

## Theorizing the (Gothic) Sublime

“Whether some things that men think they do not know, are not for all that thoroughly comprehended by them; and yet, so to speak, though contained in themselves, are kept a secret from themselves? The idea of Death seems such a thing.”<sup>1</sup> This passage occurs in Melville’s *Pierre or The Ambiguities* at a crucial moment in the lives of Pierre and Isabel. It is a moment when Pierre has been effectively disinherited, and he must now face up to the consequences of his own ambiguous relationship with his half-sister. The things that men know, that are contained within, yet inexplicable; known, and yet not known, such as the idea of death, signify that sense of boundlessness and indeterminacy that threatens the definition of the subject. In short, Pierre reads Death as the abyss of the sublime. Regardless of the specific avatar of the sublime (as mechanically rhetorical or dynamically natural), it is always an overglutted sign, an excess/abscess, that produces an atmosphere of toxic breathlessness. The Gothic maidens retreat to the misplaced security of the pastoral sublime, the postmodern subjects to the oxygen mask. The terror—that final substratum of the Gothic sublime—remains the same. Melville’s *Pierre* stands at the receiving end of an entire aesthetic of the sublime as the eighteenth century read the idea, as Kant and the post-Kantians expanded it, and as the Gothic enriched it by transforming this aesthetic into a psychology. In this respect *Pierre* anticipates, as the Gothic texts did, the sublime as a moment of entry into the unconscious, the “unplumbable,” the tangled depth of the dream-text that surfaces in life only as certain effects like that of the “uncanny.” In the classic formulation of Kant (to which all theorizations of the sublime return) the effects are the consequence of the mind’s confrontation with an idea too large for expression, too self-consuming to be contained in any adequate form of representation, but which idea, as representation, in a momentary surrender of the law of reason the mind nevertheless grasps. The desire to present that which is unrepresentable, that which is sublime, in the first sustained burst of capital in the sec-

ond half of the eighteenth century also troped itself into a literary phenomenon subsequently designated "Gothic." The sublime empowerment of the Gothic, in Melville's American version, constructs an unnameable dread (*das Unform*), a kind of a symbolic blockage, that threatens subjectivity itself.

It is this premonition of the Longinian *hypsous* that leads to Pierre's mental disintegration and the writing, on his part, of two books. One is a public book—if it ever finds a publisher—but the other is a kind of "primitive elementalizing" (304) that, of course, "can not be composed on the paper, but only as the other is writ down in his soul" (304). Like a "vast lumbering planet," this book "revolves in his aching head" (305). When both Lucy and Isabel offer to be Pierre's "amanuenses" (349) for that "vile book" (348) that somehow always remains unfinished, Pierre replies: "Impossible! I fight a duel in which all seconds are forbid" (349). The ambiguous feelings that constitute this inner writing, and the total incapacity of a second to understand it, are such that they are "entirely untranslatable into any words that can be used" (353).

*Pierre or The Ambiguities* is Melville's sublime, a powerfully fractious rendition of the program of the sublime as Kant, the post-Kantians and the Gothic read that concept. For we know that in Kant's moment of the sublime, and especially in the negative sublime, discourse itself breaks down as reason struggles with imagination for ascendancy: what can be grasped is not equivalent to what is meaningful. The resultant discourse—a ruptured discourse—can come from either the signifiers (the objects) that cannot be grasped or the signified (the mind), which in itself is overwhelmed by the highly overdetermined characteristics of this "colossal" experience. What this leads to is a failure in representation through a massive disturbance as the texts, in trying to present the unrepresentable, veer toward collapse. This is also the postmodern condition for which the Gothic, it seems, is a kind of traumatized earlier moment. Without wishing to collapse the different stages of capital and the legitimate linkages between the postmodern and late commodified capitalism (that is, without wishing to collapse different historical moments) the rhetoric of the Gothic sublime may be seen as somehow anticipating the postmodern. It is here that the return to the sublime on the part of key theoreticians of postmodernism (notably Jameson and Lyotard) needs to be clarified because its rebirth "in the panic-stricken and commodity-glutted aesthetics of postmodernism"<sup>2</sup> is under the injunction, under the sign, under the (dis) guise of the Gothic.

Whence the attractiveness of the term? In recent years we have used (and abused) every possible association of the word sublime: the Romantic sublime, the American sublime, the Indian sublime, the nuclear sublime, the Arctic sublime, the female sublime, the imperial sublime, the post-Kantian sublime, the postmodern sublime, the textual sublime, the religious sublime, the Oedipal sublime, the oppositional sublime, the Euro-American sublime, the Enlightenment sublime, the genetic sublime, the moral sublime, the technological sublime, to name a few. In all these sublimes there is clearly some understanding of limits or boundary implied in the descriptors that act as markers of containment. At the same time it is clear that the varieties of sublime indicated in this list demonstrate what David Morris has called the impossible quest for "a single, unchanging feature or essence."<sup>3</sup> Regardless of the historical or periodic positioning of a specific sublime (say, the Arctic sublime, with its emphasis on the European sense of disempowerment in the face of the Arctic void and the kinds of knowledges, both human and barbaric, the voyages in search of the Northwest Passage symbolized<sup>4</sup>), the central problematic of the sublime is still a relic of the old questions about what we mean by the sublime: is it "apprehension or comprehension, syntagmatic or paradigmatic, infinite or limited"<sup>5</sup> To borrow Steven Knapp's ideas for a moment here, we always ask ourselves three fundamental questions: what is the nature of the sublime object (the text), who is the agent that produces this object (the author), and what is the nature of the spectator (the reader) who encounters the object?<sup>6</sup> Depending on our ideological position, we may well have radically different answers. Before theorizing the female sublime, Patricia Yaeger, for instance, called the sublime a genre of "questionable use . . . old fashioned, outmoded, concerned with self-centered [male] imperialism." Nevertheless, even as the sublime celebrates its phallocentricity (though some of the great practitioners of the Gothic sublime were women), for Yaeger the sublime's very real sense of empowerment and transport, of authority, makes it a "genre the woman writer needs."<sup>7</sup> The female sublime is ideological and critical, since it draws its strength from a critique of a sublime male subjectivity. But this subjectivity itself may be turned on its head through the "what if" question: what if the sublime object were to "leak into the subject," as Peter de Bolla asks?<sup>8</sup> What if the triad of Knapp's questions were to collapse only into an endless subjectivity, both in the political and ethical sense of the word? What if there is nothing but effects of subjectivity, constructions of the object whose validity,

whose reality (as the Lacanian Real, so to speak) were to reside only in consciousness? The shift from the rhetorical/natural/ideological to the psychological is clearly implicit in these questions. It is at this juncture that we can make our initial intervention on behalf of the Gothic, without in any way suggesting that any sublime (whether Gothic or Romantic, whether American or Indian, whether nuclear or postmodern) can be wholly original or different. We are in fact tracing a genealogy (of the Gothic sublime) that can't possibly have a genealogy (origins, histories, and so on); we are talking about an adjective that transplants or supersedes the noun substantive, and this is clearly not one.

Our aim, therefore, is to theorize a Gothic sublimity that corresponds to the textual evidence. We need to articulate the Gothicness of the Gothic sublime, both in terms of its difference from and affinities with what may be collectively termed versions of the Enlightenment sublime. We shall give these versions the generic title of "the historical sublime." Our key concept will be the idea of surplus, excess, or spillage that surrounds the discourse of the sublime. There has been an historical tendency to read the Gothic sublime as the natural sublime, as an object-based sublime that excluded the affective subject and the rhetorical trope (language). Though we know that this has never been the whole story of the sublime, Gothic or not, the tendency to read it thus is linked to a need to specify the historical moment of the Gothic through a citation of Gothic special effects (a kind of early version of the technological sublime) in which secret, hidden vaults, and the general hyperreality of the Gothic dreamscape, were seen as somehow signifying something very special about the Gothic. To an extent, the symbolic linking of the Gothic to metaphors of the labyrinth is heuristically essential for an adequate theory of the Gothic. However, the cataloging of objects of terror is only part of the total story, because it insinuates a Gothic exclusivity that does not exist. To shift from Gothic terror (a critical dominant for so long) to the Gothic sublime means that we can intervene into the Gothic through a much more pervasive and contradictory aesthetic. In other words, we now break the boundaries of the Gothic by using it to challenge the received wisdom of the sublime itself. The bold claim that we would want to make is that no sublime, not even the Gothic sublime, is pure in terms of either discursivity or phenomenality. All sublimines are contaminated, though some sublimines are less contaminated (but equally contaminable) than others. Our working definition would then take some such form as the follow-

ing. The Gothic sublime is not a definitive form in its own right; it is a symbolic structure, historically determined though not rigidly constrained by the dawn of capitalism, around which a host of other sublimities intersect. The Gothic tropes the sublime as the unthinkable, the unnameable, and the unspeakable, always making it, the sublime, and its basic forms (the rhetorical and the natural) both incommensurable with each other and in excess of language. The phantasmagoria of the Gothic sublime, as the projection of a psychic terror, finally leads to the unrepresentability of death itself. It is not what the Gothic sublime *is* that is crucial, it is what it *effects* that is its essence.

Any idea that is in excess of language signifies the death of its own medium of representation, that is, of language itself. In narrative theory, as Foucault tells us, “writing so as not to die . . . is a task undoubtedly as old as the world.”<sup>9</sup> The “postmodern”/“post-mortem” phrase (“In the nights of prenatality and post-mortemity,” wrote Joyce in *Ulysses*<sup>10</sup>)—writing so as not to die—gestures toward a sublime capacity involving our consciousness about language itself. For speech is marked by a compulsion toward its own self-dissolution, its own nirvana, that narrative attempts to circumvent by prolonging through writing.

Perhaps there exists in speech an essential affinity between death, endless striving, and the self-representation of language. Perhaps the figure of a mirror to infinity erected against the black wall of death is fundamental for any language from the moment it determines to leave a trace of its passage.<sup>11</sup>

Language, therefore, acts out the procedures and processes of this deferral or postponement—the prolongation of the moment of death when speech is consumed by silence. The great epic poets, the singers of great tales—these minstrels, through their glorification of personality and a conception of utterance as endless repetition indeed got around the compulsion toward death by effectively stilling narratives. The *Mahābhārata* is replete with the name of the subject followed by the verb *to say*, hence *arjuna uvāca*, “Arjuna said.” Again, in another twist of Odysseus’ autonarrative, Demodocus recounts to the Phaeacians, in Odysseus’ own presence, Odysseus’ tale, already a thousand years old.

The epic poets’ “self-enclosed expression” of the glory of the work they transmitted comes to an end more or less at about the

same time as the beginnings of late eighteenth-century tales of terror. In the “languages” that make up the tales of terror we discover an uncanny image of language itself. “These simple languages . . .,” writes Foucault, “are curiously double”<sup>12</sup> because they mirror their own mortality in the act of writing. Thus, Sade’s “pastiche of all the philosophies and stories of the eighteenth century,”<sup>13</sup> written to no one from the confines of his prison walls, expresses the boundless doubling and redoubling of language. Where epic certainty had once prolonged life through the device of the twice-told tale, the tales of terror now turn inward and become regressive. The prolongation becomes a matter of reaching outward toward a form that is curiously double because it can only repeat a desire for the unrepresentable without ever finding any adequate image for it. The language of the Gothic now presages not the prolongation of life but its opposite: we speak so as to die. A text such as Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* that seemingly prolongs itself through the device of the tale within the tale (a narrative mediatization that is not uncommon in the Gothic generally) nevertheless can no longer construct the certainties of the epic narrators for whom writing could prolong life. The *Mahābhārata*, for instance, never comes to an end. Contemporary reviewers of *Melmoth the Wanderer* sensed this schism in the narrative when they spoke of a “diseased imagination” obsessed by “unwholesome recreations” carrying an “exploded predilection for *impossibility*.”<sup>14</sup> Earlier, William Beckford’s *Vathek*, with its wildness and extravagance, its orientalist flavor and Arabian Nights narrative—*Vathek* anticipates Salman Rushdie—had had the same doubling effect. But the doubling, this inward turn of the narrative, occurs through a curious process of inversion, through a construction of a parallel, almost parodistic, text that mirrors, critically, the self-enclosing, functional claims of the narrative. The Gothics “were not meant to be read at the level of their writing or the specific dimensions of their language; they wished to be read for the things they recounted, for this emotion, fear, horror, or pity,” writes Foucault.<sup>15</sup> Foucault inserts into the texts of the Gothic a form of reception aesthetics in which the “rabble of the senses” momentarily questions the primacy of reason. In their emphasis on emotions and feelings, the Gothic texts, like parasites, release a poison that consumes the host and confronts it with its own self-evident though inferior logic. A profane daemonization of space (sacred or otherwise) takes place as the castles, for instance, undergo remarkable degrees of sexual and social contamination. The reader senses an *Es Spukt hier* effect, the haunting effect of the



religious visibility/invisibility that Mircea Eliade detects in the believer's construction of the initial sacred space.<sup>16</sup> The haunting presence/absence of the uncanny inscribed in the Gothic, and its seemingly paradoxical endorsement of death, is seen by Foucault as the real agenda of the Gothic. It is this agenda that underpins the Gothic sublime.

Foucault's archaeology of faked immortality through the endless deferrals of the epic has its other side in the frightening mortality of writing in the Gothic sublime. The epic was built on a teleology; the Gothic passes the sublime, unresolved, to future generations. In a deconstructive echo of the postmodern, the Gothic becomes a force field that intervenes into the continuum of history and blasts it open. What this procedure implies is a kind of an aesthetic rendition of history that now requires us to go beyond theories of orderly narratives to those of the sublime. Since, as we have already seen, all versions of the sublime in Western thought, at any rate, have the same starting point, we need to construct a history of the sublime so as to make more meaningful our claim that the Gothic sublime insinuates a postmodernity in its undermining of a realist economy of meaning. To make this somewhat difficult connection possible, I would like to isolate the major trope of the Gothic—the sublime—and read it with a view to establishing its resonances with the postmodern.

The sublime has now become a trope that is somehow antianalytic, suprasensible, and beyond the grasp of our cognitive faculties. Rereading it in the light of religious philosophers such as Mircea Eliade and Rudolf Otto (who preferred to use terms such as "hierophanic vision" and "the numinous") one begins to sense the "sublime" (here in quotation marks) as a kind of a radical Other, the perennial underside, of materialist politics and sociology. In many ways, then, the postmodern (mis) appropriations of this term signal also a remarkable disenchantment with scientific paradigms and theories of knowledge, in that the sublime allows us a freedom (in both the intellectual and interpersonal spheres) from the highly organized world that, increasingly, we inhabit. The constitutive features of this world and the significance of the sublime in coming to terms with it are best summarized by one of the foremost postmodern theorists, Fredric Jameson:

... a new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary "theory" and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum; a consequent weakening of historic-

ity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality, whose “schizophrenic” structure (following Lacan) will determine new types of syntax or syntagmatic relationships in the more temporal arts; a whole new type of emotional ground tone—what I will call “intensities”—which can best be grasped by a return to older theories of the sublime. . . .<sup>17</sup>

Jameson connects the postmodern sublime with the third stage of capital (he follows Ernest Mandel here), where the reality of social and economic institutions is “only dimly perceivable.” In this stage capital is “hypermobile” and “hyperflexible” as dispersed production under the sign of global transfers of capital now displaces the old-fashioned monopolistic capitalism that frames the later eighteenth-century Gothic. The sublime then becomes a metaphor of that which is beyond the “capacity of the normal reading mind” faced with the complexities of the digital information networks of the third “decentered global network.”<sup>18</sup> The final aim of Jameson’s project is to offer a theory of the fractured nature of postmodern or technological subject in terms of an equally disfigured and dehumanized multinational capitalism. For this reason “older theories of the sublime” are dragged out in an act of pseudopanic to explain the subject “blissed out before feats of postmodern commodification.”<sup>19</sup> The bliss in question here is, of course, a negative bliss, a terrifying bliss whose analogue is not simply the general trope of the sublime but the more specific trope of the Gothic sublime and its subsequent avatars. Because the Gothic is the absolute negative of this bliss, the linking of the genre of the Gothic with postmodernity has a different order of social payoff. The Gothic sublime and the sublime of late capital are linked by the definitions of the subject. A bourgeois individualism that produced through its imperial apparatus a tea-drinking culture in the eighteenth century<sup>20</sup> now finds itself in the grip of the American postcolonial drug overlords. The analogy may sound obscene, but both are linked to similar histories of dispossession and colonization. Peter de Bolla has in fact made a very strong case that the discourse of debt in the mid-eighteenth century crossed with that of the sublime to construct a subject as “the excess or overplus of discourse itself: as the remainder, that which cannot be appropriated or included within the present discursive network of control.”<sup>21</sup>

The literary Gothic of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was one example of a seemingly barbaric docu-



ment, to use Walter Benjamin's phrase,<sup>22</sup> that is also the occluded text of the postmodern. It offers in a stark, uncompromising form a textuality (recall Jameson's summary of the discursive features of the postmodern) in which many of the current issues surrounding experimentation, the affirmation of discontinuous histories, the fractured subject, radical and unstable epistemologies, the distrust of *grands récits*, ideological commitment, and legitimation had already been played out. All these features recall Lyotard's definition of modernity in the *locus classicus* text for contemporary debates on the postmodern:

Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the "lack of reality" of reality, together with the invention of other realities.<sup>23</sup>

The "'lack of reality' of reality" has a familiar Gothic ring about it. Nietzsche had called this nihilism, and enthusiastic postmodern critics have endorsed the equation. For a good critic of postmodernism like Arthur Kroker, the connection may be underlined through a reading of Giorgio de Chirico, "the painter of postmodernism *par excellence*."<sup>24</sup> Seen from Kroker's perspective, what Chirico's paintings demonstrate so clearly is the impossibility of the real, the "representable." As *the* artist of nihilism Chirico "understood the full consequences of Nietzsche's accusation that in a world in which conditions of existence are transposed into 'predicates of being,' it would be the human fate to live through a fantastic inversion and cancellation of the order of the real. Commodity into sign, history into semiurgy, concrete labor into abstract exchange, perspective into simulation."<sup>25</sup> Chirico poses the rupture of Western consciousness, a nihilism that is both "the limit and possibility of *historical* emancipation."<sup>26</sup> In Chirico's *Landscape Painter* Kroker sees precisely those features that are the hallmarks of postmodernism: the impossibility of representation, humanity's imprisonment in the dead empire of signs, the end of power, truth, history, and nature as referential finalities, the "metamorphosis of society into a geometry of signs."<sup>27</sup>

Nietzsche, Chirico, cynical history, the end of the emancipating quality of history, the logic of the sign, our existence only within the sign itself (with the possibility of the "beyond the sign" articulated so forcefully in *The Will to Power*)—these are the loci of the postmodern, the discourses of which permeate culture at every turn.<sup>28</sup> The heterogeneity of elements, language games, as well as

the triumph of local determinism, in the postmodern social formation, make it impossible for us, as subjects, to unify, in one image (as V. S. Naipaul does) the multiplicity of narratives that bombard us from all sides. It is for this reason that appeal to the sublime becomes an uncanny repetition of the Gothic situation we have already sketched. Hence Lyotard's return to the sublime: "it is in the aesthetic of the sublime that modern art (including literature) finds its impetus and the logic of avant-gardes finds its axioms."<sup>29</sup> In Lyotard's summary the defining characteristic of the sublime is a "strong and equivocal emotion." The "equivocality" of this emotion is a result of the origin of the sublime in pain. Unlike judgments on beauty, which are a matter of consensus as the mind creates stable harmonies, the sublime is a radically different sentiment. Before we proceed any further, we must quickly historicize the sublime so that we can ground our own readings of the Gothic in an identifiable and discrete body of knowledge.

"As a power to make trouble for categorizing procedures,"<sup>30</sup> wrote Donald Pease in an exemplary essay, the sublime has come to be seen as a thoroughly independent, defiantly disruptive, trope not unwilling to make trouble in the realms of aesthetics, rhetoric, or politics. "Theories of beauty," as one of the great critics of the sublime, Samuel H. Monk, had also noted, "are relatively trim and respectable; but in theories of the sublime one catches the century somewhat off its guard, sees it, as it were, without powder and pomatum, whalebone and patches."<sup>31</sup> Monk's remarkable study points out in great detail the complexity of the diverse theories of the sublime in the eighteenth century, and the dangers of reducing the sublime to the formulations of any one aesthete. The crucial moment that marked the beginnings of interest in the sublime was Boileau's translation (1674) and re-reading of Longinus' *Peri Hypsous* ("Sublime"). Having defined the sublime as a

certain power of discourse which is calculated to elevate and to ravish the soul, and which comes either from grandeur of thought . . . or from magnificence of words. . . .<sup>32</sup>

Boileau rewrote the rhetorical sublime as the effect of subjectivity. Such was the impact of Boileau's translation that the original Greek text of *Peri Hypsous* was regularly printed and between 1710 and 1789 no fewer than fourteen editions were available.<sup>33</sup> The commentaries that these editions spawned, however, indicate that the eighteenth century was not particularly interested in total defi-

nitions. Instead we find a much greater interest in specific effects, in thematizations of the sublime, and in the whole question of emotional intensities. The key figure in the English theorizations of the sublime is, of course, Edmund Burke. However, it seems unlikely that Burke's singular achievement would have been possible without the intermediate work of John Dennis.

In both *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701) and in its incomplete sequel *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) Dennis expanded Boileau's reading of the sublime as residing in a great artist's mind to make a series of correlations between the sublime, the highest art, and the expression of the greatest passion. These three (the sublime, great art, and passion) are connected, finally, through a theory of association. The theory itself is never made explicit (Dennis did not have a sophisticated aesthetic discourse that he could use for his theory) but the "associationist" move on the part of Dennis took him to what he called "Enthusiastic Passions," which were "admiration, terror, horror, joy, sadness, and desire."<sup>34</sup> These "enthusiastic passions," however, imply a hitherto undertheorized connection between the sublime and terror. The paradox of pleasure arising from the seemingly unpleasurable—from terror, from pain, from the grotesque and ugly, in short, from the body itself—was not only enormously fascinating to the English mind, but also intellectually frustrating, since contemporary neoclassical theories could not account for it. Dennis' use of the concept of the sublime to explain the inexplicable, the "excessive," the "Other," is the first clear statement about how terror escaped from the order of neoclassicism by aligning itself with the lawless sublime. It is as though the "narrative of terror" is the first of our language games that could not coexist unproblematically with the grand narrative of a neoclassic epistemology. Dennis was, however, unhappy with a broad semantic class called "terror." He therefore divided it into "Common Terror" and "Enthusiastick Terror" so as to be able to distinguish between the religious and nonreligious sublime. "Enthusiastick Terror" may sound to us a rather peculiar phrase, but Dennis wished to use it to designate the human state of mind confronted with the wrath of God as the most intense moment of the sublime.<sup>35</sup> Eighteenth-century meanings of "enthusiastic" and "enthusiasm" were closely aligned to their original Greek root as signifying "possession by a god, supernatural inspiration, prophetic or poetic frenzy," or "pertaining to, or of the nature of, possession by a deity" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). It is in this semantic context that Dennis' use of "Enthusiastick Terror"

should be considered. In making the connection between terror, religious awe, and the sublime through the centrality of emotion, Dennis foreshadowed Edmund Burke's reduction of the individual subject to the effects of a particular structure of emotion based on an unresolved tension between a scientific empiricism on the one hand and a psychological idealism on the other.<sup>36</sup> The technology of the sublime in Burke is terror.

By the time Burke published his essay in 1757, the sublime had become more or less absorbed into the English language.<sup>37</sup> Longinus' *Peri Hypsous* was readily available in the original, and English translations of the original or of Boileau kept the debates alive. Edward Young ("The Complaint, or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Mortality"), Joseph Warton ("The Enthusiast: or the Lover of Nature"), and Mark Akenside ("The Pleasures of Imagination"), among other poets, drew on contemporary readings of the sublime, which by now had incorporated, after Addison and John Baillie (author of the posthumously published *An Essay on the Sublime*, 1747), the related concepts of the "unbounded" and the "immensity of [its] views."<sup>38</sup> In Akenside's "The Pleasures of Imagination" we read:

From the womb of earth,  
From ocean's bed they come: th' eternal heav'ns  
Disclose their splendours, and the dark abyss  
Pours out her births unknown.<sup>39</sup>

In this version of the sublime the effects of horror come from castrating amphibian females. The vision is in fact quite frightening, because birth is imaged as an act of perversion from the womblike ocean's bed and from the dark abyss. At the same time the Gothic pouring forth of splendors, which are to be read as negative delights, fails to arouse the intensities of terror one associates with Edmund Burke. It is only in Burke that the subject actually faces the pleasures of impotence transgressively offered by the sublime.

The source of (negative) pleasure for Burke is pain, and it is on this basic dichotomy of pain and pleasure that Burke constructs a series of eight emotional effects which, as Craig Howes' summary shows very clearly, follows from two mutually exclusive sensationist positions. Pain generates self-preservation, terror, and the sublime, while pleasure "enlists the social passions" related to society, love, and the beautiful.<sup>40</sup> These are what in Sanskrit poetics one would call the effects of *rasas*, aesthetic states that are mental cor-

relates of real emotions (*bhāvas*) in the world outside.<sup>41</sup> The primacy given to terror, however, underlies a much more pervasive belief in Burke about the ruling passions of the sublime, for which terror was the only real source. But Burke's sensationist aesthetics have no room for mediating categories, since emotions and their mental transformations are absolutely identical, as *rasas* and *bhāvas* are not. It is here that Burke's principle of terror as the source of the sublime lacks that daemonization of the spirit and its sublimation that are the hallmarks of the Gothic sublime.

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. (39)

Even as Burke defines the experience of the sublime through the technology of terror, he still works with absolute categories, since his terror and sublime are somehow ideas that require no mediation whatsoever. There is no intransigence in these terms, they become the secret, veiled characteristics of the occluded hero of the sublime who is, for Burke, God. The empowerment of language that Burke especially endorses (at the expense of pictures) associates the most powerful feelings with a Burkean deity who, finally, confirms that the effects of sublimity will not lead to the construction of Akenside's monsters. The same sense of absolutism is to be found in Burke's definition of "Astonishment":

The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect. (57)

The capitulation of the subject in the face of the "passion" of astonishment, it seems, is a profoundly religious experience that connects the passage directly with the devotional sublime. Since for Burke the object of astonishment remains the unnameable presence of God, the sublime in this theorization cannot possibly connect the subject itself with the will to dominate. In this regard, as Adorno recognized, there is a greater complicity with domination in Immanuel Kant, because in linking the sublime with power he pushed the subject beyond Burke's fundamentally consensus aesthetics to reimagine the procedures of thinking the unthinkable. In this version of empowerment, the subject, as "an epistemological entrepreneur,"<sup>42</sup> must remain constantly active and forever vigilant.

Whereas the beautiful in Kant, writes Paul de Man, "is a metaphysical and ideological principle, the sublime aspires to be a transcendental one, with all that this entails."<sup>43</sup> It is this hidden agenda of the transcendental that leads Kant to qualify the sublime with the adjective *absolutely* so that the phrase would broach no comparison whatsoever. Admittedly, the sections in the *Critique of Judgement* that deal with the sublime (Part 1, Book 2, sections 23–28) are among the most difficult and unresolved passages in Kant generally. This is largely because Kant's aim, to paraphrase Donald Pease, is to authenticate the discipline of aesthetics without erasing the subject that the sublime ("an outrage to our imagination") proposes to disrupt.<sup>44</sup> Kant had in fact observed:

For the beautiful in nature we must seek a ground external to ourselves, but for the sublime one merely in ourselves and the attitude of mind that introduces sublimity into the representation of nature.<sup>45</sup>

Terry Eagleton most certainly has this passage in mind when he writes:

In the presence of beauty, we experience an exquisite sense of adaptation of the mind to reality; but in the turbulent presence of the sublime we are forcibly reminded of the limits of our dwarfish imaginations and admonished that the world as infinite totality is not ours to know. It is as though in the sublime the 'real' itself—the eternal, ungraspable totality of things—inscribes itself as the cautionary limit of all mere ideology, of all complacent subject-centredness, causing us to feel the pain of incompleteness and unassuaged desire.<sup>46</sup>



Sublimity in this definition is not a quality intrinsic to the object, as one finds in the rhetorical sublime (an essentially aesthetico-stylistic category) or the medieval *sublimitas* and *humilitas*, which were “ethico-theological categories”<sup>47</sup>; rather, it is profoundly, principally, and preeminently a state of mind contemplating its own supersensible being. In Kant’s classic formulation:

*The sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense* (98),

the demonstrative *that* clearly alludes to infinity as a whole, a fact which explains Kant’s rather austere thesis. Imagination fails to satisfy reason’s demand for totality and yet, it seems, it is reason that leads imagination to the condition of the sublime because it wishes to enter, momentarily, into a pre-Oedipal chaos, the realm of the Lacanian *imaginary*, which it, as law, cannot countenance.

Consequently, the experience of the sublime pushes the imagination to crisis point, to a point of exhaustion and chaos. But precisely because of the extreme condition of the imagination—“our incapacity to attain to an idea *that is a law for us*”—we are filled with “RESPECT” (105). This reverence arises from a failure to grasp what reason has established as law, that is, the transformation of everything into an absolute whole. Reason must totalize; the sublime gestures toward the unattainable. Now this is the cause of a fundamental contradiction or confusion that gives rise to an ambiguous state of pleasure and displeasure. Displeasure, because the imagination fails to deliver the absolute, that is, unqualified magnitude (the condition of the sublime), and pleasure, because in spite of this failure the imagination is nevertheless in accord with reason, insofar as it attempts to achieve the aim of the law of reason, which is totality.

The feeling of the sublime is, therefore, at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason, so far as the effort to attain to these is for us a law. (106)

The feeling of the sublime as an alternation is also a sign of its essential mobility. It is not a feeling that arises out of static or “*restful*” con-

templation; on the contrary, it has a certain kinetic energy, a vibration, a motion, "a sense of power"<sup>48</sup> that explains why it is attracted *and* repelled by the same object. This vibration, alternation, or simply energy is a consequence of precisely those forces which give rise to the sublime. The imagination wishes to grasp the unimaginable, the limitless, the nonpresentable, and is driven to limits, to excess, as a consequence. Unchecked, such an excess might well be symptomatic of madness or other mental disorders; halted and checked, it becomes part of a crucial ambiguity that is at the very heart of Kant's reading of the sublime. This check, and the consequent paradox, comes from the human faculty of reason, which finds nothing unusual or excessive in this attempt to find a correlate for the unimaginable.

The point of excess for the imagination (towards which it is driven in the apprehension of the intuition) is like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself; yet again for the rational idea of the supersensible it is not excessive, but conformable to law, and directed to drawing out such an effort on the part of the imagination: and so in turn as much a source of attraction as it was repellent to mere sensibility. (107)

At one level these passages may be mobilized toward a Romantic aesthetics of the sublime, which, historically, has in fact been the case. Yet the furious sense of alternation implied here, the whole question of an almost pathological attraction and repulsion, goes well beyond Romanticism and connects directly with the Gothic. Much of what is implied here is the shock of the new that one associates with postmodernism. The sublime may be read with this function in mind. The kind of compensatory movement that follows the initial moment of shock, the play between what Neil Hertz has termed the "mental overload" and release, between "confusion and assurance," between the processes of attraction and repulsion, "the drama of the imagination's collapse and reason's intervention,"<sup>49</sup> can be readily mapped onto a Freudian discourse. Imagination, guilty and excessive, would wish to cancel out the anteriority of the law of reason, the superego, with its interdicts and proprietary claims. The ego, in turn wishes to displace, through excessive identification and collapse, the father, reason, superego. And this is where the process of the sublime, in the Freudian discourse, becomes so fascinating. The sublime therefore aspires to the condition of pre- or nondifference, to the state of the pre-Oedipal phase, when, in the words of Wordsworth, "the faint sense which we have

of its individuality is lost in the general sense of duration belonging to the Earth itself.<sup>50</sup> Wordsworth is remarkably Kantian in his essay ("The Sublime and the Beautiful") and is conscious of the intersubjective nature of the sublime experience when he draws the distinction between viewing a mountain from a distance and situating oneself close enough "yet not so near that the whole of it is visible."<sup>51</sup> Threatened by its formlessness, the "comparing power of the mind" is then suspended in the contemplation of the sublime as the "absolutely great," in comparison with which, as Kant noted, "*all else is small*" (97). "Sublimity, therefore," concludes Kant:

does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind, in so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us (as exerting influence upon us). (114)

One gains access to the sublime through self-contemplation, unrestrained by other demands or imperatives. In this narrative "the sublime is simply the heightened consciousness of beholding oneself beholding the world."<sup>52</sup> Or else it is the extreme instance of Kant's "lawlessness without a law,"<sup>53</sup> revealing in this memorable phrase a purposiveness without purpose, an antidote to Kant's own uncompromising appeal to abstract reason but, at the same time, a further confirmation of the centrality of the subject, rationally defined through the categories of pure and practical reason, as "sovereign," "buoyantly active, with all the productive energy of an epistemological entrepreneur."<sup>54</sup> The subject may well be sovereign, but he or she is nevertheless pushed by the sublime toward a redefinition of his or her own sovereignty by the need to confront his or her own incompleteness in the presence of limitlessness, turbulent and ungraspable. As we have already noted, however, this dual movement, which is marked by an excessive desire followed by its lack, paradoxically confirms the centrality of the subject and his/her capacity to avoid total dissolution in the sublime. The sublime representative of this position is, quite naturally, the mature Wordsworth of *Resolution and Independence*. Put in this manner, the Kantian sublime is defiantly Romantic and raises important questions about how another sublime, the Gothic, which both antedates the Kantian and feeds on it may be defined.

For Samuel H. Monk, with whom we began this section, theorizing the sublime more or less comes to an end with Kant: the "eighteenth-century aesthetic has as its unconscious goal the *Cri-*

*tique of Judgment*.”<sup>55</sup> This is no throwaway line since after the *Third Critique* we find philosophers quite self-consciously using Kant as their point of departure. Schopenhauer makes this connection explicit: “My line of thought, different as its content is from the Kantian is completely under its influence, and necessarily presupposes and starts from it.”<sup>56</sup> The same indebtedness may be seen in Schiller and Hegel as well. In matters of the sublime Kant then becomes the grand patriarch who dominates the scene. One, therefore, speaks under a kind of Kantian interdiction. But since the sublime in Kant had, however contradictorily, a transcendental presence, it is not identical with the Gothic sublime, for which the primacy of reason cannot be taken for granted. In this respect Schiller’s connection of the sublime with “the *pure daemon*”<sup>57</sup> in us, as both an ontology and a phenomenology, Hegel’s incorporation of negativity in the miserable corporeality of the Real, and Schopenhauer’s decisive rewriting of the sublime through the nirvana principle (an oceanic consciousness that is clearly linked to the Indian sublime: *aham kṛtsnasya jagataḥ prabhavaḥ pralayas tathā*, “I am the origin of this entire universe and its dissolution,” said Krishna to Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgītā*) begin to shift the sublime toward the Gothic. The daemonic in us (Schiller) and the oceanic sense of dissolution (Schopenhauer) are clearly linked to the impossible object (the Lacanian Real or the Hegelian supersensible Idea) that leads us to the paradox of representation at the heart of the sublime. In the words of Slavoj Žižek:

The Sublime is therefore the paradox of an object which, in the very field of representation, provides a view, in a negative way, of the dimension of what is unrepresentable.<sup>58</sup>

There is, then, an epistemological inadequacy, a negativity that governs the sublime. The impossible representation of the idea, in its negation, proposes the incomparable greatness of the Thing in question as it also connects the imagination with pain. Not surprisingly, for Kant there was “no more sublime passage in the Jewish Law than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image . . . ” (127).

If we take Kant’s metaphorical analogy seriously, then for the Gothic, as for Melville, the impossible idea, the “no more sublime passage,” is the idea of death itself, since death is quite beyond representation. The mind introjects the fear of death (for Burke the cause of absolute terror) and the subject defines itself in terms of

this absolute negativity (which cannot be imaged). It is here that the Gothic becomes one of the key texts of the sublime and the effective literary source of the “uncanny” as sublimation. In Schopenhauer’s oceanic manifestation the sublime is the terrifying metaphor of the confrontation of the desiring self with a world that is ontologically locked into suffering (the Buddhist *duhkha*). To the rational mind, however, the final horror is that the oceanic sublime is also the end of narrative, and of history, as epic certainty is replaced by Gothic unpredictability. The uncanny logic of this version of the sublime is to be found in the Gothic.

Hence the metaphysics of human superiority espoused by Kant are no longer the conditions of the sublime. Instead, death is embraced contemplatively, and idealism is now tempered by pessimism and human insignificance. Desire becomes a thing-in-itself, and since it is founded on lack (we desire that which we do not possess), the oceanic sublime becomes the desired object. Unless, as Freud qualifies it, the reality principle intervenes, this *nirvana* principle, this death instinct, becomes the goal of life.<sup>59</sup> Freud quotes Schopenhauer approvingly (“For him death is the ‘true result and to that extent the purpose of life’”<sup>60</sup>) in his own deliberations on the struggle of the death instinct with the persistent will to live. More extensively argued in his essay entitled “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood” (1910) Freud introduces the term “sublimation” to mean both Schopenhauer’s sublime as exaltation and a process of change borrowed from the scientific definition of the term. The conflicting drives of life and death, therefore, find in the process of sublimation a substitute outlet for these conflicts that, if discharged, would make conscious life intolerable. In the words of Steven Z. Levine:

The process of sublimation converts the unsayable into the said, the unseeable into the seen; but the underlying drive remains behind in a repressed, unconscious form, ever ready to erupt.<sup>61</sup>

Life and will therefore struggle against the repressed desire for death. In the sublime—and especially in the oceanic sublime metaphorically invoked by all theoreticians of the subject, from Longinus to Schopenhauer—the death instinct is momentarily triumphant. (Schopenhauer had, of course, read this through a very Hindu concept of universal self-extinction and oneness with Brahman; Freud sees in it the essential “truth” of the unconscious itself.)

In other words, in the oceanic sublime we discover the image of a desire to return from the terrors of life to the "inviting tranquillity of death."<sup>62</sup> The latter is what we would call sublimation, a process of displacement and rechanneling, which allows the ego to confront its own relentless, and inevitable, goal, death.<sup>63</sup>

The foregoing very selective outline of the sublime from the eighteenth-century theoreticians through Kant to Freud is meant to demonstrate the possibilities of another narrative of the sublime that remained occluded or repressed. The extraordinary emphasis on the primacy of reason meant that the subject, though scarred, nevertheless emerges from the encounter with the sublime more or less triumphant. Against this I have projected the category of the Gothic sublime as the other, unspeakable narrative of this position, claiming that the triumph of reason (which has its counterpart in the epic's capacity to achieve, through writing, a faked immortality) is not to be taken for granted and that the totalizing grand narrative that is implicit in that claim to triumph is presaged in the Gothic, which shows the far-reaching consequences of narratives that examine a possible history of the period designated in the momentary lapse on the part of reason as it gives imagination total freedom. If we examine that space we find that there is no hope of self-transcendence available, as the subject simply dissolves into the pleasure principle and, finally, death. The narrative of this gap, this lapse, begins with Kant but ends up with the ghosts of the unconscious that Freud lays bare before us. In this respect the Gothic sublime becomes a general field under which another narrative, more like our own postmodern narrative, may be composed. This other sublime, the Gothic sublime, is in many ways the voice from the crypt that questions the power of reason (in Kant a substitute for the law of patriarchy as well) and destabilizes the centrality of the ego in Kant's formulation. It is the voice that wishes to write the narrative of the gap, the infinitesimal lapse, in which reason for the moment gives way to chaos as the mind embraces the full terror of the sublime. The Gothic narrative is to be located at that indeterminate moment of the near-abyss where the subject says, I am my own abyss, and is faced with a horrifying image of its own lack of totality. Where the Romantic version of this narrative reestablishes a totality as the ego under the security of reason embraces the magnificence of storm or holocaust, the Gothic subject has none of the capacities of the supremely confident, overpowering (though often insecure) Romantic ego: "We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;/ But thereof come in the end despondency and madness."