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# BEYOND FIGURATION, BELOW THE THRESHOLD: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON POSTMODERNISM AND THE SUBLIME

*Nicoletta Pireddu*

## 1. Introduction

Hegel's *Aesthetics* marks a decisive turning point in the relationship between the beautiful and the sublime, with important consequences for the conception and the role of the work of art in the modern age. The inhibition of mental faculties *vis-à-vis* the vastness of nature, the tension between attraction and repulsion entailed by the incommensurable and the unknown, the feeling of awe for that which exceeds human limits are all threats to Hegel's aspiration to totality. Swerving from the standpoints of Burke and Kant, the Hegelian sublime unfolds a harmful infinity: any experience beyond figuration is negative since it makes perceivers powerless by compromising their expressive abilities. No longer a source of powerful emotions, nature is precisely the main obstacle to human superiority, the enemy against which the spirit struggles. Civilization attests to the victory of freedom over blind necessity, becoming a tangible sign of mankind's successful appropriation of the phenomenal realm.

The liberation of the spirit from the constraints of nature goes hand in hand with the development of *representation*. This is the reason why also within the realm of art the presentable must prevail upon the unrepresentable, and the finite must encompass the infinite. Art accomplishes a miracle of ideality whenever the depth of spiritual signification penetrates the exteriority and materiality of the object, that is, whenever the internal content of the spirit finds an adequate *form* in the sensible world. The work of art is generated by the encounter of the individual and particular character of nature with the universality of aesthetic representation. If the idea is in perfect harmony with the concrete reality of its form, the work embodies artistic *beauty*. We can therefore understand why Hegel confines the sublime to the lowest, hence most primitive, of three progressively ascending artistic levels, which he defines respectively as symbolic, classical and romantic art. The symbolic age which for Hegel is typical of Oriental civilizations represents the strife of art simultaneously against a content it cannot master and against an unsuitable sensible form. The association of form and content provided by the symbol is in fact abstract and unstable: thus it materializes a world of pure inventions but creates no authentically beautiful work of art. In the aesthetics of the sublime, in particular, signification exceeds objective reality and makes the latter appear as a subordinate and unworthy entity. Any attempt to

express a substance that is inaccessible to concrete intuition entails the disappearance of expression itself. Hegel thus sets up a contrast between, on the one hand, the inability to represent infinity through artistic objectivity and, on the other hand, the peaceful balance of form and content that characterizes the totality of classical art. It is by achieving such completeness that the work of art can attain a more advanced stage in the evolution of the spirit. In this process, Hegel shifts from the negative sublimity of Indian art and of Hebrew poetry which is founded precisely upon the recognition of human defectiveness vis-à-vis an unrepresentable and ineffable divinity to the absorption of the ideal and excess within finitude. Greek art incarnates the essence of the beautiful: its calm and its unalterable happiness are the result of a perfect accord of the idea with its sensible manifestation.

Not only does Hegel's *Aesthetics* reject the dialectical relationship between the beautiful and the sublime; with another remarkable twist with respect to Burke, it also cuts the link between the sublime and the tragic. Actually, some passages of Burke's *Enquiry* show that the difference between the tragic and the sublime is ultimately a matter of emotional intensity. Both aesthetic experiences produce delight: a mixture of pain and pleasure, of sympathy and self-preservation instinct, "hinders us from shunning scenes of misery" (Burke 43) in actual life as well as on stage. Both the tragic and the sublime hence exert a cathartic influence upon the spectators: they excite their nervous systems, they awaken their minds from a state of indifference, without overwhelming them. However, the effect of "imitated distresses" (Burke 43) is "never so perfect" (Burke 43) as that of "real calamities" (Burke 43).<sup>1</sup> In Hegel, on the contrary, the tragic no longer expresses the struggle between involvement and detachment, which qualifies the sublime experience. Nor does it dramatize the unresolved conflict between man and nature, individual will and destiny as in the aesthetics of the Enlightenment. Hegel's notion of the tragic is in fact associated with the realization of beauty in the completeness of artistic form.

For my present purpose I want to emphasize that the secularization of the sublime and its consequent devaluation in Hegel's thought, which I have illustrated above, inaugurates an aesthetics of the beautiful that prevails almost unscathed up to our century. Actually, the attempts to reconcile the beautiful as a superior ideal of unity, even though beauty in post-Hegelian <sup>2</sup> is no longer an expression of eternity. In other words, after Hegel the beautiful loses its transcendent value: it becomes transitory and irremediably prosaic. Yet, ironically, it still functions as the aesthetic reference point, with respect to which the sublime represents only a transitional moment, an internal component.

In the light of such a prolonged tendency it is significant to examine the transformations that philosophy and literary theory have undergone approximately in the last two decades. With a curious inversion of direction, the sublime has been brought once again to the foreground in Europe<sup>3</sup> as well as in the United States, where such cultural shift has taken on wider proportions. The attempt to isolate the causes of this phenomenon may well seem reductive, yet it is perhaps neither accidental nor paradoxical that such recent rediscovery of the sublime goes hand in hand with the development of some trends of modernism and above all of postmodernism. If we consider the epigonic nature of much contemporary thought and as a corollary the frequent cannibalization of literary tradition with parodic intent, the retrieval of the sublime out of the canonical works of Longinus, Burke and Kant, and its transposition into the realm of megalopolises and simulacra can be taken as signs of disenchantment. The elevation produced by the blend of pathos and intellect in Longinus' great writing, the Burkean sense of annihilation in front of natural wonders, or the experience of the infinity of the Kantian moral law undergo a radical estrangement in a secularized and polluted world. They cannot but be decontextualized, and deprived of their original aims. Once re-exhumed from tradition, the voices of these philosophers of the sublime can only remind their postmodern epigones that the arrow of time proceeds in only one direction: it is not possible to recover the past in an innocent or painless way. This is tantamount to saying that the impulse toward the infinite which informs the sublime cannot survive in the postmodern universe of finitude. The mimesis of the sublime can easily shade off into mimicry.

At the same time, however, it is precisely by starting from the immanent quality of contemporary reality that we can interpret this renewed attention to the sublime as a sincere longing for transcendence, as the formulation of an attempt to reconstruct a "beyond" of any kind. The surmise of such *beyond* although it is one which can no longer be assimilated to divinity, *natura naturans* or a universal moral norm allows us to overstep the limitations of the postmodern condition. From this perspective, the nostalgic component of contemporary thought predominates over disenchantment: by recuperating an aesthetic category of the past and by elevating it to a model of experience it is possible to get out of the cognitive and emotional impasse which distresses us, and hence to nourish new hope for spiritual freedom.

This paper proposes a survey of the most relevant ways in which the current cultural debates have revisited the category of the sublime in the light of postmodernism. The works of scholars who eventually have a different origin such as Adorno and Lyotard have been in any case vigorously appropriated overseas, and adopted as methodological tools for the analysis of American culture: hence I feel justified in including them into my discussion. Actually, in the United States the interest in literary and philosophical postmodernism has

been and continues to be stronger than in Europe. Similarly, American civilization seems to concentrate all the positive and negative qualities underlying the newly emerging modes of twentieth-century sublime: the cult of vastness, of speed, of mass-empowerment, of commodification and technology, the craving for excess, the lacerating tension between extremes.

My aim is not so much to question the philosophical and ethical premises of postmodernism as to provide a snapshot of a cultural tendency. We will hence step into the postmodern epistemology and explore, from within, the status and role of the sublime. Through a polyphony of literary and critical texts we will try to examine how disenchantment and nostalgia merge or exclude each other in the various forms of postmodern sublime.

## 2. Some voices of postmodern *hypsos*

Precisely disenchantment and nostalgia meet in *The Romantic Sublime*, where Thomas Weiskel proposes a semiotic and psychoanalytic reading of the sublime, which he applies to nineteenth-century English poetry. Nevertheless, although the critic's attention is mainly concentrated on Romanticism, the argument of the book suggests significant consequences for our age. My discussion will hence privilege those aspects of Weiskel's work from which the standpoints of postmodernism can best emerge.

Weiskel finds in modernist irony the major hindrance to the survival of the Romantic sublime. The latter must be "abridged, reduced, and parodied as the grotesque" (Weiskel p.6) in order to appeal to the contemporary sensitivity. In this respect, along with irony, the postmodern soul has inherited from modernism the inability to feel terror or any other strong emotion vis-à-vis the infinite spaces that would astonish the Romantic subject. Ironic detachment "assures us we are not imaginative adolescents" (Weiskel 6), that is, it protects us from the fear of pathos. Separated from us by the screen of critical distance, natural infinitude now stirs only curiosity. Yet, the overall observations of the American scholar perhaps even against his intention lead us to deduce that the ideology of the sublime is not necessarily on the verge of exhaustion in the late twentieth century.

If on the one hand a human sublime is nothing less than an oxymoron since the adjective "human" negates the transcendence of limits that defines the noun "sublime" on the other hand it is equally true that in the history of literary consciousness "the sublime revives as God withdraws from an immediate participation in the experience of men" (Weiskel 3). The nostalgia and the uncertainty of a mind devoid of the traditional apparatus of spiritual and ontological sublimation and hence inevitably secularized trigger a search for new experiences of elevation in different contexts, and for a language able to legitimize them. The Romantic sublime functions precisely as a form of *compensation* for the loss of transcendence. It becomes "a major

analogy", "a stunning metaphor" (Weiskel 4). Actually, in this text metaphor plays a pivotal role, since it blends the two elements that for Weiskel determine the dynamics of the sublime, namely, substitution and rhetoric. It is precisely by considering the persistence of such notions from the Romantic age to the postmodern condition that we can extend the category of *hypsos* beyond the literary period here privileged, yet without overlooking relevant differences.

For Weiskel alienation is the structure of the sublime experience. The latter is thus opposed to the beautiful, which implies reconciliation and participation in the social order. In so doing, Weiskel presupposes the creation of a "credible god-term" (Weiskel 36), of a "meaningful jargon of ultimacy" (Weiskel 36) which can mediate between the subject and a reality which is no longer natural, ultimately replacing such reality. Therefore, in line with Kant's aesthetics, the sublime adventure of the Romantic "I" consists of a paradoxical *anagnorisis*, of a kind of overturning which transforms the source of annihilation into an occasion for "self-empowerment" (Weiskel 4) and "aggrandizement" (Weiskel 4). The perceiver's mind resolves the traumatic disequilibrium by introjecting the external source of power: the "I" *identifies* with the infinity of the object. However, Weiskel modifies the context of such mechanism: he reinterprets in psychoanalytic terms the idealistic metaphysics underlying *The Critique of Judgement*. The three phases that we can distinguish in the Kantian sublime namely, an initial correspondence between mind and object, a subsequent disproportion between the internal and the external, and a new balance which sees in excess the symbol of a relationship with transcendence become the respective stages of the Freudian Oedipus complex. In so doing, Weiskel exploits pivotal analogies between Freudian psychoanalysis and the early Romantic philosophies of the sublime. Actually, Burke emphasizes the ambivalence of *delight*, by presenting it as an attractive horror, as a negative pleasure which derives from the coexistence of the desire to be inundated by the sublime with the fear of being annihilated by it. By combining affection and privation, delight does not grant "that smooth and voluptuous satisfaction which the assured prospect of pleasure bestows" (Burke 35). Actually, as "the sensation which accompanies the removal of pain or danger" (Burke 34) it sets up the mind "in a state of much sobriety, impressed with a sense of awe, in a sort of tranquillity shadowed with horror" (Burke 32). Kant, for his part, confirms such a tension, which he describes in almost analogous terms: "since the mind is not just attracted by the object but is alternately always repelled as well, the liking for the sublime contains not so much a positive pleasure as rather admiration and respect, and so should be called a negative pleasure" (Kant 98). Significantly, Freud's explanation of the Oedipus complex is founded upon the same dynamics: the child's jouissance generated by the fantasy of possessing the mother goes hand in hand with the anxiety of castration that the

threats of the father figure awaken in him. In this respect, the identification with the sublime object in the reactive phase of the Kantian sublime corresponds to the child's identification with the male parent: the child acknowledges the censoring role of the Superego over his own Ego, a function which legitimates paternal authority. In both contexts we are confronted with the same paradox: the subject can overcome the threats to self-preservation and to personal freedom only by succumbing to a new form of power. The Romantic "I" is born precisely of such bounded freedom, which characterizes the sublime experience as well as the Freudian family romance.

Nevertheless, the identity that *The Romantic Sublime* describes in the process of its formation is, in particular, the poetic consciousness: the family romance thus becomes a *Künstlerroman*; the authority which is simultaneously a source of *delight* and of castration anxiety is embodied the figure of the literary precursor, which inhibits and stimulates the epigone. In this way, the "anxiety" (Weiskel 83) associated with the transcendence of the sublime can be enriched with references to Harold Bloom's notion of "anxiety of influence,"<sup>4</sup> with which Weiskel, as a student of Bloom, was unquestionably familiar. Starting from the premise that the history of poetry is indistinguishable from poetic influence, Bloom traces a genealogy of strong poets who wrestle with their strong precursors in order to appropriate and simultaneously revise their literary heritage. Through the mediation of Bloom, Weiskel thus sees the conflict between poetic generations as the exemplary instance of agonistic sublime a topic for which Longinus is a more useful reference than Burke or Kant. Indeed in Longinus, as in Weiskel's Romantic sublime, the poet's counterattack takes on the form of a mimesis of his precursor, from which he derives the possibility of elevation. Great writing the Longinian *hypsous* already recognizes "the burden of indebtedness" (Weiskel 10) which qualifies the Romantic poet's attitude *vis-à-vis* his literary past, and can eliminate such burden precisely by being engaged in a power struggle. Actually in a passage of his *Peri hypsous* the "road to greatness" (Longinus 22) is precisely "the emulation and imitation of the great prose writers and poets of the past" (Longinus 22). Only in this way can these "eminent personages [be] present in our minds and raise us to a higher level of imaginative power" (Longinus 23). Yet, Longinus' homage to the authority of his poetic fathers is not exempt from the acknowledgment of the belatedness and weakness of his age:

It is indeed a trial to submit our work to such a jury and to such an audience, and to imagine, if only in play, that we have to give an account of our literary stewardship to these giants as our judges and witnesses.

(Longinus 23)

At the same time, however, Longinus is equally assertive about self-confidence and courage in art, independently of the weight of one's precursors:

...if a man is actually afraid to utter anything that looks beyond his own life and time, then his mind's conceptions are destined to be imperfect and blind; they will miscarry, nor ever grow into the perfection which deserves later fame. (Longinus 23)

The compromise between freedom and subjection, which is the common ground for both the sublime experience and the Oedipal crisis, thus calls attention to the issue of originality in the artistic realm (Weiskel 32). This question is particularly relevant for postmodernism, yet in Weiskel's discussion it does not overstep the boundaries of the Romantic period. In fact, if we extend the horizon of our inquiry beyond the limits imposed by the American scholar, we can realize that the ambivalence of the Oedipal relationship between precursor and epigone is nothing less than the distinctive trait of postmodern literature, and that such conflict is resolved with the same sense of "self-empowerment" entailed by *the Romantic sublime*. The postmodern ephebus, too, comes to terms with literary tradition and overcomes the "burden of indebtedness" with the introjection of authority. Only by incorporating the model that challenges his own consciousness as a writer can the postmodern epigone master the anxiety of influence and make his voice to be heard. However, unlike the Romantic poet, he acquires power and freedom not so much by elevating himself towards his precursor as by dragging the latter down, by discrediting his authority from the pedestal to the *abyss*. The son's identification with the father hence becomes the father's reduction to the condition of son; the *hypsos* deriving from the emulation of the literary past is replaced by the jubilation for its blasphemous manipulation. In this respect, postmodernism resorts to parody in order to deform the sublime adventure described by Weiskel, and resumes its ideology with disenchantment.

Donald Barthelme's tale *The Dead Father* offers perhaps the most explicit and parodic reenactment of Weiskel's and Bloom's agonistic sublime in American postmodern fiction. The carcass of a gigantic father is being hauled across the landscape by his children who are engaged in an impossible search for the Golden Fleece. "Half buried in the ground, half not" (Barthelme 4), "[d]ead but still with us, still with us, but dead" (Barthelme 3), this paradoxical character is simultaneously moribund and immortal, but still eager to impose his weight and power upon younger generations. The collective quest through the archive of mythological and literary tradition thus proceeds hand in hand with the children's attempt to get rid of their father's burden so as to acquire freedom. In this respect, Barthelme's story dramatizes the father-sons conflict by blending the psychoanalytic and the rhetorical implications that have already emerged from *The Romantic Sublime*. As a

parody of both the Freudian family romance and the *Künstlerroman* of the struggle between postmodern epigones and literary precursor, *The Dead Father* revises the conditions for self-empowerment: the only source of strength for postmodern sons resides in the lucid awareness of their own weakness. "A Manual for Sons" a handbook that in the novel the children receive from a visitor teaches precisely how to come to terms with the devastating paternal influence. The solution does not lie in the nostalgic dream of a blank slate which can obliterate their cumbersome historical and literary heritage: in fact [f]athers are like blocks of marble, giant cubes, highly polished, with veins and seams, placed squarely in your path. They block your path. They cannot be climbed over, neither can they be slithered past. They are the "past". (Barthelme 129)

At the same time, however, the manual does not animate any fantasy of self-aggrandizement which might result as in *the Romantic sublime* from the epigone's identification with his powerful precursor: "a son can never, in the fullest sense, become a father" (Barthelme 33). Therefore, if according to the paradoxical logic of Barthelme's tale dead fathers can neither be killed nor replaced by their progeny, the anxiety of influence can be cured only by not taking paternal authority seriously. The postmodern epehebi must set up a dialogue with their literary predecessors without considering them the repository of truth any longer. They must manipulate and contaminate the masterpieces of the past with their own parodic whim.

Your true task, as a son, is to reproduce every one of the enormities touched upon in this manual, but in an attenuated form. You must become your father, but a paler, weaker version of him...Fatherhood can be, if not conquered, at least 'turned down' in this generation. (Barthelme 145)

Significantly, when the Dead Father realizes the emotional indifference of his children vis-à-vis his extraordinary enterprises, he cannot but wonder: "They don't seem very impressed... Where is the awe?" (Barthelme 14). Barthelme's disenchanted answer is that the awe generated by the *pathos* of the agonistic sublime has been profaned and degraded to the irony of *bathos*.

We can extract other elements from *The Romantic Sublime* that are essential to establish a different kind of connection between the Romantic and the postmodern sublime. Since the Romantic poet transposes the experience of excess to the rhetorical level by making it ineffable. Weiskel interprets the mind-object opposition in linguistic terms, that is, as a relationship between, respectively, a signified and a signifier. According to this semiotic rereading, the natural sublime consists of an excess on the level of signifiers:

the feeling is one of *on and on*, of being lost. The signifiers cannot be grasped or understood; they overwhelm the possibility of meaning in a massive underdetermination that melts all oppositions or distinctions into a perceptual stream (Weiskel 26) <sup>5</sup>

The motif of the wasteland of which Weiskel underlines the continuity from Romantic to modernist literature effectively depicts such shapeless and meaningless horizontality. Once again, Weiskel seems to oscillate between the will to isolate the specificity of *the Romantic sublime* and the attempt to emphasize its persistence in contemporary reality. Actually, on the one hand he takes the wasteland *topos* of much recent literature as a mere "abridgement of the sublime moments" (Weiskel 26) which confines us to the second phase of the Kantian system: we thus "await futilely the restorative reaction which never comes, except *ironically*" (Weiskel 26. My emphasis). On the other hand, however, Weiskel does not exclude the prospect of extracting some significance from such experience of loss, and, along with it, the possibility of elevation from such apparent vacuity:

The absence of a signified itself assumes the status of a signifier, disposing us to feel that behind this newly significant absence lurks a newly discovered presence, the latent referent, as it were, mediated by the new sign. (Weiskel 28)

With these observations the American scholar comes very close to some recent theories of postmodern sublime, which I will examine in detail below, that are based precisely upon the idea that indeterminacy is itself an instance of presentation, a *Darstellung* in the Kantian sense of the term. Weiskel's standpoint which is far more post-structuralist than Romantic suggests, although timidly, that "being" and "depth" as evoked in the sublime adventure have no independent ontological status: "perhaps they are reifications of the signifying power, spontaneously created by the mind at some zero degree, in the mere reflex of making absence significant" (Weiskel 28). This statement by Weiskel is particularly useful to introduce the position of another American scholar who has discussed the mechanism of the sublime in contemporary reality: Fredric Jameson. Being nostalgic of a transcendent order for which there is no room in the postmodern condition, the "I" for Jameson cannot but create what in Weiskel is a new "jargon of ultimacy" (Weiskel 36): the quest of the postmodern subject for a "god-term" (Weiskel 36) takes place within the urban wasteland and in the endless play of signifiers.

In Jameson's *Postmodernism and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Weiskel's observations on language and the sublime act as a premise for wider reflections on the contingency of being and depth. The metaphorical sublime is here presented as a by-product of schizophrenia. Starting from the very phenomenon that Weiskel associates with elevation in Romantic poetry "the breakdown of the signifying chain" (Jameson 26) Jameson

underlines that like the schizophrenic the postmodern subject is confronted with disconnected forms and impenetrable messages, to the point of experiencing "pure material Signifiers" (Jameson 27). Nevertheless, if the emotional impact of such occurrence initially consists of "anxiety and loss of reality" (Jameson 27), it then undergoes a positive transformation: it becomes euphoria, and reaches a sort of "intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity" (Jameson 28). Jameson reads in these terms the whole postmodern hyperspace: the prostration and the subsequent uplifting in the reactive phase of the sublime, that in Burke and Kant derive from the encounter with nature, are now generated by simulacra. The exemplary sources of *delight* in the postmodern condition are not so much the depth and verticality of the Romantic world as the glittering mirror surfaces of the Hotel Bonaventure and the labyrinthine layout of its interior, which transcend "the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world" (Jameson 44).

The protagonist of "Lost in the Funhouse" a short story by John Barth experiences the same exhilarating sense of ego-loss that Jameson associates with an actual visit to this emblematic building of downtown Los Angeles. The mirror-maze of an amusement arcade is for Ambrose "a place of fear and confusion" (Barth 72), a spatial dimension which is impossible to seize. Barth's Funhouse decenters and breaks into pieces the character's subjectivity. In this architectural and narrative space, Ambrose's bewilderment on seeing the "endless replication of his image in the mirrors" (Barth 94) goes hand in hand with his dizzy meditations on the all-encompassing prison-house of language. He ultimately accepts the fact that not only he but all of us "will never get out of the funhouse" (Barth 77) in other words, that there is no substantial, true reality beyond or underneath the glossy surface of our mirages. However, disenchantment does not hinder him from extracting "some 'moment of truth' within the more evident 'moments of falsehood' of postmodern culture" (Jameson 47). Ambrose finds a source of self-empowerment and elation in the decision to perpetuate falsehood, hence in his metamorphosis from a hostage to an author of postmodern fiction, from a visitor to an architect of stereoscopic illusions: "He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he's not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator" (Barth 97).

Paradoxically, the progressive de-realization of phenomenal reality does not exclude the possibility of attaining moments of exaltation: in the hallucinatory space of megalopolises, in special effects, even in a technological and dystopian society, it is possible to experience "some new, as yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions" (Jameson 36). Thus in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* the anti-human power of technology turns back against the inhabitants of Blacksmith the moment a toxic cloud appears in the sky. However,

despite the anxiety and the fear that it stirs in the characters, the cloud sublimates the collective yearning for "something large in scope and content" (DeLillo 6). At the beginning of the story, "a weekly dose of cult mysteries" (DeLillo 5) is the only touch of transcendence, albeit grotesque, in the totally commodified life of Jack and Babette Gladney. Yet, the "airborne toxic event" (DeLillo 117) quickly becomes the most intriguing mystery to penetrate: the desire for a confrontation with the infinite and the unknown is stronger than the obsession of death with which the same event haunts the protagonists. Why can urban squalor and the alienation of daily life be a delight, Jameson asks. Ironically, a conversation between Jack and a nun lays bare how and why some faith in a *beyond* can and must be kept alive in the postmodern world:

What does the Church say about heaven today? Is it still the old heaven, like that, in the sky?"..."Do you think we are stupid?" she said..."Then what is heaven...if it isn't the abode of God and the angels and the souls of those who are saved?" "Saved? What is saved? This is a dumb head, who would come in here to talk about angels. Show me an angel. Please. I want to see." "But you're a nun. Nuns believe these things..." "It is for others. Not for us...The others who spend their lives believing that we still believe. It is our task in the world to believe things no one else takes seriously. To abandon such beliefs completely, the human race would die. This is why we are here...If we did not pretend to believe these things, the world would collapse." "Pretend?" "Of course, pretend. Do you think we are stupid?..." (DeLillo 317-19)

Jack ends up appropriating the moral of the nun's astonishing speech, which is also the condition for the survival of the sublime in the postmodern *chaosmos* of simulacra: we must not take the nun's dedication as a pretense, but rather see her presence as a dedication (DeLillo 319). Ultimately, who cares whether there are angels or chemical poisons among the clouds? Who cares whether the hues of the atmosphere at sunset are a natural prodigy or the by-product of a chemical reaction? That which matters is to feel the impulse to raise our heads to the sky and wait until the next sunset for our overdose of awe.

The euphoric ecstasy that the metropolitan universe infallibly seems to grant succumbs however to the threat of a nuclear catastrophe. Excluded from the sublime horizon after Romanticism, nature reasserts itself in its most devastating and uncontrollable aspect. Whereas for Jameson the postmodern hyperspace turns anxiety into overwhelming hilarity, the scenery of Alamogordo and Hiroshima evoked in Rob Wilson's *American Sublime* overturns these premises: powerlessness supplants the sense of self-mastery. The ineffability of the atomic disaster re-opens the terrifying abyss separating the object from the subject's cognitive faculties, and referentiality from language that gap which Weiskel emphasizes in *The Romantic Sublime*. However, as Rob Wilson observes, the prostration entailed by a nuclear explosion cannot stimulate belief in a transcendent

entity: it can only provoke deep bewilderment. The poetic language of elevated passions that arise from the reactive phase of the Kantian sublime dies both metaphorically and materially together with the subject which is annihilated by the holocaust. Therefore, after Hiroshima there is no chance of survival for the Burkean and Kantian distinction between, on the one hand, love for the beautiful seen as that which the subject can dominate and, on the other hand, admiration for the sublime because of its devastating impact upon the mind. The instinct of self-preservation which induces the mind to withstand natural forces capitulates to the threat of irreversible annihilation. Far from promoting that "empowerment of selfhood" (Wilson 236) which the Romantic poet can achieve through empathy with nature, the nuclear sublime deprives the subject of the safe distance that should allow him/her precisely to recuperate mental faculties after the shock of perception. Actually, in line with the impulse of self-preservation, Burke's *delight* does not derive from the presence of pain and danger but rather from their removal. Whenever such sensations oppress the mind from too close as in the case of a nuclear catastrophe they are "merely terrible" (Burke 36).

Angela Carter's novel *Heroes and Villains* calls attention to the ideological implications emerging from the nuclear sublime, and particularly to the fact that contrary to the natural sublime of Niagara Falls a spectacle like that of Los Alamos cannot be adopted as a model of individual or national empowerment. The novel imagines precisely a post-nuclear society in which the paradigms and the myths that traditionally invest power with the aura of legitimacy have been dismantled. There is no *a priori* distinction between masters and slaves; in Carter's post-apocalyptic fiction the seemingly neat division between a "good", rational civilization and "bad" primitive tribes falls apart. Marianne the female protagonist blurs the contrast between heroic Professors and contemptible Barbarians by choosing the jungle: a Professor's daughter, she ultimately becomes the bride of a tribe's leader. However, with her exotic adventure she experiences anything but the noble savage's benign innocence. Even more subtly, Carter produces a further crack in the heroes/villains conventional dialectics by introducing in the novel a third group of "non-connoted" characters designated as "the Out People" and described as mutilated and marginalized creatures. They effectively stand for a residual, radical Otherness that hinders the reconstitution or the overturning of the binary opposition between dominators and subaltern. In *Heroes and Villains* the boundary-threatening effect of the nuclear sublime is constantly at work. In the hallucinatory and implausible landscape of the novel the laws of the conventional natural world are overwhelmed:

the order of nature was awry: a bee buzzed above a magic sunflower fully two feet across. A patch of rhubarb had become a plantation of huge, sappy stems holding up a thick roof of worm-eaten leaves. (Carter 26)

The physical integrity of human beings is equally undone:

Among the Out People, the human form acquired fantastic shapes. One man had furled ears as pale, delicate and extensive as Arum lilies. Another was scaled all over, with webbed hands and feet. Few had the conventional complement of limbs or features and most bore marks of nameless diseases. Some were ludicrously attenuated, with arms and legs twice as long as those of natural men, but one was perfect in all things but a perfect miniature, scarcely two feet long from tip to tip. (Carter 110)

The disintegration of values, beliefs and codes of behavior that follows the nuclear catastrophe also erases the most evidently distinctive feature of the human species, namely, its outward bodily appearance. One character in the novel hence rightly observes: "Perhaps we should seriously reconsider as to whether form makes the man" (Carter 110). Yet in the aftermath of Carter's sublime experience provides no surrogate process of self-definition, and all the more reason no subsequent prospect of self-aggrandizement. Dwarfed by their lack of self-identity, the protagonists of *Heroes and Villains* are equally unable to preserve the specificity of their own emotions: their attitude towards the post-nuclear reality is actually a mixture of horror, pastoral sentimentality, despair, irony, complacent curiosity. The psychological, ideological and aesthetic *impasse* that Carter fictionalizes in this novel is the climax of a technological apocalypse in which the subject is "awe-struck not so much into belief...as into uncertainty" (Wilson, 229).

Therefore, the nuclear sublime invalidates the compromise between freedom and authority underlying both Weiskel's Romantic sublime and Jameson's late-capitalist postmodern sublime. So far we have seen with Weiskel that the Romantic poet can recover the power of words only by recognizing a superior order be it divine or arbitrarily created. Similarly, with Jameson we have found a way out of the postmodern *impasse* by developing some "capacity for gratification in an environment which increasingly makes gratification impossible" (Lyric Poetry 262). For its part, the sublime nuclear experience of Alamogordo as presented by Wilson has destroyed any potential reaction.

### 3. A new "promesse du bonheur"?

Wilson's meditations on the nuclear sublime and on the limits it posits to that which is commensurable and sayable expand a famous statement by Theodor Adorno about the loss of innocence in contemporary art after the Nazi holocaust: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (*Prisms* 34). The subject's yearning for totality as a source of identification and aggrandizement remains unfulfilled. This ideal can only be evoked as unfeasible through its negation, namely, through the complete disintegration of reality resulting from devastating human actions. For an *aesthetics* prostrated by such events but simultaneously eager to remember

them, the sublime is not so much a means of reconciliation of mind and object. Rather, it performs the function of denouncing the reactive phase of the Kantian scheme; it reenacts the fusion of mind and object with the aim of undoing the expectation of harmony on the formal level, by making the work fragmentary and incomplete. On the one hand, in the readings of Weiskel, Jameson and Wilson the continuity between the Romantic and the contemporary sublime is established on the level of contents: actually, their works stress the evolution of the contexts that make such aesthetic experience possible across time. On the other hand, for such philosophers as Adorno and Lyotard it is in the destruction of aesthetic form that the sublime manifests itself. From the section of *The Critique of Judgement* that Kant devotes to the sublime, they resurrect the notion of excess with respect not merely to cognitive limits but also to the structural boundaries of the object of perception or of the work of art. Contemporary art thus undoes the sort of Apollonian ideal that led Stendahl to define beauty as the "promesse du bonheur," and in fact stages the unresolved tension between fragment and totality, between presentability and unrepresentability, that Adorno explains in the following way:

Whereas the traditional concept of the sublime as an infinite presence was animated by the belief that negation could bring about positivity, the same does not hold for art that aims at truth content in a context of irreconcilable contradictions. (*Aesthetic Theory* 282)

We can take *Paterson* by William Carlos Williams as a mise en scene of Adorno's sublime. "Rigor of beauty is the quest" (Williams 3), announces the poetic voice in the Preface, and Williams himself avows his effort "to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world about [him]." <sup>6</sup> However he soon reduces his totalizing ambition to a search for the universal in the particular: a statement by John Dewey which had deeply struck him becomes the aesthetic law of *Paterson*: "The local is the only universal, upon that all art builds" (Williams iii). The poem can be read as a tension between a local and a global perspective, order and chaos, memory and oblivion, presentable and unrepresentable: "In ignorance a certain knowledge and knowledge,/ undispersed, its own undoing" (Williams 4). Only the end of life will arrest such incessant flux of destruction and reconstitution of temporary stability: "Never in this world will a man live well in his body save dying and not know himself dying; yet that is the design" (Williams 4). Death should come as the reconciliation of contrasts, as the aesthetic apocalypse which makes nothingness coincide with totality. The moment of death would thus be the sublime, epiphanic moment in which the pattern, "the design" (Williams 4) of Williams's aesthetic world is no longer hidden. In fact, however, there is no apocalypse in *Paterson*, which hence overcomes precisely the traditional notion of the sublime as "an infinite presence" (Adorno 282). As I have already suggested, Williams' sublime is rather to be found in the staging of formal and conceptual

"irreconcilable contradictions" (Adorno 282). Therefore, on the one hand the poem develops alongside the flow of the Passaic River as an epic of both a man and a city: it hence seems to follow a preestablished direction toward a conclusion. Furthermore, the frequent analogy between the river and the serpent with "its tail in its mouth" (e.g. Williams 214; 233) grants *Paterson* unity and circularity. On the other hand, however, Williams warns against a facile reading which accommodates all details within a reassuring interpretive grid: "this is order, perfect and controlled/ on which empires, alas, are built/ But there may issue, a contaminant,/...a dissonance" (Williams 179). Ultimately, that beauty which initially animated the poet's quest turns out to be quite distant from the ideal of rigor with which it was associated. It becomes "a defiance of authority" (Williams 119), and, first of all, of the Apollonian authority of classical beauty. The overall image of *Paterson* as "an abstract design without design" (Williams 244) thus confirms the dynamics of Adorno's sublime: it is a poetic collage on the threshold between composition and decomposition, between the complex order of Cubist elements and the ironic dissolution of Dadaist ones.

Expanding on Adorno, Jean-François Lyotard aims at defining the status of modern and postmodern aesthetics precisely in relation to two different ways of articulating the conflict between the presentable and the unrepresentable. The modern for Lyotard is still characterized by a recognizable and consistent form, as well as by a nostalgic desire of "solace and pleasure" (Lyotard 81). Hence it can simply allude to the sublime as an absent content. It is in postmodernism that pleasure and pain are inextricably intertwined, thus generating the authentic sublime sensation. In line with Kant's theory, Lyotard explains pleasure as the by-product of the idea that reason exceeds presentation; pain, for its part, derives from the awareness that imagination is inadequate to illustrate the concept. The postmodern element, therefore, "would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself" (Lyotard 81). In other words, the postmodern deprives us of the reassurance of formal integrity, and thus becomes the obstacle that hinders taste from matching the universal consensus required by beauty. In the absence of a socially accepted and shared aesthetic judgement, also the nostalgia for an unreachable unity and totality seems to become meaningless. In the postmodern hence sublime work, artistic representation is reduced to a means for conveying "a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (Lyotard 81).

With this explanation, Lyotard does not interpret the postmodern as an aesthetic and philosophical category resulting from the *evolution* of the modern and thus linked to a specific historical period. After associating the postmodern to the condition of knowledge in contemporary reality, the French philosopher transforms such a category into a mode of being, into a state of latent subversion that modernity itself makes evident. Therefore,

Lyotard concludes the appendix to his report on postmodernism by stating that a "work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (Lyotard 79). The very sublime that in Hegel's *Aesthetics* Precisely due to its unconditional nature, this freedom cannot but realize itself in literary and figurative avant-gardes: not accidentally, in order to exorcise the danger of nostalgia which might subsist in the postmodern sense of epigonism, Lyotard ends up identifying authentic postmodernity with the *novatio* of Braque, Picasso and Duchamp (Lyotard 80). Paradoxically, such artists are generally located on the opposite side of postmodernism, since in their aesthetics there is no room for the feeling of exhaustion, nor for the recognition of a debt towards the past. Lyotard's choice thus reinstates a desire for transcendence, redemption, revolution - all ideals that only the domain of art can now fulfill. Postmodern epigonism is overturned into the cult of a *tabula rasa*: a new promise of happiness can arise from the invention of "new rules of the game" (Lyotard 80) with the prospect of a future emancipation. Yet, precisely this palingenesis, that the sublime must prepare, gives voice once again to nostalgia. It looks as if Lyotard's ultimate dream were that of a post-postmodernist artist "creating from nothingness" (*Opus Posthumous* 127) and renewing "the world in a verse" (*Opus* 129) like Wallace Stevens' *Ulysses*.

In his yearning for new artistic premises, the French philosopher shares with Stevens a complex "idea of order" (*Collected Poems* 128) able to pervade the works of art with the sense of an irrational and spiritual presence which yet remains beyond the margins of definition. In a sort of Kantian *via negativa* the rhapsodic obscurity of Stevens' poetry treats absence as the mark of a transcendental "other". Thus Stevens' poetic design conceives of representation as boundless, instead of enclosing it within the limits of "the transparent and communicable experience" (Lyotard 82). It thus performs the function that Lyotard assigns to the aesthetic of the sublime, which "allows the unrepresentable to become perceptible" (Lyotard 80) through allusion. But this parallel with Stevens betrays Lyotard's nostalgia for a fecund imagination and for a powerful self, precisely that imagination and that self which in postmodernist literature and philosophy have irremediably collapsed onto forms of global discourse. As a means for accomplishing the *novatio* of a new avant-garde, Lyotard ends up reasserting the pre-postmodern "American sublime" (*Collected* 130-31) to which Stevens devotes a lyric. As in Stevens's lines, after Lyotard's envisioned *tabula rasa* "... the sublime comes down/ To the spirit itself" (*Collected* 131). The spring for an aesthetic revolution must be the energy of a poetic "I" which finds within itself the strength for regeneration. Ultimately, the road of Lyotard's sublime does not lead to the parodic disfiguration common to much postmodern writing. It rather returns to Stevens's oracular, supreme fiction namely, to a work of art

equal to the idea of God, struggling with the inaccessibility of the abstract, "Invisible or visible or both:/ A seeing and unseeing in the eye" (< I>Collected 385).

The plurality of standpoints vis-à-vis the sublime which contemporary reality invokes at the levels of both form and content suggest a far more articulated overview than the one which emerges from the observations of the Italian scholar Gianni Carchia. Swerving from some passages of his *Retorica del sublime*, I believe that the many aesthetics of the sublime produced by our age do not always and in the same way attest mankind's awe for the realm of ideas from the standpoint of a humiliated finitude.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, they do not necessarily decree the impossibility of sustaining such radiant ideals from the standpoint of that bewitched reality into which life is inescapably caught.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand as the nuclear sublime demonstrates the unreachable and unrepresentable "elsewhere" weighing on human finitude can be anything but radiant. On the other hand, postmodern aesthetics can draw sublime situations and elements precisely from the bewitched reality of a prosaic universe and not in opposition to it. Although devoid of the eschatological dimension, the postmodern condition does not forsake the hope of salvation. However humiliated, our finitude aspires to redemption by positing as Lyotard shows an aesthetic infinite, by finding a paradoxical transcendence in the immanence of the work of art itself. Better than any previous age, postmodernism thus seems to embody the dynamics contained in the etymology of the term "sublime." "Sub limen" designates an elevation not so much *beyond* as precisely *below* the *limen*, where the latter term refers to the threshold taken specifically as the architrave of ancient gates. The soul uplifted by the sublime is thus raised to a sufficiently high position but it is not totally unleashed. Not without some irony, I am tempted to think of the post-metaphysical world discussed in this paper as the most authentic ground for such bounded aggrandizement. There is no chance and no need, either, to get so high as the sky; let's stop a bit lower and content ourselves with the aura of our everyday, secularized, fetishized life.<sup>9</sup>

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## Notes

- 1 The merely quantitative difference between a tragic clearly emerges from Burke's further observations in the same chapter: "Chuse a day on which to represent the most sublime and affecting tragedy we have; appoint the most favourite actors; spare no cost upon the scenes and decorations; unite the greatest efforts of poetry, painting and music; and when you have collected your audience, just at the moment when their minds are erect with expectation, let it be reported that a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square; in a moment the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of the real sympathy" (Burke, 43).
- 2 For instance in the works of Solger e Vischer. See G. Carchia, "La secolarizzazione del sublime," *Retorica del sublime*: 119-32.
- 3 Two collections of critical essays can be representative of this renewed and widespread interest in the sublime among contemporary European scholars: *Da Longino a Longino*, edited by L. Russo and *Du Sublime*, edited by J. L. Nancy.
- 4 The anxiety of influence perhaps explains also the surprising fact that Weiskel a student of Bloom mentions the latter only occasionally (for instance on p. 27 for the concept of "daemonization"). In fact, *The Romantic Sublime* is impregnated with Bloomian reminiscences in its use of the concept of ambivalence and in its Oedipal dynamics between literary generations.
- 5 This is what Weiskel defines as "metaphorical sublime," since in order to overcome the excess on the level of signifiers a term must be substituted in the sintagmatic chain, and a signified is thus produced. Therefore, this kind of experience is the reader's sublime, because it reproduced the reader's

hermeneutic activity. In the case of an excess on the level of signifieds, the sublime is "metonymical:" in order to avoid a kind of "death by plenitude" (27) the poet's mind must project and diffuse such excess of meaning according to temporal and/or spatial contiguity.

- 6 The quote is taken from the beginning of Chapter 58 of Williams' *Autobiography*, where he talks about the genesis of *Paterson*. The New Directions edition of *Paterson* includes some autobiographical passages by Williams as an introduction to the poem. See *Paterson*: iii.
- 7 "ammirate testimonianze della realtà delle idee a fronte della nostra umiliata finitudine" (Carchia 143).
- 8 "Insostenibilità di quegli ideali luminosi a fronte della realtà stregata in cui la vita non smette di avvolgersi" (Carchia 143).
- 9 I am grateful to Professor Remo Bodei for his seminar on the beautiful, the tragic and the sublime at UCLA. All remaining errors are of course mine.