

AN ECOLOGICAL FEMINIST REVISIONING OF THE MASCULINIST SUBLIME

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ABSTRACT

This ecofeminist critique of the sublime argues that from Longinus through Burke and Kant, a concept of the sublime is established that is both masculinist and hierarchical, emphasizing domination over nature. In contrast a feminist sublime arose, that countered domination and emphasized engagement. Various critics have assigned different labels for this aesthetic experience, from the material sublime to the maternal sublime to Victorian female sublime. This essay concludes by raising questions about whether or not the concept of the sublime itself is really a useful ecocritical term for describing human experience in nature and suggests alternative possibilities.

KEY WORDS: Longinus, Burke, Kant, ecofeminism, sublime, misogyny, Romanticism, Mary Wollstonecraft.

RESUMEN

Esta crítica ecofeminista de lo sublime argumenta que desde Longino, pasando por Burke y Kant, el concepto clásico de lo sublime que se ha establecido parte de una idea masculinista y jerárquica, a la vez que enfatiza el dominio sobre la naturaleza. Opuesto a éste surgió una concepción feminista de lo sublime que se enfrentaba a la idea de dominación y hacía énfasis en el compromiso. Varios críticos han acuñado diferentes denominaciones para esta experiencia estética, desde el materialismo sublime, lo sublime maternal, hasta lo sublime femenino victoriano. Este ensayo concluye cuestionándose si el propio concepto de lo sublime es en sí mismo un término útil para la ecocrítica, y si sirve para describir la experiencia humana en la naturaleza, ofreciendo al mismo tiempo algunas alternativas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Longino, Burke, Kant, ecofeminismo, lo sublime, misoginia, romanticismo, Mary Wollstonecraft.

In large part due to a popular translation of Longinus, since the late seventeenth century in Western Europe a specific concept of the sublime has played an important cultural role. That role has affected the appreciation of nature perceived as external to the human body and external to civilization. As a result of its being historically tied in with the development of nature appreciation in the Enlightenment and Romantic periods, it has had significant influence on the defining of nature writ-



ing in the British and American traditions in the latter part of the twentieth century and continues to be raised as a potentially constructive concept for ecocritical theory. Christopher Hitt, for instance, has criticized ecocriticism for its inadequate attention to the sublime, concluding that “Perhaps it is time—while there is still some wild nature left—that we discover an ecological sublime” (620). And Timothy Morton in his 2007 *Ecology Without Nature* appeals to Kant’s theory of the sublime to help him develop a contemplation of “deep green ideas” (206-207).

And yet, this alleged quality of natural beauty has had a strong masculinist bias with an attendant patriarchal rhetoric. That condition raises questions about its utility as a concept. It also raises the question of whether or not ecocriticism itself has developed with too much of a masculinist emphasis in the field of literary analysis. Such a criticism of sublimity is not new, but it has come primarily from feminist specialists in Romanticism and from philosophers rather than from ecocritics and ecofeminists, although there have been notable exceptions, such as the articles on Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark*, and other texts I will treat in this essay.

Therefore, I want to undertake an ecological feminist revisioning of the masculinist sublime in order to consider whether or not we can redefine it in such a way that it can be broadly applicable in terms of representing varied gender based perspectives of nature, or if it is unusable. If we can productively redefine it, what aspects of the tradition of the sublime can be salvaged and what aspects need to be jettisoned?

ON THE SUBLIME

Longinus used the sublime as an adjective to describe elevated thought or language that could rhetorically inspire. Critical to our consideration here is his claim that “the effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport” (81). In his discussion, Longinus argues that sublime rhetoric can only be achieved if based on “the nature of the subject” (83), which is to say that attributes must provide the appropriate occasion or imagery for the artist to then represent and through that representation elevate the audience (82-84). Longinus coupled the concept of the sublime with intimations of the sacred and religious traditions. He also made use of the word “terror” as one of the examples of true elevation (88). Finally, he made the claim that the sublime must consist of representations of examples that cannot be despised or disesteemed, and, therefore, “In general, consider those examples of sublimity to be fine and genuine which please all and always” (84).

So Longinus makes these key points: the sublime is a rhetorical elevation causing transport, not persuasion, and can be associated with the sacred; it is based on the topic of an object, action, or event worthy of being perceived and depicted as sublime; that topic is universally recognized as sublime so that any audience can be transported by the appropriate representation of this genuine subject; and the elevation felt may include terror, and “mad enthusiasm” that fills “the speaker’s words with frenzy” (85). Several problems immediately arise. One, “transport” renders



the audience a passive recipient of an effect rather than a dialogic participant. Two, Longinus implies that if an author expresses an appropriately sublime rhetoric, the failure to be transported reflects a flaw or limit in the audience's recognition or perception and not a problem with the limited relevance or ideological specifics for a particular audience.

Let's consider a typical sublime subject for a moment. As we know from the European Romantic tradition, male writers most strongly associated the sublime with mountain scenery, as demonstrated by Marjorie Hope Nicholson in *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*. But before getting to those associations, it is worth considering earlier representations of mountains. As Janice Koelb notes, the Romans located their gods and temples on mountains, both figuratively and literally, as was the case with Albanus Mons. And further, she notes that Cicero uses the beauty and utility of mountains to make the case for a divine creator and arranger of landscapes (453-455).

Lucretius emphasizes a somewhat different approach in relation to Sicily by setting up a mythic relationship between the natural creation of mountains and the godly creation of great men. And one need not think too hard to notice that a phrase such as "he was a mountain of a man" has a far different connotation than "she was a mountain of a woman," to note that Lucretius had only men in mind. When Sicily is feminized as the mother of Empedocles, so that he is born from the earth and the earth invariably female, she is referred to as "fat with good things." Evidently, and early on, mountains are to men in positive associations not available to women, casting doubt on their alleged universality as a sublime object (Koelb 458-462).

Koelb also writes about both Virgil and Dante and in so doing emphasizes their positive figurative use of mountains. But what is most striking to me in her discussion is the way that, despite the verisimilitude of the imagery, both poets emphasize the symbolic and the allegorical through depictions of mountains with clear linkages to the sacred, to great or redeemed men, and to nation building. That is to say, philosophers and poets developed the heroic figurations of mountains in terms of three public arenas: religion, war, and politics. Thus mountains as symbols come heavily laden with exclusionary male-only significations before they are approached literally and figuratively by later European theorists, who adopt this orientation, as Burke does when he aligns the sublime with "feelings for 'kings and commanders' and for God. (Hust 148).

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH SUBLIME

Differentiating the sublime from the beautiful became a crucial project of eighteenth century European aesthetics. The development of the concept of the sublime as an aesthetic quality in nature distinct from beauty was brought into prominence by such Englishmen as the Earl of Shaftesbury, John Dennis, and Joseph Addison prior to Edmund Burke, although with some differences among them (Hinnant 18-20, 22, 23). They based their claims for this distinction frequently on such male experiences as crossing the Alps. These trips were *travels*, it should be noted, that is, tourist expeditions by able-bodied men with the leisure and personal freedom to



travel for pleasure and edification. So, their experiencing of the sublime is tied into the idea of wild parts of the natural, i.e., not human built, world as a site of leisure rather than a site of inhabitation. It also is tied to an exploratory freedom of personal movement generally not available to women of their social class or men and women of lower classes or individuals too physically challenged to make arduous treks.

There is, then, a potential connection here between the intellectual foregrounding of the experience of the sublime with men's recreational utilization of wild nature and travel writing treatises and natural history essays, both early genres that contributed to the development of contemporary nature writing. If the sublime were just a problem of the chauvinism of an earlier historical period, it would hardly be worth arguing about today. But, there are those who continue to uphold the sublime in order to promote one or another perception of nature and to argue for a particular kind of ecocritical thought.

EDMUND BURKE

Alongside of Immanuel Kant, Edmund Burke is probably the other best known philosopher of the sublime, having published his treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, in 1757. Burke is generally considered to be the philosopher who established unequivocally the mutual exclusivity of the sublime and the beautiful. At the same time, he contended that both could produce pleasure in the perceiver. But while both might produce awe or encourage veneration, it is only the sublime that can induce a feeling of horror. How is this pleasurable? According to Burke, horror is only pleasurable after the fact, when a person realizes that the emotion was real but the danger only perceived rather than experienced.

Yet, this emphasis on the pleasure of recognizing an unrealized perception seems highly suspect to me, since the risks of mountain climbing or mountain trekking are quite real. The sense of sublime pleasure comes in those instances not from the fiction of a perceived danger that elicited a sense of horror, but rather from the *post facto* relief of having experienced the danger, felt that fear, awe, and horror of it, and survived the experience, usually in a relatively brief period of time. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, not *survived* but rather *triumphed* over it. This difference becomes significant when we think about the argument that the sublime is supposed to be a feeling that arises at least in part from recognition of the power of natural forces far greater than human action, forces indifferent to human desires and activities. A sense of triumph if it comprises part of the experiencing of the sublime would entail a sense of domination and achievement, a possible feeling of *mastery*, rather than a feeling of humility and fortune.

Burke may appear to differ from Kant by virtue of his emphasizing a realization of physical limitations as part of the sublime, in contradistinction to the Kantian position of the sublime arising from recognition of intellectual transcendence. But this impression of difference arises from a confusion of categories. Recognition of physical limitations ought to lead to a sense of humility, a grounding of the hu-



man in a realization of nonandrocentric reality, which could certainly form a type of transcendence, not of the idealist variety, but rather of the materialist reality of transcending, that is, crossing over and getting past, egotism, masculinist illusions of superiority, and national chauvinism. Recognition of physical limitations could also lead to an awareness of human interconnectedness and interdependency with other human beings and with other living entities on this planet. It would not seem, however, that in most literary representations of the sublime, recognition of limitations and interdependence is emphasized.

This alleged conclusion by Burke seems not to have become nearly as popular in literary and artistic representations as two of his other points of emphasis. John Pipkin notes that “Burke’s definition of the sublime contains few hints of the creative transcendence that has become the defining characteristic of sublimity for most twentieth-century readers” (604). But what does come forward in time from Burke is his belief that “the subject must place a safe distance between himself and the terrible object if an experience of sublimity is to be possible” (Pipkin 604). And, as Philip Shaw remarks, “The Burkean sublime, with its emphasis on the psychological effects of terror, proved decisive in shifting the discourse of the sublime away from the study of natural objects and towards the mind of the spectator” (71).

Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Mont Blanc” is an interesting case in point. Written in a valley, a place of relative safety, its author can contemplate the significance of the sublime power, not so much of the mountain itself as the glacier atop it that produces the River Arve. And, really, in this poem what ought to be of greater interest to ecocritics than Shelley’s emotional transport at the site of this imposing white-capped mountain is his ecological appreciation of the transformations of water from glacier and snow to river. But we also have to recognize that as part of Shelley’s involvement with expressing sublime pathos he sees the power of nature as either needing or at least benefitting from human harnessing of the water for anthropocentric purposes. He presents this idea in parallel fashion to the harnessing of the power of the mountain for his meaning making poetic purposes, as noted by Robert Schwartz (see also Reiman and Powers 93). Thus, as frequently is the case, the Romantic male poet ends up emphasizing through the trope of transcendence the intellectual appropriation of natural experience as symbol rather than sensuous, literal engagement with a material reality. For such a poet, the sublime reinforces perceptions of a naturalized hierarchy whereby nature is reduced to an inspirational vehicle for the benefit of men capable of engaging in potentially sublime activities.¹

¹ Karl Kroeber defends Shelley by downplaying his Kantian idealism, but in doing so invokes the very language of sublimity that he rejects elsewhere in his book: “What the poet looks at is no familiar, lovely landscape but manifestations of the desolate destructiveness of catastrophic geologic forces” (18). Similarly, in an effort to recuperate this poem for ecocriticism Aaron Dunckel is forced to reinscribe the nature versus human dichotomy to describe mountains and other wilderness aspects of the world in terms of “separateness,” a view that the feminist critics of the sublime roundly reject (see Dunckel 222).



The element of terror as a feature defining the sublime experience in contrast to feeling the wonder of beauty is clearly at work in many of American naturalist John Muir's essays. For example, in "A Near View of the High Sierra" (34-51), he contrasts his achievement of surviving a near-death moment mountain climbing and the elation afterward from having inspirationally found his way to safety with the tame and passive experience of a group of landscape painters he guided to a tranquil valley. They could only observe and paint the appearance of the mountains from afar, while Muir had experienced the mountains first hand through climbing through them. In writing about this experience, Muir tries in his own way to *capture* the mountain as do the artists, but unlike them he is able to make himself, not wild nature, the hero of the story. His representation is an example of what some call the heroic sublime, and a considerable amount of it is to be found in male nature writing. Shelley is more obviously a neo-Platonist Kantian idealist in his representation of the sublime than Muir, yet Muir also emphasizes an inner glory of mind over matter. Muir also demonstrates the carrying forward in time of this key Burkean element.

Before turning to Kant it is important to look at the misogynist focus of Burke's dichotomy of the sublime and the beautiful and its relationship to a fear of, and desire to, transcend death. As Pipkin argues:

for Burke beauty is also the sign of weakness inscribed on women's bodies... Since the strong passions of the sublime are beyond the limits of female experience, Burke's formulation ensures that a woman can seek her own self-preservation only by relying upon the sublimity of her husband...

But while beauty makes women attractive to their sublime husbands, it also poses a great threat to male autonomy... The beauty of the female body threatens male self-preservation because it undermines the disinterestedness required for the pursuit of the sublime. But Burke is careful to assert that the disruptive capacity of female beauty does not itself represent a form of power, because the beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness.²

While Kant will reject significant portions of Burke's theorizing, he fully embraced the misogyny and worked to exclude women philosophically from experiencing the sublime on their own terms even as European societies were increasingly working to prevent women of the upper classes from experiencing nature directly at all (see Kofman; Alexander).

² Pipkin 605-606; see also Hinnant 17, 19, 26-27. Pipkin quotes Burke here: "beauty, that this quality, where it is the highest in the female sex, almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection" (p. 605) and again, "beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness, or delicacy, and is seen enhanced by their timidity, a quality of mind analogous to it" (606).

IMMANUEL KANT

Kant, in *The Critique of Judgment*, begins with the kind of emphasis on greatness and magnitude that Longinus promoted and which would have been in line with Aristotelian concerns about magnitude, balance and harmony in the *Poetics*. Kant's mathematical and dynamical distinctions of magnitude are important to note. The former leads toward a sense of unbounded greatness, infinity. The dynamical, though, is of greater interest. In comparison to Burke's idea about physical limitations, Kant's idealism is extremely important because it displays a defensive denial of the material evidence that undomesticated nature does indeed have dominion over us and not the inverse illusion promoted in the Judeo-Christian tradition that man has dominion over the rest of nature of which we are a part. *Dominion* in the first sense here would refer to the kind of regulation and control that is established by the processes of ecosystems, the larger cycles of the biosphere, the influences of genetics on our individual bodies, and those bodies' continuous mutually sustaining interactions with a host of other living organisms. But Kant cannot entertain the possibility of a world beyond our cognition, except momentarily. Shaw points out that "Kant's *a priori* knowledge is based on the assumption that, according to Monk, 'objects must conform to our cognitions, rather than our cognitions to objects'" (73).

As Pipkin recognizes, Kant is concerned with critiquing anthropomorphism only insofar as it leads away from disinterestedness and provokes feelings of human/rest-of-nature relatedness. Instead of recognition of relative positioning within the biotic community and the rest of material existence, Kant heads toward the transcendent superiority of abstract reason over material reality by way of some supersensible substrate that underlies both nature and thought. Timothy Morton fully defends Kant's belief in the superior imaginings of the mind "surpassing any standard of sense" (Kant's words), by remarking that "The sublime transports the mind from the external world to the internal one" (46). Morton, however, never demonstrates that an internal world exists apart from material reality, but only posits such an autonomous mental state by means of ignoring neurobiology, evolutionary genetics, and cognitive science. The seemingly democratic but fundamentally reactionary character of this position can only be understood by means of a refusal to fall prey to the masculinist desire to deny human interdependence: "For Kant, the realization of the distinction between mind and world is something to be not overcome, as it is for Schelling, but rather embraced, for it is only on the basis of this fundamental division that ideas of freedom and autonomy, ideas central to ethical and political life, as well as to poetry, may be asserted" (Shaw 96).

But this embrace is based on the illusion that "freedom" can be anything more than a selection of options within constraints and a faith that "autonomy" is obtainable and desirable, despite all of the symbiotic evidence of the human body's nonvolitional interdependence on such anaerobic organisms as gut bacteria. As I have argued in earlier work, such as *Literature, Nature, and Other* (143-155), we are neither free in such an absolute abstract sense nor are we autonomous in any way except an idealist adamistic/atomistic sense that is the hall mark of masculinist



ideology. Political life in the age of climate change requires precisely the admission that no one person or nation state can go it alone and that freedom from human self-destruction depends on mutual aid, interdependent policies, and post-national cooperation.

I have to note here that in Kantian idealism the fundamental dualisms of nature/culture, man/nature, and mind/matter are also used as part of an androcentrism made to appear universal by virtue of Kant's embracing Burke's misogyny: "For Kant, then, a woman who pursues the heights of the sublime actually deprives herself of her only access to it because the only 'feminine' sublime is a vicarious one" (Pipkin 607). Ecocritical apologists for Kant, such as Morton, ignore Kant's absolute subordination of women and nature to an abstract concept of an autonomous male mind, all the while ignoring feminist revisions and critiques of Kant in general and the sublime in particular.

FEMINIST AND ECOFEMINIST REWORKINGS OF THE SUBLIME

Considerable work has been done on the sublime by feminist and ecofeminist thinkers. Anne K. Mellor in her 1993 study, *Romanticism and Gender*, distinguishes two types of women writers' responses to male representations "of the sublime as a masculinized experience of empowerment" and "the beautiful as a feminized experience of nurturing and sensuous love" in the Romantic period: "the female Gothic domesticates the sublime as paternal transgression" and "the feminine sublime" positively portrays the sublime as a democratic engagement that "can produce a sympathy or love that connects the self with other people" (90-97). Mellor concludes that rather than reinscribing the separation of the masculine and the feminine by means of the dichotomy of the beautiful and the sublime, "In this feminine Romantic tradition, the sublime combines with the beautiful to produce, not the experience of *sehnsucht*, of solitary visionary transcendence sought (however futilely) by several male Romantic poets, but an experience of communion between two different people, that very 'sympathy' or *domesticated* sublimity" (103). Just prior to the publication of Mellor's book, Patricia Yaeger defined a "maternal sublime" that she claims leads women to reject illusions of physical autonomy and mental separation from the rest of the natural world, of which their body is a dynamic element (15).

Barbara Claire Freeman, publishing two years after Mellor, sees the stance adopted by female Romantic writers as a conscious "politics of the feminine sublime [that] involves taking up a position of respect in response to an incalculable otherness" (11). This explanation, however, does not satisfy Pipkin who wants to argue that it wasn't only women who wrote from this perspective. He claims it ought to be labeled the "material sublime," which "denotes those moments either when the physical world announces itself within the textual gesture toward transcendence, effectively disrupting the act of suppression, or when the text itself foregrounds the materiality upon which the sublime experience is based" (600). Pipkin, however, finds himself going on to point out the frequency with which women writers utilized

this alternative philosophical and experiential rendering of awe inspiring and ecstatic engagements with aspects of the undomesticated natural world (601).

Despite his reservations about labeling this kind of sublime “feminine,” as Freeman willingly does, Pipkin demonstrates that many female Romantic writers approached representing nature and the sublime in directly contradictory ways from the majority of their male peers and that even some male writers adopted this disruptive aesthetic strategy, providing an extended discussion of Charlotte Smith, Mary Tighe, and John Keats (610-616).

The “Victorian female sublime” is just one of the writing strategies that Barbara Gates explores in her broadly ranging study of Romantic, Victorian, and Edwardian women, *Kindred Nature*. Aware of the cheap dismissal that chauvinists and others antipathetic to ecofeminism might make, Gates interdicts accusations of *essentialism*: “The title of this book, *Kindred Nature*, is therefore not meant to suggest kinship in terms of ‘natural’ womanhood but kinship in terms of a familiarity that was mentally and artistically apprehended and consciously and deliberately embraced” (5). Gates cites Anne Mellors, noting that

in gothic fiction, [women] altered the subject of the sublime: it was domesticated to include the potential dangers of the male-controlled home... Other romantic writers, like Lady Morgan, offered a second sort of domestication of the romantic sublime... In this kind of sublime, the fear and ecstasy aroused by mountains are literally based in mountain “homes,” the locales where women in the sublime novels actually live. These mountainous places are shared with other females and thus doubly “domesticated.” (169)

What is so significant here is the point that instead of emphasizing distance through alienation by having extreme experiences in uninhabitable locations, as 18th- and 19th-century male writers sought to do, these women emphasized shared and common experiences in inhabitable locations that become home. Rather than being *out there* somewhere, nature for these women writers and their literary characters was *right here and right now*.

Gates also identifies another type of sublime practiced by women writers other than Mellor’s domestic one, the aforementioned “Victorian female sublime,” in which women engage in individual encounters with the vastness of the world and experience similar feelings about infinity, space, and time that Burke depicted. But, Gates argues, unlike the British masculinist terrifying sublime with an emphasis on horror and triumph, women such as Mary Kingsley emphasize a sublime experience consisting of “a loss of human distinctiveness, a sense of infinitude—Kingsley becomes ‘part of the atmosphere’” (169). As Gates argues, “the Victorian female sublime emphasized not power *over* nature but the power *of* nature in a given place, and not a rhetoric of presence so much as a rhetoric based in absence, especially absence of the self” (170).

Unlike many studies of writers engaging the sublime, Gates does not focus exclusively on poetry or fiction, but includes nonfiction as well. She turns to the Himalayan climbing travel writer, Nina Mazuchelli: “In these remote places, she does not just describe eagles, as did Parks. She becomes an eagle... She is in har-



mony with domesticated as well as wild nature” (174). Mazuchelli does not seek out the sublime in order to triumph or dominate or solidify an egotistical sense of superiority. Rather, reports Gates, in experiencing the sublime, she intuits a loss of individualistic identity (175-176). And, rather than the balance of this experience being treated as a loss, it is treated as being one of gain, because the women Gates discusses gain as sense of integration, inhabitation, identification, and relatedness denied them by the patriarchal societies in which they lived and which emphasized their separateness in order to maintain illusions of individualism and autonomy for their male counterparts.

MASCULINIST SUBLIME TODAY

In his 2005 study, *Sublimity*, James Kirwan quotes Bill Beckley, who, in introducing a collection of writing on the sublime in 2001, declared: “to acknowledge the sublime is to admit that there is something, God or nature, that defines and transcends human culture and what it means to be human” (153). Some dozen years earlier, the aesthetician Paul Crowthers in an effort to revive interest in Kant waxed enthusiastic about the elevation achieved by the sublime, precisely not in terms of what it might say about natural objects, events, or other dimensions of the material world but rather what it tells us about the “utter extraordinariness of what it is to be human” (qtd. Kirwan 154). Could we get any farther away from the alleged sites and sights of the sublime than this? In a curiously tortuous argument, contemporary neo-Kantians argue that the overwhelming magnitude of external phenomena leads to a recognition of the limits of human existence, but instead of that recognition generating a sense of humility it provides a justification for claiming that we are superior to the rest of nature because we recognize that it is greater than we are.

Kirwan concludes his study by recognizing that the sublime exists only within the human mind and is not a quality of objects; rather “this complex—involving the entertainment of a feeling of transcending mundane limits, the projection of our ‘greatness’ onto an external object, and the subjective perception of the pleasure as devoid of self-interest—is not a *response* to the sublime but rather constitutes the sublime, the experience of sublimity” (164). And, as such, it does not lead in itself to any change in behavior on the part of those who entertain such feelings: “The very enclosed, or autonomous, nature of the experience, without which it cannot sustain itself, makes any translation into action a matter of the introduction of a third term, an interpretation” (165). That is to say, for the sublime to have any potentially positive effects in terms of human perceptions of their place in the world, their responsibilities toward other entities with which they share the planet, their treatment of a particular biosphere or habitat requires an interpretation of this intuition or emotion on the basis of an ideological position that must necessarily exist beyond the confines of the sublime.

I would concur with that conclusion as I have revised it here. But Kirwan makes two mistakes in reaching it. First, while it is true that the sublime, just like pity, fear, joy, beauty, or ugliness has to reside as an emotional experience within



the human mind, that recognition does not justify a corollary claim that external reality does not provide requisite conditions for the generation of such feelings as socialized responses to phenomena. Second, because he ignores feminist critiques of the sublime, Kirwan cannot consider the other kinds of sublime representations that Mellor, Freeman, Pipkin, and Gates analyze, and so cannot entertain the mutually sustaining relationship of experience and emotional response. But I want to suggest that Mellor and Gates are not actually defining the sublime experience. Rather, they are defining different types of interpretations of an experience that, while outwardly similar in features, is internalized and interpreted from completely different vantage points. It is, then, not the female experience of the sublime that should be our focus but rather the feminist and ecofeminist interpretations of the experience of sublime feelings.

It is perhaps noteworthy that two of the most well established ecocritical scholars of the Romantics, one from the U.S. and one from the U.K., both dislike the sublime. Karl Kroeber in *Ecological Literary Criticism* makes it clear that he prefers to focus his attention on the Romantics' treatment of beauty, since that is a relational perception of nature. He only mentions the sublime twice in his study: once in discussing Byron's *Cain*, where he claims that "Cain rejects Lucifer's preference for sublimity over beauty"; and, again in an endnote where he identifies critical fascination with sublimity as "another manifestation of the Cold War mentality, particularly in its excluding serious consideration of beauty" and then returns to Cain's rejection remarking that it elicits "the displeasure of Lucifer, whose liking for the masculinely sexist Burkean sublime fits snugly into his ethic of abstract universalizing, his desire to separate intellectuality from sensory experience" (117, 173, 174).

Jonathan Bate also prefers beauty and cites Theodor Adorno in his critique of the sublime: "Adorno would say that the increasing technological domination of nature which marked the eighteenth century led to the repression of nature's wildness. The repressed returns, but as a shiver of delight rather than a shudder of true impotence, in the frisson which eighteenth-century aestheticians called 'the sublime'" (122). As a result, Bate is at pains to recuperate Wordsworth's sublime moments by searching out ecological insights and anti-transcendental elements. He claims, for instance, Wordsworth sees consciousness as part of nature (147-149), with the result that the increasing sensitivity and awareness generated by a moment of sublime intensity does not carry a person from external nature to internal mind but links the two. He clarifies this idea later when he associates the poet John Clare with the French intellectual Gaston Bachelard: "For Clare, as for Bachelard... the interior order of the human mind is inextricable from the environmental space which we inhabit. Sanity depends upon grounding in place. But it also depends upon grounding in time" (173).

Philip Shaw makes the point that for Wordsworth, "The proper movement of the Imagination is therefore 'away from power' and towards a form of 'humanizing' reconciliation" (102). This turning away from power sounds quite similar to what Gary Lee Stonum finds occurring in some of Emily Dickinson's poems. As he notes, "Dickinson's poetry takes the established patterns of the romantic sublime and gives them an additional twist, one which works to circumvent the otherwise



deep complicity between sublimity and mastery” (68; see also 79, 111). Bate’s Wordsworthian type of sublime may then very well be compatible with Gates’s feminine forms of the sublime in that the moment of excess, or overwhelming expansiveness, gives rise to an acceptance and embracing of a person’s place within that vastness rather than an intellectual flight from it. Certainly a move toward a nonhierarchical perception of humanity’s fit with the rest of this planet would be a step any ecofeminist could cheer.

Social advances in many countries have released women from the constrictions of Victorian and other repressive societies to travel more freely and independently of male chaperones, and women have written extensively about their travels and experiences in both far away and extreme locales. But I do not see that this has produced a flurry of sublime experiences represented as such in poetry, fiction, or nonfiction. Certainly Mary Oliver has poems of rapture, but if they are any kind of sublime it is that of the female sublime in which her ecstasy is like that of Sappho’s erotic and within the body as a living material reality in which the mind exists and over which it certainly does not exert control, as in *American Primitive*, as Yaeger notes in her essay (6-9, 14-16).

In novels such as those by Barbara Kingsolver or Linda Hogan there are sustained evocations of immersion in natural elements that produce altered perspectives, open up possibilities for inhabitation, and invariably promote integration or reintegration into an environment. The decisions of the female characters in Kingsolver’s *Animal Dreams* and *Prodigal Summer* and those in Hogan’s *Solar Storms* and *Power* exemplify such evocations. The sublime for them seems to be an overwhelming sense of sharing and participating in a supersensible world. Such an orientation resembles Mary Wollstonecraft’s experience, whose trip to Sweden, Norway, and Denmark proved transformative for her apprehension of human-nature interrelationship (Hust 139). In direct contrast to William Gilpin, who declared the Scandinavian landscapes “too inartistically excessive to be properly sublime” (Hust 148; Bowerbank 178-181). Wollstonecraft did find an engagement with them that transported her to an altered perspective. Karen Hust argues that on this trip Wollstonecraft became able to reject her earlier binary opposition between beauty and chaos and the paths they dictated of “dissolution and transcendence” (152). Instead she found her senses and her imagination converging, such that “She frames the complex web of identity and difference that flows between her environment and her self as a dynamic in which mind and world are interdependent” (156).

So, is the sublime salvageable for a progressive aesthetics based on ecofeminist criteria? Yes, if we define the sublime in terms of a *participatory* or *integrational* sublime. And, we can even work up a definition of a *transcendental* sublime, but only if we completely redefine what we mean by that adjective. If we think of *transcendental* along the lines of idealist philosophy whether of the Kantian variety or the Romantic neoplatonist one, the sublime works against ecological values because it places a premium on the human mind separated from the body and the brain as a source of immaterial ideas. It also fails us if it leads to thoughts about deities and otherworldly rewards that would emphasize a lack of attention to material reality in order to seek a spiritual reality that sees the world and the human body as debased



sources of temptation and sites of death. If, instead of these two common conceptions of the *transcendental* we were to emphasize a crossing over from and rising above egocentrism and androcentrism in order to embrace ecocentrism and biotic intersubjectivity then we could support that type of sublime as consonant with ecofeminist values.

But actually, the longer I have worked on this study, the even less and less enamored of the very term itself have I become. Hust, despite all of her criticism of the sublime, finds herself trying to salvage the term for the present, because she believes that it “informs all of what is now called ecocriticism.” She concludes, then, that “if ‘the sublime’ refers to a mode of experience and writing that allows us to reconnect with and express the power we apprehend in the more-than-human world, it may be crucial to the work of the twenty-first century” (161). In other words, she attempts to salvage the term by redefining the concept as far from standard historical usage as possible. Perhaps that is a bit too much like staying married to an abusive husband because he keeps promising to get counseling. And if, indeed, virtually all of Anglo-American ecocriticism is informed by conceptions of the sublime, then perhaps it needs to undergo some serious self-examination.

Rather than an experience of the sublime, many of the writers discussed by Freeman, Mellor, Gates, and me are probably experiencing something else, an intellectual interpretation of sensuous engagement that cannot be adequately described by the language available. Perhaps other terms ought to be considered, such as *liminescence* (a sensation of in-betweenness) or *transport* (being carried beyond the threshold of ego-identity) or even *attendance* (a sense of engagement without a sense of distance). Further, the work of developing a new term and definition could benefit from conceiving it through the portal of “invitational rhetoric,” as presented by Kathleen Ryan and Elizabeth Natalie in “Fusing Horizons: Standpoint Hermeneutics and Invitation Rhetoric,” Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin in “Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric,” and other theorists (Ryan and Natalie; Foss and Griffin).³ Here I can only point in this direction and encourage others to take up the pursuit.

Ecofeminism can contribute to a revisioning of the sublime in a variety of ways. One way is through nondominational rhetoric, such as invitational rhetoric and heterarchical dialogue aligned with efforts to perceive other parts of the biotic community as speaking subjects. Another way is to look at the implications of the partnership ethics of caring that Carolyn Merchant emphasizes in *Earthcare*, as well as the implication of ecofeminist dialogics (Murphy 3-30). An ecofeminist critique of the sublime is needed for us to continue our re-evaluation of environmental writing and to continue to critique the limitations of an ecocriticism that was initially

³ Ryan and Natalie define invitational rhetoric in the following way: “Invitational rhetoric is offered as a non-adversarial rhetorical alternative to employ when the rhetorical situation calls for mutual understanding of issues and perspectives. Invitational rhetoric is grounded in the feminist principles of equality, immanent value, and self-determination and replaces patriarchal values of domination, competition, and change” (70).



developed on the basis of privileging two types of male-dominated writing: nonfiction nature essays and Romantic poetry. Both of these types of writing, which reflect not only problems with gender bias but also national chauvinism, limit the degree to which we can appreciate and promote the contributions of women writers and the perceptions of women natural historians and essayists. Further, a rethinking of the hierarchy of environmental writing genres would open a much wider attention to literary fiction where so many women have contributed to environmental awareness and where the sublime appears only fleetingly if at all.

Finally, rethinking the sublime requires a reflection on the dangerous and destructive dichotomies that an embrace of Kantian idealism entails. As Freeman succinctly puts it, Kant “shows what must be barred from the *Critique of Judgment*: an ethics and aesthetics of attachment rather than detachment” (112). It also requires a rethinking of the masculinist attitudes toward power and violence that seek out and infuse near death events and reckless behavior with delight and an egotistical illusion of mastery. It challenges the hierarchical domination that places beauty and women on a lower level than sublime terror and the men who experience it. And, finally, it challenges any claims to the superiority of interior-oriented mental imagining to external oriented sensuous engagement with the more than human world that ought to incite humility along with awe rather than some foolish intoxication from fortunate survival.

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