

Religion and the Sublime

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And the LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

When Elijah heard the whisper, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

1 Kings 19:11–13¹

Saying this, Krishna
the great lord of discipline
revealed to Arjuna
the true majesty of his form.

It was a multiform, wondrous vision,
with countless mouths and eyes
and celestial ornaments,
brandishing many divine weapons.

Everywhere was boundless divinity
containing all astonishing things,
wearing divine garlands and garments,
anointed with divine perfume.

If the light of a thousand suns
were to rise in the sky at once
it would be like the light
of that great spirit.

Arjuna saw all the universe in its many ways and parts,
standing as one in the body
of the god of gods.
Then filled with astonishment,

¹ *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008).

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his hair bristling on his flesh,
 Arjuna bowed his head to the god.
Bhagavad-Gita 11.12–14²

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the religious and aesthetic domains in human life is deep, complicated, and hard to describe in philosophical prose. Characterizing it is all the more challenging when the proposed point of intersection is the sublime, which by its very definition runs up to (“sub”) the limit (“limen”) of conceptual analysis and phenomenological description.³ As a result of the elusiveness of the topic – as well as the vastness of the historical territory here – scholarly work on the relationship between religion and the sublime has tended to focus on a specific period or set of figures, with few attempts to provide a theoretical template for the whole.⁴ Our goal here, however, is to do precisely that. We begin with some conceptual ground clearing before briefly highlighting some undernoticed connections between religion and the sublime in two central eighteenth-century authors, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. We then devote the bulk of the chapter to a fourfold taxonomy of what we call the *theistic* sublime, the *spiritualistic* sublime, the *dymythologicistic* sublime, and the *nontheistic* sublime. These models depict four main ways in which sublime experience relates to central features of religious life – that is, to what Rudolf Otto calls experience of the “numinous,” to the acceptance of religious doctrine, and to the behaviors and affections that often characterize religious practice.⁵ We conclude with a survey of what we regard as the main prospects for and obstacles to theoretical attempts to bring the domains of the religious and the sublime together in this way.

THE SUBLIME: DISCURSIVE PRELIMINARIES

It is worth noting right away that we do not take ourselves to be characterizing *the* concept of the sublime, largely because (as the various chapters of this volume indicate) there is more than one concept that goes by the name. In contemporary parlance, “sublime” functions as a term of general approbation: a highbrow version of “awesome” that can be ascribed without irony to almost any object, person, or quality that produces pleasure (thus it doesn’t sound odd to speak of a politician’s “sublime speech,” a chef’s “sublime cake,” or a philosopher’s “sublime beard”). This everyday concept is thus distinct from – or at most an extremely watered-down descendent of – the more technical eighteenth-century concept, which makes essential reference to *sensory* experience of art or nature. The authors who established the contours of the latter concept (Baillie, Addison, Burke, and Kant) also construe genuine sublime experience as requiring two distinct moments: first, a feeling of being dazzled and even terrified in the face of something vast, violent, threatening, or incomprehensible, and, second, a feeling of reassurance accompanied by a reflective epiphany or realization. Moreover, a certain logic is supposed to connect the two moments: whereas the first tears apart, bursts, and threatens to

² *Bhagavad-Gita*, trans. Barbara Stoler-Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

³ Cf. editor’s introduction to the current volume.

⁴ David B. Morris, *The Religious Sublime: Christian Poetry and Critical Tradition in Eighteenth-Century England* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), focuses on a particular century in British literature; Henry Hart, “Robert Lowell and the Religious Sublime,” *New England Review* 14, 1 (1991), 24–47, on a single poet; Jan Rosiek, *Maintaining the Sublime: Heidegger and Adorno* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000), on two twentieth-century philosophers; and Clayton Crockett, *A Theology of the Sublime* (New York: Routledge, 2001), primarily on Kant and his legacy in twentieth-century continental philosophy.

⁵ See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), chap. 2. The term derives from the Latin *numen*, which literally means “nodding” but has been used since Roman times to refer to divine presence and will.

annihilate, the second pieces back together, repairs, and reconstructs, although often in new and unexpected ways.⁶

Although our account takes its cues from this historical tradition and is thus about a restricted, technical concept of the sublime, we do not toe the Enlightenment line unthinkingly. Instead we propose to divide the traditional two “moments” into *three* distinct phases or stages. The first stage remains that of bedazzlement, terror, and transfixedness, but there is also a second, distinct stage at which the subject’s conceptual or linguistic faculties are felt to be transcended or surpassed: she has a vertiginous sense of encountering something whose salient features outstrip her intellectual grasp, and her mind is thus “raised” over or at least beyond its typical cognitive transactions with objects (this aspect of the experience is reflected in the German for “the sublime” – *das Erhabene* – literally, “the elevating”). The sense of outstripping or transcendence can persist well beyond the point at which the initial bedazzlement or fright has subsided. Finally, third, there is a more explicit epiphany – a eureka stage at which the subject’s affections or beliefs are changed, existing states are in some way strengthened, or familiar commitments are transformed. These three stages are conceptually distinct, and in what follows we will characterize paradigmatic sublime experience as involving all three. We refer to them as the stages of *bedazzlement*, *outstripping*, and *epiphany*, respectively.

Before proceeding, a few additional comments are in order. First, although exemplifying all three stages is certainly sufficient for an experience to count as sublime, we do not mean to suggest that every such experience exemplifies each stage in a discrete way. There will be at least a family resemblance between such episodes, however, and thus we think the sublime can be usefully articulated in terms of the three-stage heuristic proposed.

Second, each stage comes in degrees. Being dazzled is clearly a gradable property, as is being outstripped: one’s conceptual and linguistic faculties can seem (and be) inadequate to a given task to a greater or lesser degree. Perhaps having an epiphany is an all-or-nothing affair: either one’s affections or beliefs are altered in some way, or they are not. Once the threshold has been crossed, however, there will be more or less dramatic epiphanies, depending on the number of states that change, the degree to which they change, and the logical relationships they bear to prior states of the subject. Thus someone whose epiphany involves adopting the belief that the physical universe is a mere phenomenal sheen draped across ultimate reality by the senses (Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, for instance) clearly has a more dramatic epiphany than someone who forms a new belief about, say, the vastness of space. Other things being equal, the first person’s experience will also be that much more sublime.

Third, despite the etymology, “epiphany” here is not meant as an alethic or truth-guaranteeing term. Epiphanies, at least as we are thinking of them, may be false or misleading.

Fourth, temporal relations between these three stages can vary. In some cases all three may overlap, whereas in others the epiphany stage will be achieved gradually and much later than the first two. From a psychological point of view it seems that the first two – bedazzlement and outstripping – will almost always occur in close succession: the initial, hair-raising sight leads naturally to the “raising” of the mind as well. Still, a large temporal gap is possible; perhaps the original fright occurred last week, but my memory of the episode today is what leads to the sense of transport to the “beyond.”

This point about memory raises the related, fifth, issue of whether sublimity can be ascribed to nonsensory as well as sensory experiences. Thomas Aquinas and Blaise Pascal famously reported visions followed by the epiphanic realization that certain philosophical conceptions were inadequate to what they had “seen.”⁷ Although such visions are not sensory experiences

⁶ This is the traditional logic of the sublime, but as we will see in discussing the nontheistic sublime in the following, some contemporary theorists are less sanguine about the prospects for repair and reconstruction.

⁷ Aquinas is supposed to have had a mystical experience while saying Mass on December 6th, 1273. On being asked to resume his scholarly writing after this experience, he allegedly replied that “all I have written seems like straw to me compared to what I have seen.” See Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 9.

strictly speaking, they often have a quasi-sensory component (consider Pascal's "Fire!"⁸) and exemplify the three-stage pattern discussed previously. Thus it is natural to view these and other such illusionary, dreaming, or even bare thinking episodes as borderline cases of the sublime. Even so, the eighteenth-century sources of the conception of the sublime at issue typically insist on its explicitly *aesthetic* character. In an effort to restrict our discussion to aesthetics and avoid embarking on a discussion of religious experience in general, we too will focus on episodes involving the *sense-perceptual* apprehension of vistas, natural objects, and artifacts, as well as the memory of such, and will make this restriction clear by using "bedazzlement" rather than the more general "overwhelmedness" to refer to the characteristic feeling of the first stage. It is important to note, however, that inner awareness of perceptual content that has been *self-consciously* reconfigured by imagination may also figure into sublime experience, even though it is not directly sense perceptual. This is presumably the sort of creative-memorial apprehension of sense-content one has while reading literature and poetry. By contrast, un-self-consciously produced dreams and visions, as well as all nonsensory mystical experiences, fall outside the scope of our discussion here.

Finally, eighteenth-century writers often assume that reference to the beholder's subjective experience is essential to the sublime, religious or otherwise. Kant even argues that sublimity is a property of the mind rather than of the external object, although we quite naturally (albeit "subreptively") ascribe sublimity to the latter. Here we will adopt a more irenic view, according to which saying that "X is sublime" is short for saying that a certain *relation* holds between X and a perceiver. "That mountainscape is sublime!" for instance, is shorthand for the claim that the vista in question evokes an instance of the three-stage experiential episode (bedazzlement, outstripping, and epiphany) in a suitably situated and well-functioning subject. We remain neutral about whether there is in addition some "objective" property of sublimity in the world, and about related issues such as whether everything, in principle, could be an object of sublime experience if beheld in the right way. We also won't say much about the characteristics that make someone a "suitably situated" and "well-functioning" subject, and we will use "sublime experience" and "experience of the sublime" as synonyms.

BURKE AND KANT: INTIMATIONS OF RELIGION IN THE SUBLIME

With these preliminary remarks in the background, we can now turn to an analysis of the ways in which certain experiences of the sublime might be considered religious. As already noted, one of the main challenges for any account of the sublime is that the first two stages do not lend themselves to easy analysis. The vertigo involved in perceiving a volcanic eruption at night or an angry sea from a sheer overlook makes a deep impression on those who experience it, but adequate description of the episode eludes philosophical prose. Perhaps this is why Kant, rarely at a loss for words, turns to his faculty psychology for an abstract, albeit curiously anthropomorphic, account of these stages. Certain vistas in nature, he says, are an "abyss" for the imagination "in which it fears to lose itself"; an encounter with them is "repulsive to mere sensibility" and even "does violence to inner sense."⁹ Presumably the same could be said for various art objects or literary or imaginative descriptions; Kant himself adduces "Milton's depiction of

⁸ Pascal's vision of November 23, 1654, led him to write on a scrap of paper, "Fire! God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the scholars." Pascal kept this scrap of paper on his person until his death. See Blaise Pascal, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Louis Lafuma (Paris: Seuil, Intégrale, 1963 [1654]), 493–649, p. 618.

⁹ Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, Königlich Preussischen (later Deutschen) Akademie der Wissenschaften, 29 vols. (Berlin: Reimer [later de Gruyter], 1900–), vol. 5 (KGS); *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer; trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5:258–9 (CJ). All references to Kant's works are to the pagination of the Akademie edition.

the kingdom of hell” as a paradigmatic example of the sublime in literature.¹⁰ In this he follows Burke, who says that in Milton’s description of Death in book II “all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree.”¹¹ Burke cites (and slightly misquotes) the following passage (from *Paradise Lost* II, 666–73):

The other shape,
 If shape it might be called that shape had none
 Distinguishable in member, joint or limb;
 Or substance might be called that shadow seemed,
 For each seemed either; black he stood as night;
 Fierce as ten furies; terrible as hell;
 And shook a deadly dart. What seemed his head
 The likeness of a kingly crown had on.
 Satan was now at hand; and from his seat
 The monster, moving onward, came as fast
 With horrid strides; Hell trembled as he strode.

The narrator here appears to experience not just the first but also the second stage of the sublime. “Death” is depicted as outstripping our normal categories: it has a shape without a real shape, it has no distinguishable member, it is both substance and “shadow” or perhaps neither, and so forth. This awareness or sense of being transported, in the second stage, may have a figurative direction to it: upward toward God and perfection; horizontally in the direction of previously unimagined discursive possibilities; or, as here in *Paradise Lost*, downward into abjection, privation, or nothingness. Apart from that very minimal phenomenological movement, however, it can be difficult to find nontrivial content – religious or otherwise – in the second, concept-transcending stage (although this too, however, is surely a matter of degree).

In the epiphanic third stage, by contrast, the religious dimension becomes more explicit, and thus more accessible to philosophical analysis. For Burke, the epiphany often involves contemplation of the divine power that is shadowed or symbolized by the terrifying power and vastness of nature (*Enquiry* 2.5.68–70). Indeed, absolute divine power is the implicit referent of so much of Burke’s theory that God himself might be seen as “the occluded hero of the sublime, for Burke.”¹² According to Kant, the third stage involves the recognition of the superiority of mind to natural phenomena, a superiority grounded in reason’s participation in an ultimate moral or religious reality that is itself governed by an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God (CJ 5:244–78).

For two of the main historical sources of the technical concept of the sublime, then, the aesthetic experience in question is not a traditional “religious experience” precisely, but it is still integrally bound up with substantive religion as they conceived of it. Other early attempts to articulate the content of the third stage share this Burkean-Kantian tendency to understand the sensuously dazzling by appealing to ways in which the subject relates to even more fundamental, supersensuous realities. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century heirs of this conception, by contrast, retained the bedazzlement aspect of the first stage, as well as the ability of the

¹⁰ Kant, *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, in KGS 20:208; cf. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹¹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958 [1759, 1st ed. 1757]), 2.3.55 (*Enquiry*). References are to part, section, and page number.

¹² Vijay Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 31–2. Mishra also suggests that for Burke, in what we are calling the first stage of the sublime, “the object of astonishment remains the unnameable presence of God.”

sublime to lead the mind, in Longinus's words, "to rise above what is mortal,"¹³ but they also tended to excise or flatten the theological content such that sublime experience came to offer at most an inchoate sense of something transcending experience and categorization. The transcendent thing *might* be interpreted, in a Schleiermachian vein, as divinity manifesting itself to us in nature and art.¹⁴ But as we will see, it became commonplace to interpret the sublime in a completely nontheological way and thus as consistent with a fully secular outlook. Beginning with the most explicitly theistic model, the taxonomy to which we now turn lays out these competing conceptions and seeks to highlight some of the theoretical costs and benefits involved in each of them.

TAXONOMY OF RELATIONS BETWEEN RELIGION AND THE SUBLIME

The Theistic Sublime

Let "theistic sublime" stand for episodes whose epiphanic content includes some affirmative theistic doctrine or other: "Yahweh is both just and merciful," for example, or "reality is at bottom personal," "Allah has the property of omnipotence," "God loves me unconditionally," "Jesus wants me to commit my life to him," "Shiva will destroy the universe," and the like. Although the contents of these propositions differ radically, they each entail the existence of some deity or other. In what follows, we distinguish three distinct species of the theistic sublime: the *conversional*, the *corroborative*, and the *transformative*.

The Conversional Theistic Sublime

It seems at least possible for sublime experience to lead someone who is not at all religious, and not even consciously disposed toward religion, to adopt a robust theistic belief. Such a person may also come to believe that God is the cause and/or object of the experience, although that is not required in order for the episode to fall into this category. During his now-famous grand tour of continental Europe with Horace Walpole, for instance, the eighteenth-century British poet Thomas Gray noted that he was not moved by the art objects he encountered, but that

those of nature have astonished me beyond expression. In our little journey up to the Grande Chartreuse I do not remember to have gone ten paces without an exclamation that there was no restraining; not a *precipice*, not a *torrent*, not a *cliff*, but is *pregnant with religion and poetry*. There are certain scenes that would awe an atheist into belief, without the help of other argument. One need not have a very fantastic imagination to see spirits there at noon-day. You have Death perpetually before your eyes, only so far removed as to compose the mind without frightening it.¹⁵

Gray's claim here is that an atheist (and presumably an agnostic too) would be "awed" into theistic belief "without the use of any argument," simply on confronting the torrents and cliffs of the French Alps. Perhaps this is just literary flourish on Gray's part, but supposing that it is not: what would constitute the connection between the first two stages of the experience and the explicitly theistic third stage? In other words, what is it about the experience that would make the atheist suddenly believe?

¹³ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1899), 36.1.

¹⁴ See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, ed. and trans. R. Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 [1799]).

¹⁵ From Gray's correspondence with his friend Richard West in late 1734, just after he and his touring party reached Turin. Quoted in Edmund Gosse, *Gray* (London: Macmillan, 1902 [1882]), 33. The emphasis appears to be original to Gray. For other accounts of conversions on the basis of what might be called sublime experience, see William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Touchstone, 1997 [1902]), *passim*.

Reflection on this question reveals that the conversional theistic sublime can be conceived in two importantly different ways. On the one hand, sublime experience might produce theistic epiphanies in someone who satisfies no other nontrivial conditions that incline him toward such episodes. On the other hand, sublime experience might lead to a change in belief or affect only for those in whom a specific and nontrivial “subjective condition” is present, a condition whose description is itself a matter of contention.

Genuine instances of the first conception are hard to identify, because the presence of the subjective condition will presumably be hard to detect, even for the subject involved. A possible example, however, is that of the Roman centurion who was on duty at Golgotha when Jesus of Nazareth was crucified.¹⁶ As the Synoptic Gospels relate the story, soon after piercing Christ’s side, the centurion witnessed a series of stupendous events in nature – the blackening of the sky at noon, an earthquake, the splitting of rocks, and the spontaneous opening of tombs. His response was to be “terrified” and then to exclaim (and presumably form the belief that), “Truly, this man was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:50–54; compare Mark 15:39). According to the Lucan author, the centurion’s response was actually to “worship God” and then exclaim, “Surely this was a righteous man!” (Luke 23:47).

Note that this example involves sensory perception of natural objects (sky, rocks, earth, and tombs) whose irregular and terrifying behaviors were apparently witnessed by everyone present. This makes the episode importantly different from, say, Saul’s theophany on the road to Damascus, which was not available to others in his party. The example also involves a subject who is not, at least as far as we are told, predisposed toward the belief that he endorses in the third stage. Indeed, if the centurion had had any inkling that the man he was ordered to beat, strip, torture, and execute was in fact *divine* – even in the polytheistic Roman sense, much less in the monotheistic Jewish sense – it is likely that he would have sabotaged the operation or at the least expressed some reservations. The fact that he is depicted as participating in the whole ordeal – including personally piercing Christ’s side with a lance – provides strong circumstantial evidence that he had no inclination to believe that the victim was divine.

But then comes the sublime experience in its three stages: the centurion is “terrified” at the strange events in nature, events whose ultimate significance fully outstrip his understanding, and he then falls down in awe and worship while endorsing (and exclamatorily uttering) a proposition about God’s existence in the form of Christ. The sublime episode is pictured in a particularly effective fashion in Lucas Cranach the Elder’s sixteenth-century piece *The Crucifixion with the Converted Centurion* (Figure 12.1). The centurion clings to his rearing horse in the foreground, exclaiming his epiphanic realization (note the words emitting from his mouth), even as the black sky above him roils and the rest of the earth takes on the appearance of an arid, inhospitable wasteland. Church tradition declares that the centurion’s conversion was so complete that he subsequently assisted Joseph of Arimathea and the Marys in bringing the body down from Golgotha, cleansing it, and laying it to rest in the tomb.¹⁷

The other main variety of the conversional theistic sublime involves preexisting subjective conditions that are “non-doxastic” in that they do not involve any particular beliefs (*doxa*) on the part of the subject. These conditions are thus still consistent with the complete absence of theistic belief. In the Augustinian or Kierkegaardian tradition, the idea here is typically expressed in terms of cognitive “grace”: God unilaterally imparts the ability to apprehend his

¹⁶ See Tsang Lap-chuen, *The Sublime: Groundwork towards a Theory* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester, 1998), who uses the Crucifixion as the paradigmatic instance of the sublime *simpliciter* rather than of the religious sublime in particular.

¹⁷ Incredibly, at least for scholars of the sublime, this very centurion was later canonized as “Saint Longinus” on account of his having been the one who lanced Christ’s side (Greek for “lance” is “*longche*”). That he shares his Christian name with the author of the famous treatise makes it all the more fitting that St. Longinus’s conversion experience would count as a paradigm case of the religious sublime.

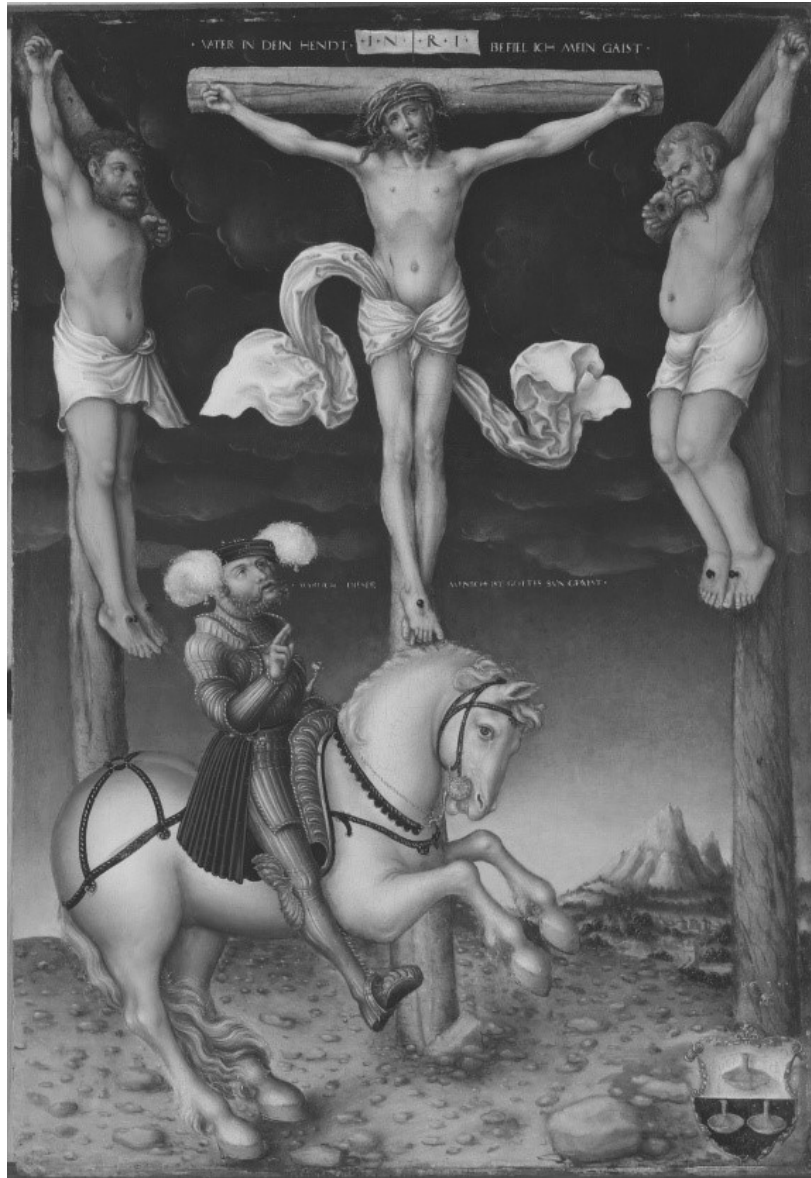


FIGURE 12.1. Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Crucifixion with the Converted Centurion*, 1538, oil on panel, 24¼ x 16⅝ in. New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery. Gift of Hannah D. and Louis M. Rabinowitz.

existence and features through experience of finite nature and art, and this condition need not be either doxastic or conscious. It does involve something more than the mere possession of concepts, however: for reasons inscrutable to us, God enables, inclines, or (in a more Calvinist spirit) positively determines certain minds to interpret sublime experience as having a religious content or even a divine relatum. This gift of grace leads, in the epiphanic stage, to full-blown theistic belief.

Clearly in the second variety of the conversational theistic sublime, the subjective condition itself is what underwrites the move from the phenomenology of the first two stages to the explicit commitments of the third. That is not to say that the subject's interpretation of the experience is *justified* in some strong internalist sense – by an introspective appeal to the presence of the subjective condition, for example. Again, in most cases the subject will be unaware

of the condition and unable to be aware of it. This doesn't preclude the interpretation from being justified in some other sense, however.

In the first variety of the conversional theistic sublime, by contrast, there is by hypothesis no special subjective condition. The experience of noonday darkness, earthquakes, splitting rocks, and the like would be terrifying to almost anyone, and very likely to occasion a sense of understanding outstripped. But it is hard to see why anyone should associate such an occurrence per se with the existence of divinity, much less the divinity of someone in particular. So there must be something else about the experience, the subject, or both together that motivates the endorsement of theistic content in the epiphanic stage. The centurion experiences terrifying events in nature while facilitating the crucifixion of a self-proclaimed messiah; he then makes what looks like an *inference* from the occurrence of these events to the veracity (and innocence) of the man he had executed. Our suspicion is that this sort of inference-to-best-explanation process from the subject's background beliefs will be at work in many or even most cases of the conversional theistic sublime.

The Corroborative Theistic Sublime

The corroborative theistic sublime involves the strengthening of preexisting theistic belief and/or affection. Occurrently or not, the subject already believes in God and has certain religious affections but then finds these states corroborated in the experience of the sublime. Talk of "corroboration" here is not meant to suggest that sublime experience, on its own, somehow raises the objective *probability* that God exists. In other words, the idea is *not* that one can simply read off of the experience of the vast night sky or the Himalayan peaks the information that there is a divine creator. Rather, what happens is presumably more of a reading *into* than a reading *off*: background beliefs are involved, and the kind of corroboration in question is importantly subjective. In other words, the sublime experience, given a theist's prior commitments, makes it rational for her to raise credence levels with respect to various doctrinal propositions. The important role played by background beliefs explains why people in different traditions take similar sorts of experience to corroborate very different religious doctrines, and also why rational apologists have not found much probative force in appeals to the sublime.

John Henry Newman's distinction between "real" and merely "notional" assent offers a different way of thinking about the epiphanic upshot here. Newman argues that propositions can be held "notionally," in the way that a docile member of a congregation might assent to the proposition that God is love, and that this is quite different from the "real" way in which a subject of an intense religious experience of divine love holds the same proposition. It may be that the content and even strength of the assent is the same in both cases, but the experience so transforms the latter subject's associations and affections that the assent somehow becomes "real" for her in a way that a "notional" assent just isn't. For our purposes, this still counts, broadly speaking, as a corroborative effect.¹⁸ The same sort of thing can happen, presumably, as the result of a sublime experience.

For an account of how the corroborative theistic sublime might go with respect to religious affections rather than beliefs, consider the following passage from Ann Radcliffe's eighteenth-century novel *A Sicilian Romance*, which describes the experience of a nun as she takes her vows:

The high importance of the moment, the solemnity of the ceremony, the sacred glooms which surrounded me, and the chilling silence that prevailed when I uttered the irrevocable vow – all conspired to impress my imagination, and to raise my views to heaven. When I knelt at the altar, the sacred flame

¹⁸ John Henry Newman, *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 9th ed. (London: Longmans and Green, 1903 [1870]), roff. Thanks to Steve Wykstra for pointing us to Newman here.

of pure devotion glowed in my heart, and elevated my soul to sublimity. The world and all its recollections faded from my mind, and left it to the influence of a serene and holy enthusiasm which no words can describe.¹⁹

Although fictional, the passage is instructive: the context of the experience – in a church, at the altar, taking holy vows – coupled with the nun's background beliefs makes it natural for her to feel a strengthened religious affection (a "serene and holy enthusiasm"). Her degree of belief in God's existence, presence, and concern needn't be raised in such a case; indeed, we can suppose that she already believes these things to the highest degree. The affections alone are strengthened by the experience, given the subject's interpretation of it. This is consistent, in our view, with the episode being, broadly speaking, an instance of the corroborative theistic sublime.²⁰

The Transformative Theistic Sublime

The third species of the theistic sublime also involves a doxastic subjective condition – at the very least some kind of preexisting theistic belief – but the experience has a transformative rather than merely corroborative effect. The experience may lead the subject, in the epiphanic stage, to *realize* something and thus to *change* her conception of the divine, of the self, of the relation between the two, and so on. It may also, or alternatively, cause a transformation of her affections: the subject of the sublime may develop a new love, or a new commitment to her karmic duty. In many cases, the subject presumably regards this change not just as the causal upshot of the experience but as a way of taking account of or being true to it. William James quotes testimony from a clergyman in this connection:

I have on a number of occasions felt that I had enjoyed a period of intimate communion with the divine.... Once it was when from the summit of a high mountain I looked over a gashed and corrugated landscape extending to a long convex of ocean that ascended to the horizon, and again from the same point when I could see nothing beneath me but a boundless expanse of white cloud, on the blown surface of which a few high peaks, including the one I was on, seemed plunging about as if they were dragging their anchors. What I felt on these occasions was a temporary loss of my own identity, *accompanied by an illumination which revealed to me a deeper significance than I had been wont to attach to life*. It is in this that I find my justification for saying that I have enjoyed communication with God.²¹

The transformation involved in this species of the theistic sublime often, although certainly not always, moves in the direction of expanding concepts and loosening dogmatic commitments. David Morris writes that in eighteenth-century Britain

a taste developed among almost all classes of society for the qualities of wildness, grandeur, and overwhelming power which, in a flash of intensity, could ravish the soul with a sudden transport of thought or feeling.... Sublimity lifted men above the daily world of prudence; in an age of reason, it temporarily teased men out of thought-constricting systems of belief.²²

What Morris does not emphasize here is that sublime experience makes it difficult to return to those putatively "thought-constricting systems" unchanged. Relaxation of doctrinal commitment, or even a general skepticism about a doctrine's ability to get numinous things precisely right, is a natural if not inevitable response to the sense of having one's understanding outstripped or transcended. In other words, sublime experience in its category-busting aspect

¹⁹ Ann Radcliffe, *A Sicilian Romance* (London: Hookham and Carpenter, 1792), quoted in James Kirwan, *Sublimity: The Non-Rational and the Irrational in the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 28.

²⁰ For the canonical discussion of religious affections and the ways they can be changed by such experience, see Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 26 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959 [1746]), vol. 2.

²¹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 71, our emphasis.

²² Morris, *The Religious Sublime*, 1.

occasions the suspicion that there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in our philosophy (or theology for that matter).

One of the main problems involved in analyzing the corroborative theistic sublime arises again in this transformational context. How can the content of a sublime experience be sufficiently determinate to transform a subject's beliefs in anything but the most trivial manner? Should a doxastic transformation be conceived as occurring by way of an inference? If so, then why is it that subjects of such experience have a hard time identifying the aspect of the experience that made their prior beliefs seem so inadequate to what they have seen? If not, then why does the belief revision take the precise form that it does, and why does the subject often view the transformation as an effort to be true to the experience?²³

A full answer to these questions is beyond the scope of our efforts here. One thing to say, however, is that even what seems like a trivial doxastic change may lead, together with the right set of background beliefs, to a substantive transformation. Consider the simple reflective belief that "That was sublime!" or, less technically, "That was mortally terrifying!" or even less technically still, "That scared the bejeezus out of me and I have no idea what it means!" Such beliefs may operate as premises in an implicit argument for conclusions such as "I am deeply vulnerable," or "I am absolutely dependent," or "there is a source of value that outstrips my current conceptual scheme," and the like. In such cases the subject does not glean determinate content from the sublime experience itself; rather, she infers a substantive and broadly religious conclusion simply from the reflective awareness of having *had* such an experience.²⁴ Or, if talk of inference seems out of place in this context, perhaps we can say, with Otto, that the feeling of "creatureliness" before a transcendent other is part of the content of the experience of the sublime itself – the subjective "shadow" of what is primarily an outward-directed awareness.²⁵

The Spiritualistic Sublime

It should be clear that there is a trajectory in our account of the religious sublime thus far. Conversional theistic experiences *produce* religious beliefs and affections, corroborative experiences *strengthen* them somehow, and transformative experiences *change* them. For better or worse, the change involved in the latter often involves revision or expansion of traditional conceptions of God in order to accommodate the outstripping aspect of the experience. As we move into the second main species of the religious sublime, the expansion of traditional theistic conceptions plays an increasingly central role.

The spiritualistic sublime bears affective similarities to the theistic sublime and often has similar effects on behavior to such a degree that traditional believers often regard it as friendly to their general outlook. Doxastically, however, the experiences in question tend to lead away from personal monotheisms and toward a kind of collectivism of a pantheistic or panentheistic sort. The epiphanic content here will thus involve or entail propositions like "the universe is a harmonious and interrelated whole," or "I am united with everything else," or "Atman is Brahman." Like its theistic counterpart, the spiritualistic sublime has, at the very least, *conversional*, *corroborative*, and *transformative* species, and we will discuss them in that

²³ Analogous questions regarding how experience of the numinous can lead to transformed beliefs about the "holy" or the good have been forcefully pressed by Otto's critics. See, for example, John Reeder, "The Relation of the Moral and the Numinous in Otto's Notion of the Holy," in *Religion and Morality*, ed. G. Outka and J. Reeder (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1973), 255–92.

²⁴ See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On the Christian Faith*, ed. and trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (London: T & T Clark, 1999 [1821–1822]), 33.

²⁵ See Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 10: "The 'creature-feeling' is itself a first subjective concomitant and effect of another feeling-element, which casts it like a shadow, but which in itself indubitably has immediate and primary reference to an object outside the self."

order. Because there is close structural resemblance to the theistic cases, however, these can be treated at less length.

The Conversional Spiritualistic Sublime

Sublime experience may lead to the adoption of new spiritualistic beliefs and/or affections, some of which can affect behavior. As mentioned earlier, the line between this category and the transformative theistic sublime is blurry. It seems possible for a traditional theist to have sublime experiences that lead initially to an expansion of doctrinal commitments and an openness to other forms of theistic expression. Later, however, the same person might cite those same sublime experiences as motivating the relinquishment of classical theism altogether in favor of a broader, spiritualistic credo. A prominent example is Ralph Waldo Emerson, who came out of traditional Christianity (he was pastor of Boston's Second Church for a time), through something like the transformative theistic sublime, and ultimately to a departure from traditional theistic commitment, although he did not abandon transcendent metaphysics entirely.

It seems equally possible, however, for an atheist or agnostic to undergo the conversional spiritualistic sublime. Such a person would presumably experience the bedazzlement-outstripping-epiphany trio as leading directly to a spiritualistic vision of the world, bypassing theism altogether. An example of the second sort of conversional movement might be Emerson's protégé, Henry David Thoreau, who from an early age claimed to have experiences that produced various "transcendentalist" beliefs about being and "the world-soul," as well as an ethical outlook that emphasized tolerance, unity, and collective consciousness.²⁶

The Corroborative Spiritualistic Sublime

The corroborative spiritualistic sublime is the species of experience that Emerson went on to have – and encourage in others – during the later years of his life as an essayist and public intellectual. His interactions with nature and art led to increased confidence that

within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are shining parts, is the soul.²⁷

It is worth noting that what spiritualists in both Western and Eastern traditions call "cosmic consciousness" comprises not so much a set of propositional attitudes as a general stance toward the world: an awareness of the connection between one's own flourishing and that of the whole, and a commitment to living in harmony with others and the natural environment without divisions. Still, such cosmic consciousness may be susceptible to corroboration by an experience of being dazzled (by the vastness of the whole), outstripped (*vis-à-vis* one's understanding of the situation), and then epiphanically convinced that one's previous inklings about connectedness with what Emerson calls "the ONE" correspond to the ultimate fact of the matter.

For example, in his immensely popular book, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Sri Yogananda describes a specific experience that he had in his student days. Despite a lot of hard work, he had been unable to approximate anything like the sort of cosmic consciousness reported by others, and he finally decided to express his frustration to his guru. In response, the guru approached him and punched him lightly in the chest, just above his heart. Suddenly, Yogananda writes,

²⁶ For some evidence of this, see Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001). Even if it is not correct to say that Thoreau himself took precisely this path, however, there are presumably others who have, especially in South and East Asia, where traditional monotheism was rarely if ever dominant.

²⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Over-Soul," in *Essays: First Series* (Boston: James Munroe, 1850 [1841]), 245.

my body became immovably rooted; breath was drawn out of my lungs as if by some huge magnet. Soul and mind instantly lost their physical bondage, and streamed out like a fluid piercing light from my every pore.... My sense of identity was no longer narrowly confined to a body, but embraced the circumambient atoms.... All objects within my panoramic gaze trembled and vibrated like quick motion pictures. My body, Master's, the pillared courtyard, the furniture and floor, the trees and sunshine, occasionally became violently agitated, until all melted into a luminescent sea; even as sugar crystals, thrown into a glass of water, dissolve after being shaken. The unifying light alternated with materializations of form, the metamorphoses revealing the law of cause and effect in creation. An oceanic joy broke upon calm endless shores of my soul. The Spirit of God, I realized, is exhaustless Bliss; His body is countless tissues of light. A swelling glory within me began to envelop towns, continents, the earth, solar and stellar systems, tenuous nebulae, and floating universes. The entire cosmos, gently luminous, like a city seen afar at night, glimmered within the infinitude of my being.... I cognized the center of the empyrean as a point of intuitive perception in my heart.²⁸

The context of this passage indicates that Yogananda's "realization" didn't involve a serious change in any of his (nontrivial) beliefs; he was already a committed spiritualist-monist. But the beliefs were very much strengthened or corroborated by his experience. The really important change occurred at the level of Yogananda's affections: the experience produced a renewed enthusiasm for his religious duties, as well as overwhelming gratitude to his teacher for (apparently) occasioning this sublime encounter.²⁹

The Transformative Spiritualistic Sublime

The spiritualist's beliefs are typically so inclusive and expansive that it is hard to see what a really *transformative* version of the spiritualist sublime would amount to. Perhaps there can be migrations from one broadly pantheistic or panentheistic outlook to another. Much more common, however, will be transformations of *affections*, some of which have powerful effects on character and behavior.

Pop culture sources provide interesting examples in this context: entering "sublime" and "spiritual" into a search engine delivers inter alia a Web site called Cold Weather Nude Hiking. The main contributor to the site claims that "hiking with the least amount of covering possible (a hat, hiking shoes and a fanny pack slung over the shoulder ... sometimes absolutely nothing at all)" can lead, even in someone who is already a committed spiritualist, to a feeling of tactile bedazzlement (if you will), and to a sense of having one's normal grasp of what is appropriate and required outstripped (so to speak), before ultimately achieving the "epiphany" that makes him a "newly converted nudist." The contributor concludes a long discussion of the group's activities by making explicit references to both the sublime and the spiritual:

While I enjoy endless roaming around the mountains nude in the balmy months, taking off my clothes in a wide-open and pristine snowfield and hiking free is a unique and almost *spiritual experience*. Also, while I consider hiking nude in the snow a personal challenge, I temper it with the realization that I have to be aware of how my body is responding. But what else is a nudist good for than being aware of his or her body's interaction with the environment? We nude hikers know how *sublime the experience is* ...³⁰

Lest these sentiments seem unusual, note that the idea that prolonged nudity can occasion an experience of the sublime, as well as a kind of spiritual transformation, is by no means new. The author of the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas appears to sanction the idea in the following

²⁸ See Paramhansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Los Angeles, CA: Self-Realization Fellowship Press, 1946), chap. 14, para. 15–21.

²⁹ See Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, chap. 14.

³⁰ <http://www.scribd.com/doc/11040895/Cold-Weather-Nude-Hiking> (accessed September 23, 2010), emphasis added.

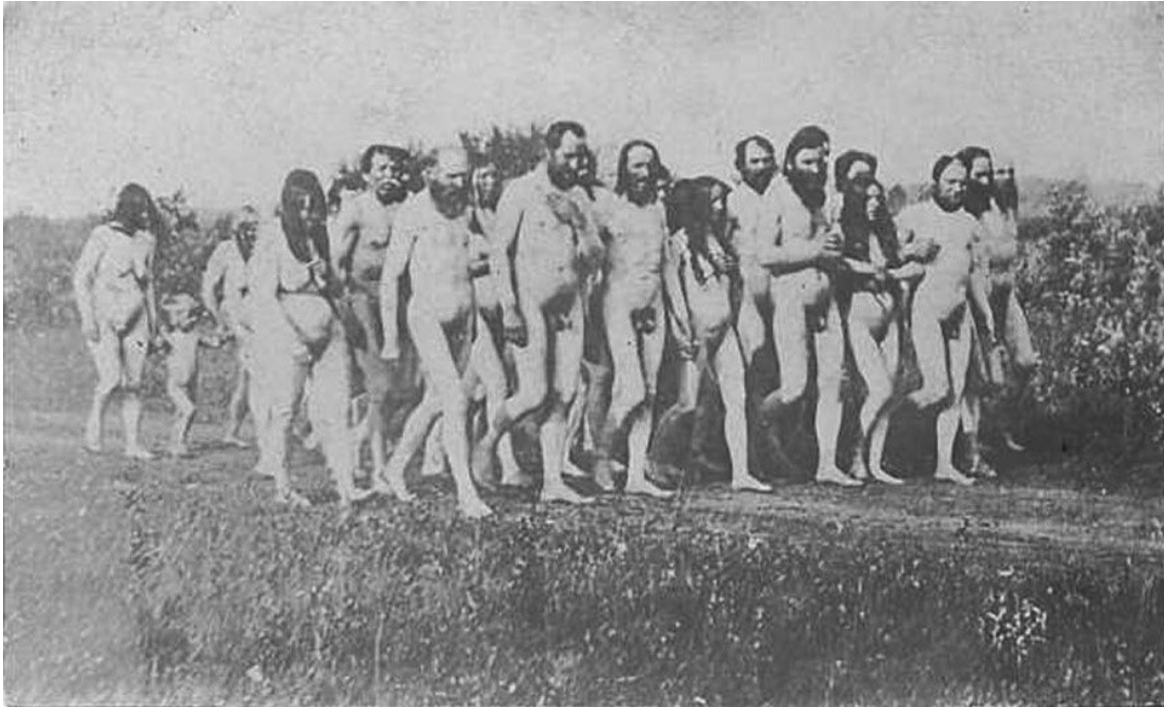


FIGURE 12.2. *Doukhobors Looking for Christ in Canada in Winter*, c. 1904–1909, from *The Alienist and Neurologist Journal* 35, ed. Charles Hughes (St. Louis, MO: Carreras Publishers, 1914).

pericope: “And Jesus said, ‘When you strip without being ashamed, and you take your clothes and put them under your feet like little children and trample them, then you will see the Son of the Living One and not be afraid’” (Gospel of Thomas, verse 37).³¹ Similarly, the “Sons of Freedom” or “Freedomites” in Canada (an anarchist offshoot of the Doukhobor sect of Christian spiritualists) regularly engaged in collective nude marches and even large-scale nude burnings of their own clothing, homes, and money (Figure 12.2). Their motive was the belief that a simple Edenic condition could be recovered by achieving liberation from clothes and property (they also set their domestic animals free). Accounts of Freedomite activities suggest that something like the transformative sublime was at work: the intentional relinquishment of all of their possessions led, apparently, to a kind of terror and transport in some of them, but ultimately to a new attitude toward value, property, and the divine.³²

The Demythologistic Sublime

We turn now to a third main model of how the domains of the religious and the sublime intersect. Although it would be possible to continue with the general pattern used previously – examining conversional, corroborative, and transformational variations on the model – it seems more efficient simply to highlight the unique aspects of the model as a whole.

“Demythologistic” in this context refers to the absence of both the robust “mythology” of traditional religion and the broadly spiritualistic “mythology” discussed in the last section. The term is taken from the existentialist tradition in twentieth-century theology – associated

³¹ *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus*, trans. and ed. Marvin Meyer (San Francisco: Harper, 1992).

³² J. C. Yerbury, “The ‘Sons of Freedom’ Doukhobors and the Canadian State,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 16, 2 (1984), 47–70. Thanks to Del Ratzsch for directing us to the Freedomites on this issue.

primarily with Rudolf Bultmann – according to which the general stance and attitude assumed by the religious person is valuable and worth retaining, even if mythological religious beliefs – theistic or collectivist – are no longer possible for us “moderns.”³³

Demythologizing modes of biblical interpretation seek to salvage what is ethically and religiously valuable in those texts despite the untruth of various nonscientific or full-blooded mythological doctrines. In the same spirit, proponents of the demythologistic model of the sublime argue that sublime experience is a valuable analogue of religious experience – that it is an experience *as of* transcendence that neither presupposes, causes, nor corroborates beliefs about transcendent items. Sublime experience is thus not a species of bona fide religious experience on this view; rather, it’s always just an analogue. As a result, the sublime becomes a space where hard-bitten Western intellectuals can, as James Edwards put it, “be religious when we can’t really believe any of that glorious stuff ... we used to believe.”³⁴ Indeed, some theorists explicitly claim that a lack of genuine religious commitment is a precondition for experience of the sublime: “Talking about the sublime,” says James Elkins, “is a way of addressing something that can no longer be called by any of its traditional names.” Thus “the sublime has come to be the place where thoughts about religious truth, revelation, and other more or less unusable concepts have congregated.”³⁵

This last claim overreaches, however, or is at least not entailed by any of the claims about analogy *per se*. Rudolf Otto, for instance, finds in the sublime a demythologized analogue of religious experience, but he explicitly refuses to regard it as an ersatz *replacement* for the latter. In his neo-Kantian terminology, sublime experience is a “schema” of experience of the numinous – “something more than a merely accidental analogy” holds between the two – and thus the first may function as a stage along the way to the second.³⁶ In the same spirit, Thomas Weiskel begins his influential book *The Romantic Sublime* with the claim that “without some notion of the beyond, some credible discourse of the superhuman, the sublime founders.”³⁷

Let us call these two competing conceptions of the demythologistic sublime *ersatzist* and *non-ersatzist*. Again, both conceptions portray the appeal to certain broadly religious categories (transcendence, the other, the “beyond”) in aesthetic experience as part of an extended analogy that is fully available in a secular context. Non-ersatzists follow Otto, however, in thinking that such episodes simply play the traditional informative role of an analogy: just as certain metaphors can acquaint us, by analogy, with the properties of a really existent God, so sublime experience acquaints us, by analogy, with the structure of genuine, religious experience. Ersatzists, by contrast, assume that the kind of full-blown religious experience described by Otto is unavailable. Art historian Randall Van Schepen reports that

according to ... modernist principles ... the only form of transcendence possible is through the tradition of modern epiphanic aesthetic experience. Therefore, the spiritual heritage of Western aesthetics enters in through the side door of formalist criticism as form, autonomy, manifestness and other pseudo-religious notions in order to claim the only realm of experience that has (perhaps) not yet been subsumed by positivist materiality.³⁸

³³ Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984 [1941]), 5.

³⁴ James Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 195. Thanks to Gordon Graham for this reference.

³⁵ James Elkins, “Against the Sublime,” in *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, ed. Roald Hoffmann and Iain Boyd White (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 75–90, p. 84.

³⁶ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 47.

³⁷ Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 3.

³⁸ Randall K. Van Schepen, “From the Form of Spirit to the Spirit of Form,” in *Re-Enchantment*, ed. James Elkins and David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 47–68, p. 62.

Sublime experiences are thus sought and celebrated by ersatzists as able to fill the ugly gulch left behind when the tide of faith withdrew: they offer many of the benefits of the religious experiences they replace, while also being more authentic, “scientific,” and acceptable across traditions.

In order properly to evaluate either of these conceptions of the demythologistic sublime, we would need to know more about the various features in which the analogy is supposed to consist. Which natural objects can be the analogues of the numinous object, and which natural feelings are analogous to the (for Otto, *sui generis*) sense of the holy?³⁹ The difficulties involved in working this out might lead a religious theorist to suspect that the best explanation of at least some sublime experiences is that they are not merely analogous to religious experience after all but rather inchoate, *de re* experiences of a genuine transcendent thing (of God, the soul, the ONE, and so on). Thus there might be metaphysical commitments on the part of some third-person theorists of sublime experience, even if the subject of the experience construes it demythologistically. Committed demythologizers, however, will share the subject’s evaluation of the situation in such a case, and the ersatzists among them will celebrate the fact that such experiences are still possible even after the death of God. What demythologizers give up in metaphysical transcendence, they regain in authenticity.

The Nontheistic Sublime

There are limit cases of the religious sublime that also appear to belong in our taxonomy – namely, cases that result in the abandonment of religious belief, or the adoption of belief in a kind of nondivine metaphysical principle or entity. Experience of horrendous evils – or even just learning about such evils – seems to be the most common context or source of such episodes. Again, it is hard to be precise here, because the content of the first two stages of the experience will often lack the structure required for the latter to ground a premise in an argument, or to defeat some preexisting belief. Even so, there does often appear to be something like an inferential connection between, say, the experience of overwhelming incomprehension at the horrendous suffering of a child and the subsequent epiphanic thought that God does not exist. Background beliefs regarding what a perfect being would allow are thus almost certainly involved in many of these cases, just as they were in the conversional theistic sublime discussed previously.

The Nontheistic Sublime: Evil as Privation

The first main species of the nontheistic sublime is negative in the sense that it involves relinquishing or rejecting theistic belief. Liberators of concentration camps at the end of World War II were often presented with scenes of human degradation that defied normal modes of comprehension; indeed, first-person reports suggest that many of them were initially both terrified and transfixed in a manner characteristic of the first stage of the sublime. This initial response was followed by a sense of incapacity to understand such evil using normal cognitive resources and, finally, by an epiphanic endorsement of atheistic claims such as that the universe is empty of sacred purpose, justice, and goodness.⁴⁰

Evils on the scale of Auschwitz are not required for this sort of experience, however. Witnessing a terrible accident involving the violent death of a friend or a child – or, worse, being

³⁹ See Otto’s discussion of “analogies and associated feelings,” *The Idea of the Holy*, chap. 7.

⁴⁰ For discussion of Holocaust reports in this connection, see Gilles Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Zone, 1991), and Peter Haidu, “The Dialectics of Unspeakability” in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 277–99.

the inadvertent cause of such a death – are events that seem equally capable of producing the relevant sort of episode.

The Nontheistic Sublime: Evil as Abjection

The second species of the nontheistic sublime is more positive than the first in that the epiphany involves forming a belief in something like radical evil or a dark but metaphysically robust force, or perhaps even fully evil beings (demons and the like). It is also consistent, in the way the first species is not, with positive belief in the existence of the traditional God or the spiritualist's One. In itself, however, it is nontheistic: its objects are not the metaphysically good beings of traditional or spiritualistic religion but rather something like their evil counterparts.

Clear examples of this species of the sublime are hard to identify. Richard Kearney borrows Kant's term "the monstrous" (*das Ungeheure*) to describe this kind of metaphysical evil as it presents itself aesthetically in nature and even art.⁴¹ Julia Kristeva describes the sight of pits of bodies, body parts, mud, and excrement jumbled chaotically together – or an artwork representing such a scene – as capable of eliciting a kind of terror, fascination, confusion, and sense of outstripped understanding that, taken together, sound very much like the first two stages of the sublime.⁴² More speculatively, the theologian William Abraham suggests (in conversation) that experience of an exorcism, if such a thing were possible, would also do the trick. Such encounters with art and nature (broadly speaking) are at once so riveting and horrifying that our power to understand their salient features is simply overwhelmed, at least for a time; when it is all over, we are left with the sense that there is a metaphysical "abjectness" in the universe that is not merely privative but palpable. Contemporary photographic work by Sarah-Jane Lynagh aims to elicit something like this response by juxtaposing classical objects of beauty (the pale, naked female torso) with vile objects of disgust (dismembered, bloody animal parts, such as a cow tongue) (Figure 12.3). The epiphany resulting from such an experience (if "epiphany" is the right word) is not that the universe is empty of transcendent goodness; rather, it is that the universe is perhaps even *worse* than that. The abjectness in our treatment of other beings (including in this case animals) stands over and against us as a genuine metaphysical entity, a kind of inscrutable evil force that threatens to overwhelm or swallow the regular, predictable benignity of ordinary things and ordinary explanations. In figurative biblical terms, the sublime experience of the monstrous, the horrible, or the abject may reveal the unspeakable reality of the *tohubohu* of Genesis 1:2 – the primordial, formless, and yet still very present void that gapes beneath the apparent order and regularity of our phenomenal universe.⁴³

PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS

Given the various ways in which the sublime relates to the religious, it is no surprise that some people will regard one or more of these models as having exciting theoretical and practical consequences, whereas others will view that same model with skepticism, suspicion, or even alarm. The main *philosophical* prospects and problems in this area, as we see them, can be brought under four main headings.

(1) For the religious and nonreligious alike, the glimpse of the "beyond" that is found in sublime experience may provide at least one part of the value that human beings have traditionally

⁴¹ Richard Kearney, "Evil, Monstrosity, and the Sublime," in *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 57, 3 (2001), 485–502.

⁴² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁴³ Kearney, "Evil, Monstrosity, and the Sublime," 489.



FIGURE 12.3. Sarah-Jane Lynagh, *Mute*, 2007.

sought in the religious life. The religious person can go on to interpret her experience as having some relation to the numinous, whereas the nonreligious person can regard it purely naturalistically. (There is presumably a fact of the matter about which of them is correct, although that cannot be settled here.) The positive prospect is that, on either of these interpretations, precisely what this value amounts to or consists in is something that philosophers of art and philosophers of religion might seek to discover and articulate.

The other side of this coin, however, is that the experience of the sublime may too easily be assimilated to whatever religious sensibilities are already in place. The theist's interpretation of it as a sensory encounter with aspects of the living God will strike the atheist as an exercise in self-delusion and wish fulfillment. The spiritualist's interpretation of the sublime as an experience of our union with the whole will look to the traditional theist like the predictable result of pernicious New Age sentimentality – opening the gates of authentic religion to anyone who reports even the vaguest sense of transcendence. In effect, because the first two stages of the sublime typically have so little content, they become wax noses in the hands of our background beliefs – able to be twisted into innumerable different shapes at the epiphanic third stage.

(2) A second prospect-problem pair has to do with the ethical implications of the last point. Otto suggests that the “expansion of the soul” or “openness to mystery” resulting from religious

experience can help to undermine overly abstract or doctrinally rigid accounts of the divine by, on the one hand, presenting the numinous directly or indirectly to the subject and, on the other hand, defying strict categorization and thus returning the subject's focus to the ethical aspects of her relationships with others.⁴⁴ Perhaps this is true of some sublime experience as well: champions of one or more of our models might argue that such experience – given the category-busting aspect of the second stage – can lead to deepened awareness of commonality between religious traditions and greater enthusiasm for interreligious dialogue.

On the other hand, sublime experience may also lead to a dangerous kind of fanaticism, to the perception that God or the One has intervened from outside the phenomenal world of sense-perceptual experience to instruct *me* to do something. As we have seen, because there is so little content to particular sublime episodes – apart from the sense of having quotidian understanding outstripped in some way – the resulting epiphany is almost inevitably guided by background beliefs. The subject will take herself to have “seen” the things that she had previously just heard or taken on faith, and her religious affections will be significantly strengthened as a result. This is likely to make her less sensitive to defeaters for her epiphanic belief and to rational criticism generally.

(3) A third prospect is that the sublime may provide a site at which the divine or the ultimate can be experienced as somehow beyond traditional categories of male, patriarch, warrior, and domination. A transformative sublime experience, for instance, might lead to the expansion of our concept of God or ultimate reality to include other qualities (not more or less mythological, in this case, but just different). This would be analogous to what reportedly happened in some of the medieval mystics' experiences of God as nurturing mother or erotic lover. On the other hand, the fact that the sublime is said to begin with terror and lead to a feeling of being stripped of the ability to understand, or ravished discursively by an incomprehensible object, may make it hard for feminist philosophers and theologians to embrace it as a means of religious transformation.⁴⁵

(4) Fourth and finally, although we have seen that sublime experience can play some of the roles that religious experience does in human life, it also throws down some of the same obstacles as an object of theory. Again, both kinds of experience have difficult-to-describe effects on the subjects who have them: as we have seen with respect to the sublime, the first two stages – and their connection to the epiphany stage – often seem to be too empty or inchoate to be of general theoretical use. For this reason, art historian James Elkins – once a great theoretical proponent of the sublime – contends in a recent recantation (called “Against the Sublime”) that the notion is too vague to be useful:

In brief: saying something is sublime does not make it art or provide a judgment that can do much philosophical work or result in much understanding. I think the sublime needs to be abandoned as an interpretive tool, except in the cases of romantic and belated romantic art. Contemporary writers who use the word can always find synonyms to express what they mean, and those synonyms are apt to be more telling, and more useful, than the word “sublime.”⁴⁶

Because no one has a firm grasp on the concept, Elkins adds, references to the sublime allow a vestigial and unwelcome religiosity to sneak in through the aesthetic back door: “in contemporary critical writing, the sublime is used principally as a way to smuggle covert religious meaning into texts that are putatively secular,” because the concept “cannot be fully excavated from

⁴⁴ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 1–4.

⁴⁵ For an account of Emily Dickinson's alleged critique of the Christian sublime as submission to “an alienating, overpowering force,” see Shawn Alfrey, “Against Calvary: Emily Dickinson and the Sublime,” in *Emily Dickinson Journal* 7, 2 (1998), 48–64, especially pp. 48–9.

⁴⁶ Elkins, “Against the Sublime,” 75.

its crypto-religious contexts.”⁴⁷ Theorists and philosophers who are not in principle opposed to religious talk clearly will not view this as reason to dispatch all talk of sublimity. Still, the underlying concern about untheorizability, dispensability, and mere fabrication (i.e., that there’s really no *there* there with respect to the sublime) needs to be more directly confronted by aestheticians and philosophers of religion who propose to retain the concept.

⁴⁷ Elkins, “Against the Sublime,” 75 and 86.