Sublimity in the poetry of William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley

Notoriously difficult to define though it may be, the "sublime" features prominently in Romantic era writing. We can see in the writings of Percy Bysshe Shelley and William Wordsworth two contrasting approaches to sublimity: whereas the former views poets as interpreters of the sublime, the latter views them as experiencers of it. While for Shelley sublime knowledge is that which comes from above and which must be conveyed, sublimity for Wordsworth is already present within himself and needs only to be discovered. Nevertheless, both poets rely on figurative language to help them articulate the paradoxes and circularities of sublimity. As a result, the language of sublimity itself becomes a kind of sublime rhetoric.

In Shelley's "To a Skylark", the sublime is portrayed as being external to the lyric subject. If we consider the skylark as a symbol for the sublime (as Shelley encourages us to in line 2: "Bird thou never wert"), we can see that the sublime is not only external to the speaker, but also far beyond his reach. The poem spells this contrast out in spatial terms: the bird soars high above the uninitiated speaker (3), who must look up towards it for instruction. He yearns to know what the bird knows, for it to "teach [him] half the gladness / That [its] brain must know" (101-2). The speaker is thus a passive observer, hoping to gain knowledge which is outside his reach. This epistemological stance is one which Immanuel Kant critically called Transcendental Realism, characterized by a disjunction between world and subject—we are mere passive observers of the world, and rely upon the world for our knowledge of it (Cohen). Knowledge which we are yet to be acquainted with, which is unknown to us, we may thus term "sublime".

It is the poet, Shelley argues, who is uniquely positioned to interpret this sublime knowledge. In "A Defense of Poetry", Shelley submits that poets are vessels of the sublime, that they channel unknown knowledge for others to appreciate. "Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, [… and of] words which express what they understand not". The same idea can also be found in the last stanza of "To A Skylark", where the speaker bids the bird to impart its sublime wisdom on him, so that he may in turn relay it to the world. An important theme here is that poets alone have epistemic access to sublimity, that they alone can make formerly unknown knowledge known to others. In short, then, Shelley views the sublime as that which is both external to us and which can only be gauged by poets.

Wordsworth, by contrast, posits a unity between speaker and nature, both of whom partake in a sublime fabric of being. For Wordsworth, there is no separation between humans and nature. Humans are part of nature, and as such are fundamentally connected to it. The speaker in "Tintern Abbey" says the following of sublimity:

> I have felt […] a sense sublime […]
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean, and the living air,
> And the blue of sky, and in the mind of man,
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things. (93-102)

The source of the "sublime" is both out there in the world, in its sunsets and expansive oceans, and "in the mind of man". The poet's repeated use of the universal quantifier "all", the first-person plural "we", and the polysyndetic coordination of *and*'s all create an expansive, all-encompassing sense of the sublime, which incorporates man, bird, and vale alike.

Unlike Shelley, who views man and world as epistemically separate, Wordsworth grants that we as human subjects contribute to the sublimity of the world rather than being its mere vessels. In Kantian terms, we may say Wordsworth subscribes to a Transcendental Idealist picture of the world: we as humans are not only shaped by, but ourselves shape the world around us

(Cohen). We are, each one of us, active knowers, shapers, and creators of the world around us. The speaker of “Tintern Abbey” is a lover “of all the mighty world / Of eye and ear, both what they *half-create* / And what perceive” (112; emphasis mine). By implicating sensory organs in the creation of the world, Wordsworth acknowledges that we are not mere passive observers of the world but are active agents within it. All we need is to remind ourselves that we are already part of the sublime, as the view of Tintern Abbey does for Wordsworth’s speaker.

Although Shelley and Wordsworth disagree about who can tap into it, the speakers in their poems both rely on figurative language to convey the sublime. In Shelley’s “To a Skylark”, the speaker attempts to bridge the gap between the ordinary and the sublime by deploying rhetorical techniques which associate the familiar with the unfamiliar. Since “[w]hat thou art we know not” (30), he must settle for answering “What is most *like* thee?” (31; emphasis mine). Be it “a Poet hidden / in the light of thought” (36-37) or “a high-born maiden” (41), “a glow-worm golden / In a dell of dew” (46-47) or “a rose embowered / In its own green leaves” (51-52), all these characterizations are preceded by a crucial word: *like*. The choice of simile over, say, metaphor, is in keeping with the idea that the bird represents a plane which is separate from ours. Whereas metaphors suggest an “integrative possibility” (Spinks), similes merely establish likeness. Because the sublime is separate from the familiar, we cannot fuse the two together through metaphor—we cannot know what the sublime *is*, only what it is *like*.

Shelley’s poem also suggests that the sublime somehow transcends the paradoxes of human nature (to the extent that we can safely posit the concept of a universal human nature). Whereas the skylark’s depiction abounds with positive adjectives—“clear keen joyance” in line 76, for instance—the reality of human nature is far more poignant:

> We look before and after,
>   And pine for what is not—

> Our sincerest laughter
> With some pain is fraught—
> Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought. (86-90)

Laughter rooted in pain, sweetness rooted in sadness—both point to a bitter dissonance between appearance and truth. The oxymoron in line 103 ("harmonious madness"), on the other hand, suggests that the sublime can reconcile seemingly divergent emotions. Whereas we are fated to a discordance between positive appearance and negative reality, the sublime offers a realm where divergent emotions can blissfully coexist. Although Shelley notes that the disharmony of human nature is a necessary precondition for appreciating the sublime (93-95), this disharmony is nevertheless figured as inferior to the potential harmony of the sublime.

Wordsworth, however, dispenses with the dichotomy altogether in favor of a view where the paradoxes of human consciousness are in fact already part of the sublime. In his *Enquiry*, Edmund Burke "associates the aesthetic experience of the sublime with the most powerful private emotions, provided they are faced at a safe 'aesthetic distance'" (*NTC* 452). In "Tintern Abbey", Wordsworth's speaker is paradoxically both aesthetically present and aesthetically distant from the present: although he physically finds himself in the present moment, his mind wanders through time, recollecting his past and imagining his future. In André Aciman's words, he is

> "firming up the present by experiencing it as a memory, by experiencing it from the future as a moment in the past. What Wordsworth remembers at Tintern Abbey is not the past but himself in the past imagining the future; and what he looks forward to is not even the future but himself, in the future, retrieving the bone he buried in the past." (*False Papers* 151).

Wordsworth's wandering consciousness is not divorced from the sublime as Shelley's is from the skylark, but at one with it. In fact, the seeming contradiction of being both present and absent too is part of the sublime.

Burke, furthermore, posits that the sublime is necessarily distinct from the systematized deductions of logical thinking—the sublime is "something not captured by terms such as *reason, order, proportion*, and *balance*" (*NTC* 452). Wordsworth's refusal to enjoy the immediate present in favor of future speculation displays what we may call a *grammar of deferral*[1]—he can only enjoy the present by delaying his experience of it, by looking on it from every possible timeframe except the one which he is in. *Prima facie* illogical though this may be, it is the deferral of experiencing X which ultimately constitutes his experience of X. When finally presented with the very thing he sought, he sees himself as "more like a man / Flying from something that he dreads, than one who sought the thing he loved" (70-72). Wordsworth's experience abounds with paradox, the totality of which is not sublime *in spite of* being illogical, but expressly *because* of it.

We may say then that it is the spontaneity of the moment, rather than its logicality, that guarantees its sublimity. In fact, both Wordsworth and Shelley privileged spontaneity over all else. The former conceived of poetry as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" ("Preface" 303), and the latter too prized the "unpremeditated art" of the skylark's poetry ("To a Skylark", line 5). Both poets seem to view poetry as emerging out of a trance-like state, indebted to sublime inspiration as opposed to the contrivances of poetic machination. They also both stress the importance of *feeling* in poetic composition: Shelley says of sublimity that we "feel that it is there" (25), and Wordsworth too speaks of pleasure and joy in his meditation above Tintern Abbey. It seems that *contra* our earlier discussion, sublimity is not knowledge of the unknown so much as it is an *experience* of the unknown. We do not grasp the sublime—we feel it.

The spontaneity criterion of sublimity, however, puts into focus the very nature of language itself. Thus far we have seen how the two poets present largely different, though sometimes overlapping rhetorics of the sublime. Their grounding of poetry in spontaneity, however, shifts the limelight to the origins of poetry itself. In his reflections on language, Martin Heidegger says that "[in] the naming [of things], the things named are called into their thinging" (*NTC* 991-2). Thus, in speaking *of* sublimity, Wordsworth and Shelley summon sublimity itself into existence. Language moreover "may or may not give itself at the appropriate time to our need or desire to speak" (Owens 59), which is why spontaneity is such a crucial element of the sublime: spontaneity evidences language's self-giving to us. It is as though language has its own ontology, and we as speakers are merely its mouthpieces. What Heidegger calls "authentic divination"—a "mode in which essentials come to us" through language—we may here term "the sublime". The sublime is that which is essential, and language gives itself to us extemporaneously to both articulate and occupy the sublime.

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[1] I initially heard this term used by Simon Cooke in a *Critical Practice: Poetry* lecture on Dramatic Monologue, and could find no further mention of it in print or online. For my purposes, then, I credit it to Dr. Cooke.

To speak of the role of the sublime in Romantic poetry, then, is to speak of the role of language. Although Wordsworth and Shelley differ in how they conceptualize man's relationship to the sublime, they share in the conviction that sublimity is spontaneous and unpremeditated. The paradoxes and circularities that define us as human beings are not incompatible with sublimity, but constitutive of it. Through language, we both embody and speak sublimity into being. While we may never free ourselves from the whims of language, we are also never more than a sentence away from experiencing the sublime. This, I opine, is the central paradox—and the crowning jewel—of Romantic poetry.

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