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THE NATURAL SUBLIME
IN WORDSWORTH'S POETRY AND ROMANTIC LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS

During the second half of the eighteenth century the meaning of the word "sublime" shifted radically from a rhetorical to an aesthetic, psychological and philosophical sense. The popularity of the *Peri Hupsous*, the Greek treaty by the pseudo-Longinus first translated in English in 1652, had established the distinction between the elevated style and energy (art's capacity to raise passion) as an aesthetic emotion. After Boileau emphasized "l'extraordinaire et le merveilleux" in the archetypal sublime effect of the divine "Fiat lux", "sublime" became a common critical term. John Dennis, insisting on the violent emotion caused by the sublime—especially with heightened spiritual feelings—and Addison, reinforced the element of pathos in sublimity, which culminated almost in empathy with John Baillie. Lockian sensationalism had helped theoreticians to focus interest on sublimity as a sensory experience, not as a quality present in the object. Locke's subjective psychology encouraged an aesthetic of mass and space: the feeling or thought produced by the contemplation of an object is proportional to the size of the object. The mind of man, says Addison, experiences a feeling of bafflement, a sense of awe and wonder at the view of a "vast, uncultivated desert, of huge heaps of mountains, high rocks and precipices, or a wide expanse of waters," because it "naturally hates everything that looks like a restraint upon it and is apt to fancy itself under a sort of confinement, when the sight is pent up in a narrow compass" [Addison 412].

It was Smith who, anticipating Burke, first derived an aesthetic of terror from such sublime objects as ghosts, darkness, storms and precipices. Thomson in *The Seasons*, travellers on the Grand Tour encountering an awe-inspiring scenery, had recognized the link between sublimity and terror; as early as 1688, Dennis wrote about "a delightful Horror, a terrible Joy" [Dennis 133-34]. Yet Burke's systematized theory of 1757 ("Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger . . . is a source of the *sublime*" [Burke 39]) provided philosophical legitimacy for the two concepts most widely re-interpreted by Romantic inheritors of the sublime: the negativity involved in its experience, and its anti-pictorial representation. For Burke, delight in the

sublime results from experiencing negative emotions (pain and fear); privation and difficulty are listed among psycho-aesthetic sources of the sublime. Also, he denies that the clarifying effect of imitation in painting can produce as powerful a sublimity as the obscure, non-imagistic words of poetry. He thus paves the way for the Romantic revaluation of the *ut pictura poesis*.

To the neo-classical theoreticians of the French Royal Academy sublimity had been synonymous with the Grand Style, the Grand Gusto, Grace and Greatness. De Piles praised Raphael's sublimity for its grace; Felibien and du Fresnoy thought Michelangelo was sublime as a mighty designer. George Turnbull, in his *Treatise on Ancient Painting*, first endowed the critical term with aesthetic connotations; he discussed a sense of space in sky and landscape and suggested that "huge Mountains, Rocks, awful towering Objects" could achieve a sublime effect in paintings. Reynolds' academic defence of the Longinian sublime in Raphael's *Cartoons* was outweighed by his personal attraction for the Burkean sublime in Michelangelo's *terribilità*. But only with Fuseli was the sublime seriously established within the landscape while integrating elements of terror. For according to Fuseli the "epic" or "sublime" manner was best illustrated by Salvator Rosa's *Hannibal Passing the Alps; the Mountains Rolling down Rocks upon his Army; Elephants Tumbling down the Precipices*, or Richard Wilson's *Niobe* (1760)—narrating the destruction of Niobe's children—with its massive impending rocks and violent torrent. In the landscape of these historical scenes, a new sublime of wild, rugged nature was given pride of place.

Set against this background, Wordsworth's critical definition of the sublime in the *Guide to the Lakes* of 1810 owes much to Burke. It preserves the distinction between the sublime and the beautiful and maintains Burkean categories ("a sense of individual form", "a sense of power" [*Prose Works* 2.351]). But to him the sublimity of mountains and water is connected with magnitude, magnificent confusion and violence when applied to Alpine scenery, rather than to the Lake District:

> Having dwelt so much upon the beauty of pure and still water, and pointed out the advantage which the lakes of the North of England have is this particular over those of the Alps, it would be injustice not to advert to the sublimity that must often be given to the Alpine scene, by the agitations to which those vast bodies of diffused water are there subject . . . If the commotions be at all proportionate to the expanse and depths of the waters, and the height of the surrounding mountains, then the exhibition must be awful and astonishing. [*Prose Works* 2.238-39.]

In fact the terrific natural sublime experienced by Walpole and Gray in the Grande Chartreuse in 1739 occurs almost only in his early loco-descriptive poetry and in *The Prelude*. These poems exhibit a topopoetic approach to

mountains, especially the Alps, which has equivalents in contemporary landscapists' pictorial apprehension of mountain space. In *Descriptive Sketches*, which is indebted to the Burkean accounts of tours of Switzerland by William Coxe and Raymond de Carbonnières, the Wordsworthian sublime enforces Burkean categories to the letter. The lines "Mid savage rocks, and seas of snow that shine, /Between interminable tracts of pine" [ll. 540-41], are a perfect instance of the Burkean "artificial infinite" constituted by the "succession and uniformity of parts" [Burke 139]. But it is also contaminated by Gilpin's picturesque, that external, pictorial form of the sublime, a sublime "made visible by its mixture with the familiar" [Price 265]. Wordsworth did subscribe to Burke's anti-pictorialism when he wrote in a note to the poem: "I had once given to those sketches the title of Picturesque, but the Alps are insulted in applying to them that term. It is impossible to describe their sublime features according to the cold rules of painting." [*Poetical Works* 62.] However, he often inserts distancing picturesque characters in sublime sceneries. The "boatman" who, "overawed before/The pictured fane of Tell" in "The wood-crowned cliffs that o'er the lake recline", "suspends his oars" [ll. 278, 285-86], mediates the observer's astonishment just like the dismounted peasant in the foreground of Joseph Wright of Derby's *Matlock Tor, Moonlight,* who stands transfixed, his head raised toward the dark, overwhelming cliff. Similarly, the "cowering shape" of the gipsy who "seeks a covert" "When lightning among clouds and mountain-snows/Predominates, and darkness comes and goes,/ And the fierce torrent, at the flashes broad/Starts, like a horse" [ll. 179-83], externalizes the terror experience only slightly less theatrically than the woman on the pathway fleeing from the tumult of natural disaster, in James de Loutherbourg's *Avalanche in the Alps* (1803).

The Gothic atmosphere pervading Wordsworth's view of the Grande Chartreuse, with its animistic creatures and its anthropomorphism embodying the human into natural forms, also acts as a mediator between the landscape and the subjective experience of horror:

> Cloud-piercing pine-trees nod their troubled heads,
> Spires, rocks, and lawns a browner night o'erspreads;
> Strong terror checks the female peasant's sigh;
> . . . .
> A viewless flight of laughing Daemons mock
> The Cross
>
> [ll. 63-65, 69-70].

This atmosphere is derived from the scenery in *The Vale of Esthwaite*, whose dismal castle and "many a rock high and steep" which "Hung brooding on the darksome deep" [ll. 392-93] are akin to the violent aesthetic of Thomas Girtin's *Bambrugh Castle* (c. 1797-1799). Here the breathtaking height of the

ruined eyrie, exalted by the idealized site, the conventionally mysterious characters, the melodramatic sky, the quasi monochromatic colour of the rock and the minutely detailed architectural drawing, turn the sublime literary.

For the Romantic sublime cannot be encountered indirectly; it is basically a solitary experience. "Among the more awful scenes of the Alps, I had no thought of man, or a single created being, my whole soul was turned to him who produced the terrible majesty before me" [*Letters* 34], says Wordsworth. The poet's dehumanized "stern mountain solitude" is aptly illustrated by some of John Cozens' and J. W. Turner's Alpine scenes where characters are reduced to the limits of iconic representation. In *Near Chiavenna, in the Grisons* (c. 1791), the monochromatic, non-defined, non-deictic central figures are identified with the landscape; the chiaroscuro emphasizes the sublime contrast between their tiny silhouettes and the arresting masses of the rocks which threateningly block almost all the horizon. In *The Old Devil's Bridge, St. Gothard* (1802), the two white dots signalling human presence on the bridge hardly disturb the vertical treatment of bare rock which is severely imposed upon the whole surface. The stern pleasure felt by Wordsworth as he faced mountain grandeur ("where . . /In Nature's pristine majesty outspread,/ Winds neither road nor path for foot to tread:/The rocks rise as naked as wall" [*Descriptive Sketches*, ll. 227-30]), is in fact associated by painters with an anti-perspectival aesthetic. The formula of the classical landscape—"an open foreground, like a stage. . . framing trees on one side balanced by an answering motive on the other, and a circuitous path taking the eye by easy and varied stages to a luminous distance" [Kitson 7]—is rejected. The sky is almost evacuated. The vanishing point is brought abruptly close to the viewer, a vertical wall coinciding with the surface. In Cozens' *Grande Chartreuse* (1783), the dark brown rock invading three quarters of the canvas and forbidding the eye to escape almost anticipates the modern spectator's radical confrontation with the abstract sublime in Rothko's pure colour masses. The horror of natural sublime also uses violent pictorial confusion to subvert rational perspective. In *The Fall of an Avalanche in the Grisons* (1810), Turner outdoes Loutherbourg by the contrast in size between the huge crashing boulder and the small crushed cottage, the powerful semi-circular movement where the white turmoil of the snow is frontally antagonized by the relentless darkness of the sky, and the ruggedness of paint handling emphasized by the low tone of the pigment.

By comparison, Wordsworth's use of poetic diction in the avalanche scene of *Descriptive Sketches* mitigates the effect of terror: "the avalanche breaks loose, to rend/Its way with uproar, till the ruin, drowned/In some dense wood or gulf of snow profound,/Mocks the dull ear of Time with deaf

abortive sound." [ll. 312-15.] Here the sublime experience is still externalized. However it displays the typical pattern of extreme confrontation between the I and nature in which blended aesthetic structures moralize space aperception and map for the self a new internal dimension, an unprecedented perspective. "I stand alone/Upon the summit of this naked cone" [ll. 303-4], foreshadows the poet's standing on the top of Snowdon. The Wordsworthian natural sublime can be defined as a traumatic experience of halted consciousness. On encountering "huge and mighty forms" [*The Prelude*, I.397] such as the Black Crag, "a huge peak, black and huge" [l. 378] chasing the young boat thief, or the ascending crag on "a day/Tempestuous, dark, and wild" [XII. 297-8] just before the death of the poet's father, epiphanic emotions of fear and terror flash through the self, an apprehension of pure negativity threatens to split the subject and annihilate it. Similarly, says Jean-François Lyotard, [Lyotard *passim*] the Kantian mind experiences a spasm when the sublime dissociates reason's lucid powerlessness from imagination's blind aspiration to absolute freedom. "Wordsworth's real danger was always the "sublime" [Hartman 15], says Geoffrey Hartman; "Deep pools, tall trees, black chasms and dizzy crags,/And tottering towers, I loved to stand and read/Their looks forbidding", the poet confesses in *Home at Grasmere* [ll. 711-3]. Naming the dark, ghostly, daemonized Powers of Nature ("Ye winds and sounding cataracts! . . . / Ye mountains!" [*The Prelude*, II. 446-7]), was a way to domesticate them. But on the liminal threshold on the Romantic sublime, in the paradigmatic episode of the crossing of the Alps, the poet meets with a frightful blank of aesthetic perception, and a deadly stasis of consciousness. "I was lost; /Halted without an effort to break through" [VI. 596-7].

In Towne's Alpine scenery there is obviously no loss of images. But the dominating verticality of its two-dimensional composition, its sharp precise delineation of contours, and its flat, smooth touches, reduce the menacing materiality of the mountains to utmost bareness and create a lifeless, haunting formal vision which similarly arrests the viewer's perception and mind. In *The Source of the Arveyron* (1781), the eye is blocked by the overpowering organization of masses, the juxtaposed colour planes denying the traditional *sfumato* (tones shading off in the distance), and faces the disturbing death power of a non-communicative, alienating landscape. The ocular concern for geology in Cozens', Turner's, and Towne's most barren sceneries is in fact pregnant with a tellurist theology of guilt, and the negative experience of the Romantic natural sublime appears as an internalization of religious mountain symbol, a subjectivized *mysterium tremendum*. In the wake of the Pauline belief that the Creator is invisibly expressed in His creation, Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* had imbued theological and ethical concepts with the premises of

an aesthetic of landscape. Burnet said that the present world was a powerful ruin, a damaged paradise whose original beauty had been destroyed in the cataclysm of the Flood; the vast, chaotic, frightful aspects of nature were the *verba visibilia* translating the anger and infinite almightiness of God.

Wordsworth, who writes in the *Guide to the Lakes*: "Sublimity is the result of Nature's first great dealings with the superficies of the Earth" [*Prose Works* 2.181], also deciphers the hand of cosmic vengeance in *Descriptive Sketches*: "Alas! that human guilt provoked the rod/Of angry Nature to avenge her God" [401-2]. But the anti-intellectual, immediate sublime experience of the Simplon pass in *The Prelude* exposes him to the risk of a personal apocalypse, which consciousness, being on the verge of self-engulfment, can only avoid through imaginative transference to the eternal characters of landscape. The failure of the self to face the infinite directly is sublimated into a vision of chaos trying to irradiate glory out of the imminence of total vortex. Does it act as a re-direction of the unconscious fantasy of parricide contained in the impending danger of the sublime moment (the "awful Power" of imagination rises like an "unfathered vapour" [VI. 594-5])? Or is it the aesthetic product of a spiritual ascent aiming at expanding into the world rather than transcend it—but this will be successfully achieved only on the top of Snowdon, when the mountain is incorporated into the dominating position of the poet majestically identifying his own divine mind with the moon? At any rate, the spectacle of the ravine of Gondo defines a non-dimensional, non-directional, non-orderly oxymoronic place of pure negative confusion and Burkean terror. Many of its discrete elements could serve as commentaries to Turner's scenery: "The stationary blasts of waterfalls", "The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky" [ll. 626, 629], to *The Great Falls of Reichenbach* (1804); "Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side", the "giddy prospect of the raving stream" [ll. 631, 633], to *The passage of St. Gothard* (1804). The mental abyss of the final vertigo: "Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light. . . /Characters of the great Apocalypse, /The types and symbols of Eternity, /Of first, and last, and midst, and without end" [ll. 635, 638-40], has an equivalent in the swirling vortical curves of Turner's wildest pictures of destruction. In his representation of a snowstorm (*Snowstorm: Avalanche and Inundation, 1837*; *The Passage of Mont Cenis: Snowstorm, 1820*; *Snowstorm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps, 1812*), the dynamic treatment of natural forces and the central glaring light internalize the vision of the destroying abyss. Above all, in *Shade and Darkness: The Evening of the Deluge* (1843), the ominous arched sky heavy with rain foretells imminent disaster while the serpentine line of animals is drawn by the vortex of light, like man by his tragic destiny, into a void. Truly enough, Wordsworth did not share Turner's cosmic pessimism. But

both in poetry and in painting, it is through analogous meta-aesthetic space patterns of non-representable places, of *topoi atopoi*, that the Romantic natural sublime dramatically discovered the impossibility for the self, poised between deadly stasis and endless vertigo, of achieving unity, and at the same time its unquenchable desire for it.

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APPENDIX

The melancholy slackening that ensued
Upon those tidings by the peasant given
Was soon dislodged. Downwards we hurried fast,
And, with the half-shaped road which we had missed,
Entered a narrow chasm. The brook and road
Were fellow-travellers in this gloomy strait,
And with them did we journey several hours
At a slow pace. The immeasurable height
Of wood decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blast of waterfalls,
And in the narrow rent at every turn
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,

The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that muttered 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 prospect of the raving stream,
The unfettered 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.

William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 6.617-40