeney Oxford; New York: Oxford UP, 1993.

Mermin, Dorothy. "Genre and Gender in Aurora Leigh." Victorian Newsletter (Spring 1986): 7-11.

Melville, Herman. Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

Miller, Henry Knight. "The 'Digressive' Tales in Fielding's Tom Jones and the Perspective of Romance." PQ 54 (1975): 258-74.

Milton, John. John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. New York: MacMillan, 1957.

Mitchell, W. J. Thomas. Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Monk, Samuel. The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in Eighteenth-Century England. New York: Modern Language Association,1935.

Morris, David. The Religious Sublime. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1972.

Most, Glenn W. "After the Sublime: Stations in the Career of an Emotion." Yale Review. 90:2 (April 2002): 101-120.

Nicolson, Marjorie Hope. Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1959.

Norton, David. A History of the Bible as Literature. 2 vols. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1993.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Omer, Ranen. "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Apocalypse: The Unraveling of Poetic Autonomy." Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 39:2 (Summer 1997): 97-124.

Pascal, Blaise. Thoughts. Ed. W.F. Trotter. New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910.

Plato. Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII. Trans. Walter Hamilton. London; New York: Penguin, 1973.

Pope, Alexander. The Poems of Alexander Pope. 10 vols. Ed. John Butt and Maynard Mack. London: Methuen; New Haven: Yale UP, 1967.

Quintilian. Institutio Oratoria. Trans. H. E. Butler. 4 vols. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1921.

Radcliffe, Ann. The Italian; or, the Confessional of the Black Penitents. A Romance (1794). Ed. Frederick Garber. London: Oxford UP, 1980.

Reeves, Marjorie. "The Development of Apocalyptic Thought: Medieval Attitudes." The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature: Patterns, Antecedents, and Repercussions. Ed. C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1984.

---. Joachim of Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Evangel in the Nineteenth Century. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford UP,1987.

Reide, David. "Elizabeth Barrett: The Poet as Angel." Victorian Poetry, 32:2 (Summer 1994):121-139.

Reynolds, Margaret. Preface. Aurora Leigh. By Elizabeth Barrett Browing. Ed. Margaret Reynolds. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996. vii-xi.

---. "Allusion in the Verse-Novel: Experimental Bricolage." Aurora Leigh. By Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Ed. Margaret Reynolds. W.W. Norton: New York, 1996.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

552-7.

Richardson, Samuel. Clarissa or The History of a Young Lady (1747-8). Ed. Angus Ross. London; New York: Penguin, 1985.

Ruskin, John. Modern Painters. New York: Hurst& Company, 1873.

---. Works Ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. 39 vols. London; New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1903-12.

Rymer, Thomas. "Preface to the Translation of Rapin's Reflections on Aristotle's Treatise of Poesie" (1674). Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century. Ed. J. E. Spingarn. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1957.

Sacks, Oliver. "A Neurologist's Notebook: The Mind's Eye." The New Yorker. July 28, 2003: 48-59.

Sacks, Sheldon. Fiction and the Shape of Belief: A Study of Henry Fielding, with Glances at Swift, Johnson and Richardson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964.

Schiller, Friedrich von. Naive and Sentimental Poetry & On the Sublime: Two Essays. Trans. Julius A. Elias. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1966.

Schonhorn, Manuel. "Fielding's Digressive-Parodic Artistry: Tom Jones and the Man of the Hill." TSLL 10 (1968): 207-14.

Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper. Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times; in Three Volumes. Reprint, 1714 edition. Famborough, Eng.: Gregg International, 1968.

Sherwin, Paul. Precious Bane: Collins and the Miltonic Legacy. Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1977.

Showalter, Elaine. A Literature of Their Own. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Sigworth, Oliver. William Collins. New York: Twayne, 1965.

Sircello, Guy. "How is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?" The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism. 51:4 (Fall 1993): 541-549.

Spacks, Patricia Meyer. "The Eighteenth-Century Collins." MLA Quarterly. 44 (March 1983): 3-22.

Spenser, Edmund. The Faerie Queene. Ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. Harmondsworth, Eng.; New York: Penguin, 1987.

Steele, Timothy. Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1990.

Swinburne, Algernon. Complete Works. Ed. Edmund Gosse. 20 vols. London: W. Heinemann ltd.: New York: G. Wells, 1925-27.

Takase, Fumiko. "Some Considerations of the Man of the Hill in Tom Jones." English Studies I (1988): 37-47.

Tasso, Torquato. The Genesis of Tasso's Narrative Theory: English Translations of The Early Poetics and a Comparative Study of Their Significance. Ed. and Trans. Lawrence F. Rhu. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993.

Tate, J. "The Beginnings of Greek Allegory." The Classical Review, 41 (1927): 214-15.

---. "Plato and Allegorical Interpretation." The Classical Quarterly. 23 (1929):142-54; 24 (1930):1-10.

Thomson, Patricia. George Sand and the Victorians: Her Influence and Reputation in Nineteenth-Century England. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.

Tsang, Lap-Chuen. The Sublime: Groundwork towards a Theory. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1998.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Tuveson, Ernest. "Space, Deity, and the 'Natural Sublime'." MLQ. XII (1951): 20-38.

Warton, Joseph. The Adventurer. 57 (May 22, 1753).

---. "An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope." The Life and Times of Seven Major British Writers. Popeiana 18. New York: Garland, 1973.

Watt, Ian. Rise of the Novel: Studies in DeFoe, Richardson, and Fielding. Berkeley: University of California, 1957.

Watts, Isaac. Horae Lyricae. Boston: Little Brown, 1864.

Wendorf, Richard. William Collins and Eighteenth-Century English Poetry. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1981.

West, Delno C., ed. Joachim of Fiore in Christian Thought: Essays on the Influence of the Calabrian Prophet. 2 vols. New York: B. Franklin,1975.

White, Julian Eugene. Nicolas Boileau. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969.

Wieskel, Thomas. The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

Woolf, Virginia. "Aurora Leigh." Collected Essays. 2 vols. London: Hogarth Press, 1966. I.209-19.

Wordsworth, William. The Prelude; or, the Growth of a Poet's Mind (1805). Ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Stephen Gill (corrected by). Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970.

Xenophanes. Fragments/ Xenophanes of Colophon. Trans. J. H. Lesher. Toronto; Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 1992.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.