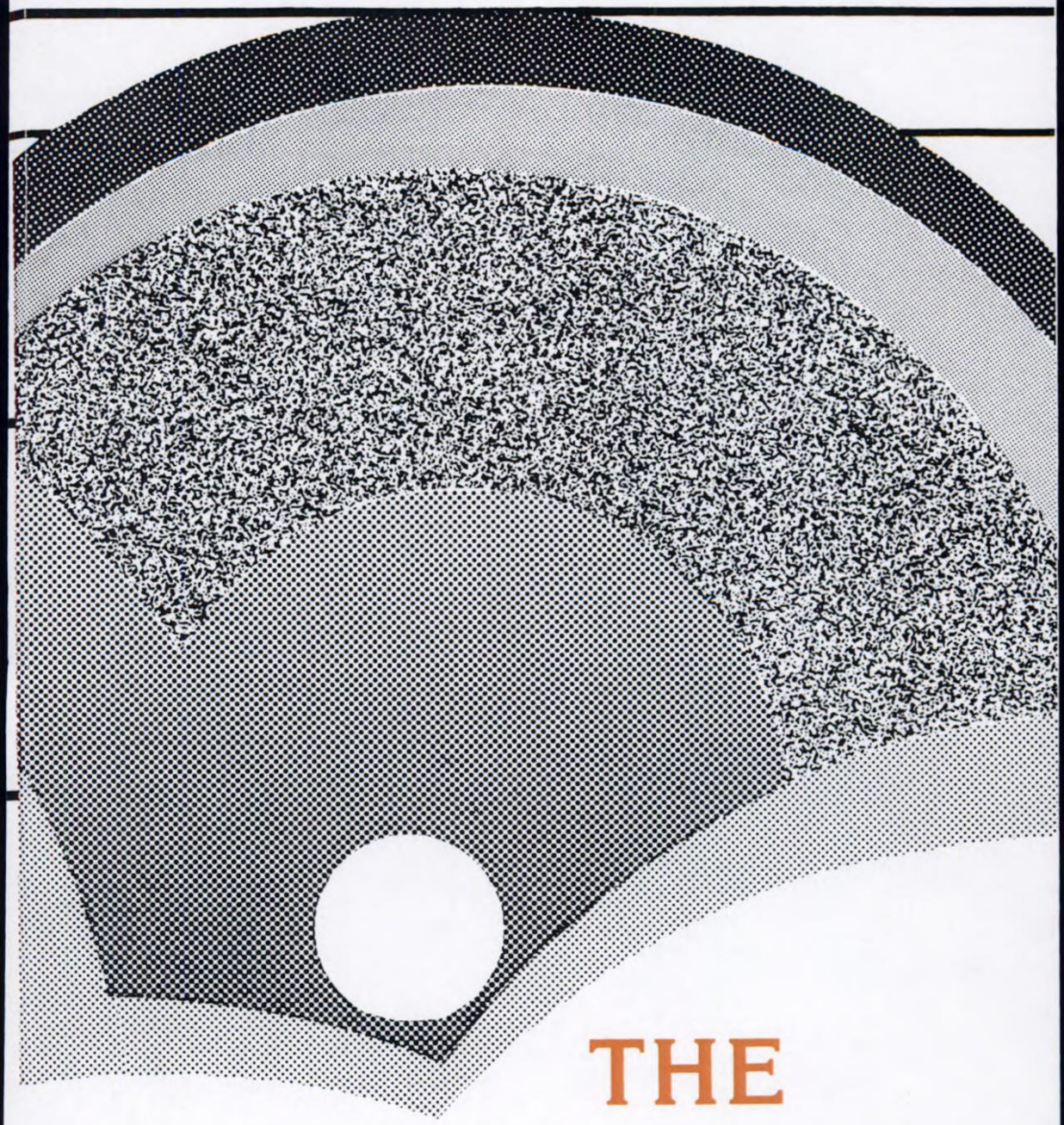

THE AMERICAN SUBLIME

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Acknowledgments

The idea for this collection was germinated in an old fashioned seminar room in Thames Hall on the Connecticut College campus many years ago. As the spring rain misted the apple blossoms outside, inside we discussed "supreme fictions," particularly those of the American poets Whitman, Dickinson and Wallace Stevens. Later there was the "American Sublime" of Harold Bloom whose "capable imagination" revised our poetic canon through those "negative moments" or sublime crossings mapped out in this volume. I am also indebted to the following colleagues and relatives whose support and intelligence were invaluable: Professors Sara Schyfter, Sarah Blacher Cohen, Eugene Garber, Donald Stauffer, Aaron Rosenblatt, Harry Staley, Randall Craig, Mary Anne Sullivan Devane, Helen Desfosses, Elizabeth Wilson; Elizabeth, Tom and Barbara Blatner and my son, Phillip.

Chapter 1

Introduction: The American Sublime

MARY ARENSBERG

Ghostlike we glide through nature,
and should not know our place again

––Emerson

In one of his last poems, Wallace Stevens assumes the cloak of Ulysses to speak about the quest of all wandering poets: the search for the "sublime." He envisions the sublime as an "englistered woman . . . seen/in an isolation, separate from the human in humanity,/a part of the inhuman more,/The still inhuman more." Yet she remains a metaphor, an image for something that cannot be named, precisely because the sublime is the inhuman, the realm of things beyond ourselves, the dimension of otherness we can never know. Not finding her in human form, not even in the patience of Penelope, Stevens-Ulysses sets sail once more, seeking a voice, a way of knowing beyond the human threshold. *Limen*, boundary or threshold from the Latin, is both the etymological and philosophical root of the sublime.[1] Poems get written, then, because that threshold has never been crossed or articulated; for to trangress that boundary, to speak with the tongue of a god would be to achieve the sublime and also silence.

The Romantic Sublime of Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth was preoccupied with crossings between self and nature—what they called transcendence—and with the boundlessness of the universe or a field of daffodils. Yet, in his stunning account, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*, Thomas Weiskel suggests that since we "live in an age when we have lost the obsession with natural infinitude" and can look back at our earth from the vantage of a space vehicle, the idea of a sublime may well be a "moribund aesthetic." He goes on to demonstrate that in "contemporary criticism and the development of structuralist thinking as well, we learn how very little of our creations belongs to individual vision and choice."[2] We live in a place that is increasingly finite, limited, and, as Stevens said, "not our own." Ten years have passed since Weiskel's own death and this pronouncement; since then, not only has our sense of the heavens diminished, but also, our sense of ourselves.

The past decade in American literary criticism has confirmed Weiskel's perceptions: even as the Star Wars project threatens to crowd the void of outer space, so the literary enterprise known as "deconstruction" undermines the notions of Self, Nature, Imagination, Truth, Reality, constructs formerly identified with the Romantic sublime. Since the importation of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction into this country by the Yale School critics, J. Hillis Miller and Paul deMan, and numerous misreadings of Derridean practice by American critics, the "ultimate truths" of language (Self, God, Essence, and so on) have been called into question. No longer do some of us view language signs as absolutes or transcendental signifieds.[3] Instead, these former anchors of meaning have been cast back into the vast sea of textuality where no word or sign is privileged over any other: "freedom is just another word" and, in fact, a fiction invented through the free play of other words and signs. The sublime, too, in poststructuralist thinking, becomes a fiction for transcendence, itself a fiction of absolute disclosure. However, within the free play of language

and its various scenes, the sublime is alive and doing well, although it may be living under the guise of assumed names. This collection of essays is an inquiry into those assumed names: how to identify those American texts which open up a quest for the sublime, and particularly, how to read sublimity in the poststructuralist mode.

It is necessary to begin with "Longinus," whose third century *Peri Hypsos (On Great Writing)*, is the origin or at least the beginning of the tradition of the sublime. His text opens up the question of the sublime as a linguistic effect by stating that: "Sublimity is always an eminence and excellence in language."[4] The Longinian sublime is essentially rhetorical and identified as the reader's response to great utterance. "For it is a fact of Nature that the soul is raised by true Sublimity, it gains a proud flight upwards, it is filled with joy and exhultation, as though itself had produced what it hears." The crucial words in this passage, *as though*, suggest that even in this ancient reader's sublime, the moment of sublimity is always a language scene which produces an uncanny metaphorical effect. Affect, however, the emotional response, is attributed to the "reader" who experiences not a *déjà vu* but a *déjà écrit*: it seems as if she has written what she has heard. Yet, even as he grounds his sublime in language, Longinus goes on to describe an extra-linguistic or affective aim: "Sublimity . . . parts all matter this way and that, and like a lightning flash, reveals, at a stroke and in its entirety, the power of the orator." In these few passages, Longinus supplies us with several of the rhetorical and psychologic structures which inform the problematic of the sublime, ancient or modern:

1. The experience of the sublime is an affective or emotional response (joy and ecstasy) to **power, authenticity** or **authority.**

2. This **power** is perceived in a moment (like a "lightning flash") through the effects of speech and language.

3. The sublime moment is preceded by a disruption in normal consciousness ("parts all matter this way and that") whose equilibrium must be restored.

4. Equilibrium is seemingly restored through an identification with that **power** or **authority** ("exhalts our soul as though we had created what we merely heard") and a **repression** of that power.

5. The repression takes the form of a **defense** (in this case **mimesis**) in which the reader makes the sublime her own.

To some readers, this outline of the Longinian sublime may seem uncannily familiar: as Neil Hertz has brilliantly pointed out, there are the elements of an Oedipal conflict inherent in the reader's confrontation with great writing, and we can also detect the sketchy patterns of Harold Bloom's readings of the sublime and its relationship to literary influence.[5] Finally, the Longinian sublime is also suggestive of other poststructuralist theories of language which discount the referential capacity of words or signs and deny that meaning is immediately present in language. Already in Longinus, the sublime is a trope, a metaphor, which includes both its rhetorical elements (subject, reader, poet and object, text, discourse), as well as its psychological strain or the experiential response to great language.

Although the Longianian sublime articulates the "problem," the modern or negative sublime finds its full expression in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. Yet the bridge between the ancient reader's sublime and the Kantian drama of the imagination is the eighteenth century which retrieved "Longinus" from the ancients and foraged his version of sublimity for its own purposes. Addison and Burke were the first to distinguish between the sublime and the beautiful; since then, the beautiful is reserved for positive qualities, while the sublime is linked with emotions of displeasure such as anxiety, panic, and terror. Evoked by moments of extreme aphasia or disorientation, the "sublime," according to Bruce Clarke, "tends to break continuities and open epistemological gaps."[6] Thus the eighteenth century sublime becomes obsessed, not with the moment of restored power or identification, but with the

moment of breaking or the experience of discontinuity that precedes the sublimatory act.

Concurrent with this positioning of anxiety as the central emotional response to the sublime by Burke, particularly, was the Lockean notion of anxiety elicited by the perception of absence. Locke, of course, was concerned with the absence of the soul, the empty vessel, which becomes, in more modern versions of the sublime, the nothingness of the self and the perceived loss of the Other. Absence and anxiety, the twin affective strains of the eighteenth century sublime, displace the Longinian emotions of joy and exhaltation, to become the central participants in Kant's drama, and, in fact, define its psychologic structure.

Kant's scenario of the sublime is divided into two types: the first is the **mathematical** sublime that may be described as the imagination's inability to grasp magnitude or endless progressions; the second, the **dynamical** sublime, is concerned with the effect of power on the imagination. In both instances, the psychic operation fictionalized by Kant occurs within the mind of the subject without the direct participation of the object; the object merely exists to initiate the psychic response. Unlike the Longinian sublime, in which the object is subsumed by the subject, in the Kantian version, the object is seemingly erased while reason is privileged over the imaginative or psychodynamic faculty.

Weiskel has outlined the three phases of the Kantian models.[7] In the first phase, the mind and object are in a determinate relationship; there is a smooth correspondence between inside and out, and equilibrium is maintained. During the second phase, however, the normal relationship between subject and object is destroyed, and either the subject or object is suddenly in excess. This moment of disorientation may occur at any time in response to a phenomenon in nature, perhaps a line of poetry or even an unconscious memory. It is as though there were an anxiety attack engendered on the imagination resulting in

displeasure and unease. In the third and final phase, equilibrium is restored through the mind's "constituting a fresh relation between itself and the object such that the very indeterminacy which erupted in phase two is taken as symbolizing the mind's relation to a transcendent order."[8] In other words, sublimation occurs when reason comes to rescue the tottering imagination to restore the primacy of reason and its limitations. The fall into reason makes the abyss of magnitude or power symbolically cognate with the infinitude or abyss of the human mind.

Two fictional psychic functions are disclosed in this outline: first is the collapse of the imaginative faculty, and second, the aggrandizing of reason which is called on to reconstitute the psychic balance. Precipitated by an imagined excess in the object, the subject's crisis emerges from a fear of being engulfed; to dissuade the anxiety, the subject evolves a reaction formation or psychic defense. In this defense, the imagination is repressed and reason emerges as psychic victor. It is not difficult to transpose Kant's formulations into a Freudian psychodrama in which the subject becomes the ego; the object, the Other; while reason is a hypothetical superego. The ego, in the first stages of the sublime, is threatened by a surplus of stimulation from the object and experiences fear of injury (castration) or power (incorporation). "This anxiety is met by a reaction formation . . . which precipitates a recapitulation of the Oedipus Complex; this in turn yields to a feeling of guilt (superego anxiety) and is resolved through identification (introjection)."[9] Although this scheme, which follows Wieskel's guidelines for a Freudian sublime, is inherently reductive, it does demonstrate the natural progression from the Kantian account of negative sublimity to versions of the modern sublime grounded in both Kant and Freud.

The critic who has perpetually mused on Freud and the sublime is Harold Bloom. *In Poetry and Repression* and *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, particularly, Bloom articulates Freud's "enormous importance in the history of the sublime" and then constructs his own

theories of literary influence and sublimity from the Freudian models.[10] Bloom reads Freud as "the last great theorist of that (sublime) mode," and calls the essay on "The Uncanny": "the only major contribution that the twentieth century has made to the aesthetics of the sublime." Reading the essay in what he calls his antithetical stance, Bloom discloses Freud's true subject (one he has repressed) as the sublime rather than the uncanny.

> Anxieties when confronted with anterior powers are overtly the concerns of the essay on "the uncanny." E. T. Hoffman's *The Sand Man* provides Freud with his text, and for once Freud allows himself to be a very useful practical critic of an imaginative story. The repetition-compulsion . . . brilliantly is invoked to open up what is hidden in the story. Uncanniness is traced back to the narcisscistic belief in "omnipotence of thought" which in aesthetic terms is necessarily the power of the mind over the universe of the senses and death.[11]

In this passage, Bloom links the sublime with narcissism and repression, the centerpieces of his own theories of literary history and intertextuality, at the same time he represses the tradition of the sublime ("anxieties when confronted with anterior powers") to make a space for his own. Omnipotence of thought, or the neurotic illusion that we can think something into being, is transposed by Freud-Bloom into the third or restorative phase of the scenario of the sublime.

Other of Bloom's "misreadings" of Freud, which turn on the theories of the primal scene and the family romance, eventuate into his six-part rhetorical psychology of poetic origins, genealogy, and the sublime.[12] The story begins with the post-Enlightenment's "strong" poetry, Milton and after, where the young poet (ephebe), having initially fixated on and primally repressed the power of a strong precursor-poet, chooses his/her own counter-sublime to combat the perceived "threat." Finding his/her own voice through a repression of the "father" poet, the seemingly

liberated ephebe can finally identify with the precursor through acts of misreading the antecedent's text. "Three times the strong latecomer contracts and withdraws himself, experiencing a 'negative moment' followed by a 'crossing' over into expansive acts of positive self-representation."[13] Yet, in the final stage, the revision is so complete, it seems as if the ephebe had written what the poetic father had indeed created. Bloom's own counter-sublime here sounds uncannily familier, a misreading of Burke, Kant, and Freud; however, like his true precursor, Longinus, he opens up the problem of the sublime "yet once more."

II

> There is no outside, no enclosing wall, no circumference to us.
>
> Emerson, "Circles"

When we move from the two Kantian sublimes, which inform and structure the British Romantic sublime, to the American sublime, there is still the problem of nature's surplus signification (its vastness and infinitudes), and there remain the problems of "belatedness' and the self. American poetics has been radicalized in recent years by such antithetical readers as Harold Bloom and John Irwin.[14] Emphasis has shifted from Adamic models of American romanticism with their virgin landscapes and notions of prelapsarian, unmediated vision to a dramatic scenario of an American counter-sublime. The epic solipsism, myths of the self, discussed by earlier readers of *Leaves of Grass* and *Paterson*, has been displaced by revisionist theories of intertextuality which replay and ground the poets of the American sublime against their Romantic precursors. In its revisionist incarnation, the American self of the traditional Emerson dissolves, splintering into what Bloom calls a "self-rebetting" of the self. Tracing an almost exclusively

patrilineal line that begins with Emerson and ends, right now, with Ammons and Ashbery, Bloom has fathered a version of the American sublime which downplays rather than registers the importance of the precursor. The American sublime, according to Bloom, "begins anew not with the restoration or rebirth . . . of the Wordsworthian Sublime, but that is truly past such displacement."[15] Instead, the American sublime is a merger, a blending of the poetic self with the fathering force of an anterior power. Bloom's own assumption, which distinguishes his theories from those of the deconstructionists, is that there is a self, a tangible voice, which in Emerson cries out "I and the Abyss."

A strong contender for the most sublime passage in the American canon is Ishmael's discourse on the whiteness of the whale in *Moby Dick.*

> Is it by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihiliaiton, when beholding the white depths of the Milky Way? Or is it that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for all these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all color of atheism from which we shrink . . . so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him.[16]

Here Ishmael's anxiety stems not so much from the "heartless voids" and immensities of the universe that proves so threatening to his English Romantic precursors, but from the "dumb blankness" of the whale that mirrors the abyss of himself. Melville's version of the psychodrama of the sublime is not resolved through a cathartic identification between outside and inside as in the Kantian drama, nor is there a return to an Oedipal confrontation and introjection of the rival. In the American brand of sublimity, the imagination finds itself the inhabitant of a

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