CHRISTINE BATTERSBY

THE SUBLIME, TERROR AND HUMAN DIFFERENCE

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Christine Battersby is a leading thinker in the field of philosophy, gender studies and visual and literary aesthetics. In this important new work, she undertakes a thought-provoking exploration of the nature of the sublime, one of the most important topics in contemporary debates about modernity, politics and art. Through a close and compelling examination of terror, transcendence and the 'other' in the writings of key European philosophers, Battersby articulates a radical 'female sublime'.

A central feature of *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference* is its engagement with recent debates around '9/11', race and Islam. Battersby shows how, since the eighteenth century, the pleasures of the sublime have been described in terms of the transcendence of terror. Linked to the 'feminine', the sublime was closed off to flesh-and-blood women, to 'Orientals' and to other supposedly 'inferior' human types. Engaging with Kant, Burke, the German Romantics, Nietzsche, Derrida, Lyotard, Irigaray and Arendt, as well as with women writers and artists, Battersby traces the history of these exclusions, while finding resources within the history of western culture for thinking *human* differences afresh.

This exceptional book will be of interest to students of continental philosophy, aesthetics, gender studies, literary theory, visual culture, and race and social theory.

Christine Battersby is Reader in Philosophy at the University of Warwick. She is author of *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* and *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity.*

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Christine Battersby

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NOTES ON THE TEXTS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Corr. I have generally tried to give an in-text reference to an existing translation into English; *corr.* indicates where I have made corrections to the cited text.

Kant, Immanuel

All in-text references to Kant's writings follow the standard format of the volume and page in the German Akademie edition (*KGS* below); where Akademie numerals are not noted in the cited English translation, the page number in the translation is also supplied.

A 1781 ed. of *CPR* (see below).

Anth. (1798/1800) *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell, Southern Illinois University Press, 1996.

B 1787 ed. of *CPR* (see below).

CPJ (1790) *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge University Press, 2000. Abbreviated to *CPJ*. Unless otherwise noted, numerals refer to the pagination of vol. 5 of *KGS*. The first (unpublished) Introduction is published in vol. 20 of *KGS*, and is marked as appropriate in the text.

CPR (1781/87) *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, 1998. Standard references to the 1781 (A) edition and to the 1787 (B) edition are provided. Published in vols. 3 (B ed.) and 4 (A ed.) of *KGS*.

KGS (1902–) *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. der Deutschen [formerly Königlich Preussischen] Akademie der Wissenschaften, Walter de Gruyter Verlag.

Obs. (1764) *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John Goldthwait, University of California Press, 1960.

RWB (1793/94) *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. Mary J. Gregor and Robert Anchor in Kant (1996b), *Religion*

and Rational Theology, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, Cambridge University Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich

BGE (1886) *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage, 1966. Referenced by section.

BT (1872/86) *The Birth of Tragedy,* prefaced by 'Attempt at Self Criticism', in *The Basic Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann, The Modern Library, 2000. Referenced by section.

D (1881) *Daybreak: thoughts on the prejudices of morality*, eds. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, 1997. Referenced by section.

GM (1887) *On the Genealogy of Morals* trans. Walter Kaufmann and bound with Nietzsche, Friedrich (1908), *Ecce Homo*, Vintage, 1969. Referenced by section.

GS (1882/87) *The Gay Science*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage, 1974. Referenced by section.

TI (1888) *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann, The Viking Press, 1968.

Z (1883–85) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann, The Viking Press, 1968.

Schopenhauer, Arthur

WWR (1819/59) *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, Dover Publications, 2 vols., 1966.

1

A TERRIBLE PROSPECT

The pleasurable shudder at the sublime has been with us since the late seventeenth century: its focus, intensity and character repeatedly transformed by changing theories and by political and cultural events. The sublime was overwhelming; breath-taking; awe-inspiring; tremendous; terrifying; unrepresentable; revolutionary. But the word was also slippery, denoting a concept that was subject to metamorphosis and flux. Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophers and theorists (especially those belonging to a post-Hegelian tradition) picked out as the most salient characteristic of sublimity the failure of the understanding and reason to capture the infinity that it invoked. Eighteenth-century writers, by contrast, tended to emphasise the way that pleasure mixed with terror in the experience of the sublime. Between these two traditions we find Immanuel Kant, writing at the end of the eighteenth century, who described the sublime in terms of the encounter between an 'I' and that which has the capacity to annihilate it completely. For Kant and many of the Romantics, the 'I' is the victor in this (ennobling) conflict; but for others like Arthur Schopenhauer writing in the middle years of the nineteenth century or Jean-François Lyotard theorising at the end of the twentieth century, the delights of the sublime involve a surrender or displacement of the ego.

In the philosophical frameworks of empiricism and idealism as they developed during the course of the eighteenth century, the term 'sublime' came to refer to a quasi-aesthetic response to nature, to a work of art or to a political or historical event that produces a kind of shock to the human spectator or auditor. In the experience of the sublime the audience or observer was said to derive pleasure from being (temporarily or potentially) overwhelmed by an object or an entity that seemed infinite or vast, powerful or terrible, exceeding the capacities of the human to imaginatively grasp or understand it. Breaking with conscious control and individual personality or preferences, the pleasure-in-pain that was integral to the sublime seemed to take man temporarily beyond the human; but the pleasure was generated by the object—not by a god or by the divine—and opened up a kind of split within the subject before consciousness and reason re-established control. Kant's is one of the most important voices in the history of the sublime, decisively influencing the

Romantics and other later modern and postmodern thinkers. For nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophers and artists, the destabilisation to the I produced by the sublime was often more than momentary.

Indeed, it was this emphasis on an affect that bypassed conscious reflection and control that was so important to modernist artists as they theorised a response to colour and abstract form in terms of an 'absolute' that became associated with the 'sublime'. The Expressionists, the Futurists, the Surrealists and the Vorticists were amongst the many types of twentieth-century artists who drew on the language and imagery of the sublime to suggest that modernist art derives its energy neither from classical beauty nor from the tastes or preferences of the individualised subject, but from a kind of power that stems from 'modern life' in which space, time and objects have been reconfigured into vortexes, planes, surfaces, colours, patterns of dissonance and speed. Although often refusing the technical label of the 'sublime', modernist European artists and theorists deployed the conceptual framework of sublimity when, like Kasimir Malevich writing in 1916, they advocated a variety of diverse ways to energise art whilst simultaneously 'spitting' on the 'altar' of beauty and the past 'idols' of art (Harrison and Wood 1992: 169). The concept of the sublime was also integral to the changing notion of the avant-garde as mainstream modernism switched its allegiances from Paris to New York at the close of the Second World War when Abstract Expressionist painters like Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still explicitly appropriated the language of the sublime for a specifically American and anti-Romantic project to revolutionise art (Guilbaut 1983; Beckley 2001: 8; Golding 2002: 201ff.). As we will see, towards the end of the twentieth century Lyotard's 'postmodern sublime' picked up—and reworked—a tension inherent in the very notion of the avant-garde inherited from modernist visual artists, especially Barnett Newman.

Jean-Luc Nancy has claimed that 'there is no contemporary thought of art and its end which does not, in one manner or other, pay tribute to the thought of the sublime' (Nancy 1993: 26). Analogously, Lyotard finds the 'frame of contemporary aesthetics and aesthetic commentary, built by pre-romanticism and Romanticism' to be 'completely dominated by (and subordinate to) the idea of the sublime' (Lyotard 1986: 8). Thus Lyotard insists that it is 'indispensable to go back through the Analytic of the Sublime from Kant's *Critique of Judgement* in order to get an idea of what is at stake in modernism, in what are called the avant-gardes in painting or in music' (Lyotard 1988a: 135). Even if one were to agree with Mark Cheetham (2001: 102) and say that Nancy and Lyotard are offering over-exaggerated and 'historically inaccurate' claims, it is clear that the question of the sublime has resonance for philosophers, art historians and cultural critics writing today—so much so that the postmodern feminist critic Meaghan Morris has reacted with (ironic) terror to the re-emergence of the sublime in late twentieth-century debates: 'a new Sublime: what a terrible prospect!' (Morris 1988: 214).

Morris' ambivalent response to the sublime is symptomatic, since the links between the sublime, terror and human transcendence might lead one to elaborate on Nancy's claim and add: 'there is no representation of modern political terror which does not, in one manner or other, touch on the idea of the sublime'. Some of these links will be explored in Chapters 2 and 10; but we should not be surprised that the politics and aesthetics of a 'new' sublime might cause anxiety. But the imagery and language of the sublime is also not so easily escaped, even when—as artist and critic Anthony Haden-Guest puts it—'We seem, in fact, more comfortable with work that sidles into the Sublime, as if accidentally' (Haden-Guest 2001: 53).

Published in America in 2001—but written prior to the events of September 11th—Haden-Guest reminds us how the imagery of the sublime did, even then, make visual artists and art critics uneasy. He writes at a moment at which all varieties of the sublime—Romantic, modernist, postmodern—seemed outdated to the fashionable New York art world who were advocating a return to 'extreme' and 'uncontrollable beauty' and hence to a mode of aesthetic pleasure which has often been theorised as antithetical to the sublime (Beckley and Shapiro 1998; Gilbert-Rolfe 1999). But if the sublime could only be approached obliquely (and slightly ironically) in up-market art journals and catalogues, those mounting marketing campaigns seem much more direct. A flyer advertising a new and 'awesome' computer opens with a headline that shouts 'SUBLIME' in large capitals, and continues by quoting a review of the product in *Computer Buyer*, April 2002:

> 'a truly sublime experience', even we were surprised to hear one of our computers being talked of in such terms, but *Computer Buyer* magazine ... went on to say, 'every single feature is pretty much the biggest, fastest or most luxurious you could possibly want'.

What this particular advertisement picks out as the relevant characteristics of the new and 'sublime' computer is its extravagant power and its excessiveness to human imagination, desires or needs. Historically, the pleasures of the sublime were linked to an encounter with something tremendous: an infinite; something indefinitely great, grand or boundless; a longed-for absolute. Starting out as a term within rhetoric, the effect of the sublime was described in terms of a kind of overwhelming compulsion and a reaction so powerful and so inexplicable as to appear irresistible. If the computer marketing team does not know this history, it is nevertheless still employing the term 'sublime' in ways that directly link with this past.

The history of the concept of the sublime is complex, and is generally traced back to Nicolas Boileau's 1674 French translation of a fragmentary ancient text on stylistic greatness in spoken speech. The Greek treatise had been entitled *Peri Hypsous* (*About Elevation*) and was written by an unknown author (conventionally, but probably not accurately, called Longinus) some time between

the first and third centuries CE. The author is clearly immersed in Greek culture; but the treatise is addressed to a Roman friend, and includes a single quotation from Genesis as well as mention of the Jews (Longinus 1957: 14). The author's apparent familiarity with the philosophy of the Alexandrian Hebrew philosopher, Philo Judaeus (born about 20 BCE), has led some scholars to speculate that 'Longinus' also lived in Greco-Roman Egypt.

Almost lost in antiquity, 11 manuscripts of *Peri Hypsous* survive, with the tenth-century Paris codex accepted as the oldest and most complete. The first printed edition was that of Francisco Robertello in Basel in 1554, with an influential Latin translation appearing under the title *De Sublimi Genere Dicendi* (*Of the Sublime in Types of Speech*) in Venice in 1555 (Macksey 1997; Saint Girons 1998). The emphasis on spoken language was underplayed in Boileau's French translation of 1674 which was entitled simply *Du Sublime* (*Of the Sublime*), but in the Greek text *hypsous* is a stylistic category, and concerns a type of speech which has such 'irresistible' strength that it induces astonishment (*ekplexis*) and overpowers and transports the hearer. Longinus links this state of elevated transport to the inspired author, and to texts that are themselves 'frenzied', with the 'strong and inspired' impact transmitted directly to the audience from the animated author and text.

Amongst texts on rhetoric, Longinus' treatise is unusual. Conventionally, rhetoric was portrayed as occupying itself with the techniques of convincing and persuading an audience. It was the 'fourth part of logic', and operated either via an appeal to the reason or understanding (producing conviction) or by operating on the specific passions or character of the individual auditor (persuasion). Thus Longinus' apparent concern to produce an emotional affect which is non-individualised is distinctive. So also is his neglect of the classical divisions between the 'High', 'Middle' and 'Plain' styles analysed in exhaustive detail by other Greek and Latin writers on eloquence. Instead, Longinus explores the means whereby an audience might be elevated (gain *hypsous*) or attain '*ekstasis*' (meaning, literally, to 'stand outside' oneself). The mysterious nature of this transport was further emphasised in Boileau's French translation through appeal to an obscure quality—a '*je-ne-sais-quoi*'—as the causal origin of the power that 'sublime' speeches or texts exercised on the spell-bound audience. The overall sense of mystery was also intensified by Boileau's adoption of the French term '*sublime*' to replace '*hypsous*'. As we will see in Chapter 6, this word had rich alchemical connotations and was linked to the purification or sublimation of matter through the process of heating. These associations would be exploited by the German Romantic writers and by Nietzsche and Freud in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The complex and highly problematic gender politics of this usage will also become apparent, and in Chapter 9 we will see Nietzsche deliberately exploiting the language of 'sublimation' as he seeks to reconfigure the sublime and render it more material.

Other more technical uses of the term 'sublime' in the seventeenth century included usage in architecture and the building trades where it was employed

in relation to chimneys and lintels. In both alchemy and architecture the Latin word *sublimis* is in play, in particular '*sub*' denoting 'under' or 'up to' and *limin* meaning 'threshold'. It is, however, the conventions of rhetoric that Boileau is primarily drawing on in his translation of Longinus. Thus, in other Latin, French and English texts on rhetoric reference had also been made to a 'sublime style', but in ways that were completely at odds with the analysis of *hypsous* provided by Longinus. The non-Longinian 'sublime' style was a synonym for the so-called 'high' or 'lofty' style deemed suitable to describe 'the heroical and mighty actions of kings' (as A. Day puts it in the 'English Secretorie' of 1586). This could not have been more different from Longinian *hypsous* which fits more with the so-called 'low' or 'plain' style than with this highly flowery and grandiloquent mode of address. However, as we will see, connotations of kingly power and also of masculinity would be carried over from the old-fashioned 'sublime style' to the modern concept of the sublime. Thus, for example, in Edward Benlowes' *Theophilia* (1652) we find an explicit linking between 'Sublime poets' and 'the masculine and refined pleasures of the understanding' which 'transcend the feminine and sensual of the eye'. As we will see, analogous gendered metaphors can be found in both Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant.

Boileau's translation of Longinus generated a kind of mania for a more simple style that produces its effect by means of a magical and ineffable *je-ne-sais-quoi* that transforms language and also its audience. After 1674 and throughout most of the eighteenth century, re-translations of Longinus followed by the score: not only into English, but also into most other European languages. Most followed Boileau and left out any reference to 'Types of Speech' (*Genere Dicendi*) from the title of the treatise, so that gradually the scope of the sublime was broadened out to include not only speeches, but also images and events—especially as depicted on the stage. By 1721 Tamworth Reresby was equating the sublime with 'the marvellous' and with that '*which produces a certain admiration mixed with wonder and surprise*' (Reresby 1721: 43). Even earlier, in 1701 and 1704, John Dennis, the English critic and actor-manager, had explicated the sublime in terms of 'enthusiastic' passions that were based on an imitation of nature and then further excited by the subject matter and the poetic technique, specifically claiming that 'ideas producing terror, contribute extremely to the sublime' (Dennis 1701: 32–34; 1704: 37).

Dennis claims that 'the sublime does not so properly persuade us, as it ravishes us and transports us, and produces in us a certain admiration, mingled with astonishment and surprise'. Never without passion, 'it gives a noble vigour to a discourse, an invincible force, which commits a pleasing rape on the very soul of the reader' (Dennis 1704: 37). Dennis' sublime thus produces an emotional and imaginative effect that seems to bypass the three traditional (Aristotelian) routes for convincing or persuading an audience by rhetorical means: via an appeal to the reason; through reliance on the specificity of the character of the speaker; by playing on the particularity of the emotions or beliefs of the

subject who is being addressed (Aristotle *c.* 350 BCE; Ijsseling 1976). Although for Dennis the sublime always does involve 'passion', the passion involved is not the 'ordinary passions' of the individual subject. These are set to one side; instead, 'like the artillery of Jove', the 'united force of a writer' takes over the reader and 'thunders, blazes, and strikes at once', generating a specific set of 'enthusiastic' passions that are both violent and irresistible (Dennis 1704: 37).

For Dennis, these enthusiastic passions are linked to a particular set of 'terrible' and 'wonderful' ideas, including 'gods, dæmons, hell, spirits and souls of men, miracles, prodigies, enchantments, witchcrafts, thunder, tempests, raging seas, inundations, torrents, earthquakes, volcanoes, monsters, serpents, lions, tigers, fire, war, pestilence, famine, &c.' (38). What is important about this set of imaginary and real objects is, according to Dennis, the capacity of each of them for generating 'religious terror', an emotion that is said to be distinguished both from ordinary terror and from fear. Ordinary terror is different from fear in that it is 'more sudden', 'less gradual' and involves an element of surprise in the way it registers 'an approaching evil, threatening destruction or very great trouble'; by contrast, 'great enthusiastic terror' is mixed with wonder and borders on astonishment. It is this religious terror that is characteristic of the sublime on Dennis' model, with the degree of terror generated made dependent on the more 'powerful' the object is that induces the terror, and the more likely that object is to hurt the subject—so the greatest, most sublime idea becomes 'the idea of an angry god' (36).

As a playwright and stage manager, Dennis was reputedly the inventor of the sound effect of 'stage thunder' as a dramatic means of evoking the sublime. He was also so taken by the 'sublime' that he earned himself the nickname 'Sir Tremendous Longinus' through the mockery of John Gay, Alexander Pope and other members of the Scriblerus Club. For all his excesses, in terms of the developing history of the sublime Dennis' treatment of the Longinian sublime is symptomatic since, at least until Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), the aesthetic of the sublime would be torn between several competing tendencies that we find in Dennis: first, the sublime is defined in terms of a particular set of objects or properties that generate enthusiastic terror; second, there is a tendency to assert that whatever generates great and intense terror is also sublime; third, a distinction is made between 'ordinary' passions and those elevated passions that are characteristic of the sublime; and fourth, the sublime is linked with the religious, the numinous, the non-human and the superhuman. This is already an unstable mix, and Dennis compounds this by linking the sublime to 'spirit, or genius in poetry' (Dennis 1701: 33). Importantly, in Germany as well as in Britain, the language of the 'sublime' was deployed to explain how Shakespeare and other 'natural geniuses' could produce such a powerful effect on an audience, despite breaking the rules of neoclassical poetry and art.

Sexing the difference

In mid eighteenth-century Britain the spectator of the sublime was theorised as passive; but so also was the genius himself, so that the genius took on many stereotypically 'feminine' characteristics, including imagination, intuition, strong emotions and frenzy (Battersby 1989). For pre-Romantic writers like Edmund Young (1759), William Duff (1767) or the young Goethe, geniuses like Shakespeare were little more than super-spectators: mirrors that give us access to the region of the sublime. The *maleness* of this feminised spectator was taken for granted, but was spelt out more explicitly in Edmund Burke's classic and influential text, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Beautiful and Sublime* of 1757 (revised 1759).

Burke divides passions into those which are social and are linked to the 'purposes of propagation' and 'generation', and those that are bound up with 'self-preservation', involving pain, danger, terror and reason. The social feelings give rise to the pleasure that we take in beauty; but the enjoyment in the sublime is generated by the ego as it operates in defensive mode. In particular, Burke links the sublime to 'delight': a term which is given a narrow and technical definition involving the 'removal of pain or danger' (1757/59: 36–44). Thus, for Burke, the sublime and the beautiful are modes of affect which function as polar opposites insofar as taste is concerned:

> There is a wide difference between admiration and love. The sublime, which is the cause of the former, always dwells on great objects, and terrible; the latter on small ones, and pleasing; we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us; in one case we are forced, in the other we are flattered into compliance.
>
> (Burke: 1757/59: 113)

The 'we' that Burke uses here is sexually specific. According to Burke, it was the beautiful that operates on the (male) observer by a form of flattery; the sublime that threatens to overwhelm the male ego via a form of mental rape that renders him (temporarily) passive, and like his ideal woman who was herself 'beautiful' and not 'sublime'. Burke never made the adjustments to his vocabulary that would have been necessary had he registered that there could be another 'we' (women) who do not simply admire, but also love the sublime.

In Burke's text, the language of sexual power is employed to explain the psychological thrill that comes from the sublime. The latter is exemplified by kings and commanders discharging their terrible strength and destroying all obstacles in their paths, as well as by the grandeur of the Alps (64ff.). By contrast, the 'beautiful'—small, smooth, delicate and graceful—is claimed to be what men (i.e. males) love in the opposite sex (42, 113, 91ff.). Burke characterises beauty as a mental state of relaxation produced by the physical encounter with objects that are small, smooth, without sharp contrasts or

angles, and with delicacy of form and colour. It is what 'we'/'men' (males) love in 'the *sex*' (women):

> this mixed passion which we call love, is the *beauty* of the *sex*. Men are carried to the sex in general, as it is the sex, and by the common law of nature; but they are attached to particulars by personal *beauty*.
> (Burke: 42)

The sublime, by contrast, was bound up with a 'stretching' of the nerve fibres: with tension and with feelings of terror and infinity generated by power, obscurity, magnitude, difficulty, absences (such as solitude, silence and darkness) and impressions of endlessness (146n; 132ff.).

Via the framework of the Burkean 'beautiful', women—who, during the Renaissance, had been allied to the frenzied, the passionate, the ecstatic and the passively reactive—found themselves deprived of sisterhood with raw Nature. It was, of course, no coincidence that this happened at that time in the history of Europe when passivity and the 'natural' were being revalued and made integral to the sublime. Instinct, madness, the emotional and the capricious remained 'feminine' characteristics and were eulogised; but they were no longer thought of as specifically *female* characteristics (Battersby 1989). Instead, these characteristics were increasingly debarred to women or presented as part of a 'natural' condition that women themselves were unable to transcend. Mary Wollstonecraft was amongst the many women writers who raged against the ways in which the 'sublime' was often explicitly, and nearly always implicitly, gendered as male (Wollstonecraft 1792). Her record of her adventures amongst the wild mountain scenery of Scandinavia was a way of countering the newly emergent gender ideals which confined women to the (distinctly inferior) category of the 'beautiful' (Wollstonecraft 1796).

The British writers on the sublime were influential across Europe, but particularly in Germany. Thus, in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* of 1764 Kant draws on Burke as he allies woman with the beautiful and the male with the sublime, arguing that a woman 'should show nothing else than a beautiful nature'. Kant allows that the 'fair sex' has 'as much understanding as the men', but insists that woman has 'a *beautiful understanding*, whereas ours should be a *deep understanding*, an expression which signifies identity with the sublime' (*Obs*: 2/229, p. 78).[1] Kant links the 'beautiful' to 'facility' and to apparent ease:

> On the other hand, strivings and surmounted difficulties arouse admiration and belong to the sublime. Deep meditation and a long-sustained reflection are noble but difficult, and do not well befit a person in whom unconstrained charms should show nothing else than a beautiful nature. Laborious learning or a painful pondering, even if a

> woman (*Frauenzimmer*) should greatly succeed in it, destroy the merits that are proper to her sex.
>
> (*Obs*: 2/229, p. 78)

'Charm' and 'beauty' are positive virtues for women; but the sublime is ruled out. Kant even claims that a woman 'with a head full of Greek' or one who studies mechanics is 'disgusting', and 'might as well even have a beard' (2/229–30, p. 78). Since Kant will link full personhood and moral autonomy to the sublime in his later writings, it is not just a trivial matter that he refuses women the right to develop their capacities for the sublime.

Like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (his philosophical hero), Kant emphasised the need to civilise woman in order to make her more 'natural', more charming, and an ideal (yet subordinate) companion, mother and wife. However, as we will see in Chapter 3, in Kant's mature philosophy there were significant changes in his account of the beautiful and the sublime, and, as we will also discover, Kant's later, critical writings continued to have a strongly charged sexual subtext insofar as the sublime was concerned. Women (and various racial and ethnic types originating from outside Europe) remain excluded from his account of the 'universals' of reason and of taste, of freedom and personhood that are operational in 'our' (male and European) enjoyment of the sublime.

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), Kant continued to make the distinction between beauty (*die Schönheit*) and the sublime (*das Erhabene*) fundamental to the structure of his text, but now women no longer count as an example of the beautiful in any straightforward way. By 1790 Kant was taking a stand against empiricists such as Burke whose account of mental functioning emphasised passivity, sensibility and affectivity, as well as against accounts such as those of Young or Duff who presented the ideal male—the original genius—as a creature as wild, capricious and irrational as a Renaissance female. In his late writings Kant makes a merely passive response to danger—a block to the appreciation of the sublime which is now described as involving terror and its simultaneous transcendence. Since Kant also insists that women and 'effeminate' ('Oriental') males either cannot, or should not, transcend fear, his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* does, in effect, return to older notions of masculinity that were uncontaminated by the newly re-valued passions and irrationality. This explains why, in 1818, we find Goethe praising Kant for his 'immortal service': of having 'brought us all back from that effeminacy in which we were wallowing' (Cassirer 1918: 270).

There are clear fault-lines in Kant's philosophy of the sublime, especially in relation to sexual difference and race, and these will need to be explored in subsequent chapters. But some of the difficulties in untangling what Kant himself said about the sublime comes from the fact that his own views are too often mediated by Friedrich von Schiller's interpretation of Kant's aesthetics. It would be difficult to overemphasise the influence of Schiller, since, in the history of philosophy, it is Schiller's Kant who has often come to displace what

Kant himself said. Thus, for example, both Hegel and Nietzsche seem to read Kant through spectacles borrowed from Schiller. What is emphasised in this tradition is the defeat of the imagination, and the role of the understanding and reason in relation to the pleasures of the sublime as sensibility opens up the individual to 'the Idea'. There is thus also an emphasis on the potential of the sublime to enable man to transcend the limited framework of the space–time structures which shape our world.

Schiller described the feeling of the sublime as involving a mixture of melancholy and joy, and claimed that this 'mixed feeling' is generated by a sublime object which is itself 'of a dual sort':

> We refer it either to our *power of apprehension* and are defeated in our attempt to form an image of its concept; or we refer it to our *vital power* and view it as a power against which our own dwindles to nothing.
>
> (Schiller 1801: 198)

Importantly, for Schiller the truly moral man is dynamised by this failure. He is 'ravished by the terrifying', and takes 'delight in the sensuously infinite because we are able to think what the senses can no longer apprehend'. With his understanding out of alignment with his senses, 'Nature' uses 'a sensuous means of teaching us that we are more than merely sensuous' (199). Such a man 'abandons the possibility of *explaining* Nature and takes this incomprehensibility itself as a principle of judgment': he is forced by this imaginative and sensory failure to 'apprehend the great and sublime by means of reason' (207, 203). The encounter with the sublime object thus provides evidence that man is a free and autonomous being with a '*spiritual mission*' that is integral to the 'rational vocation' of human nature (211). For Schiller, there is thus a moral and educative dimension to the sublime experience—and, indeed, terror—that pushes man towards a kind of spiritual salvation. If women and various ethnic groupings are refused this capacity for spiritual salvation and moral improvement, then the Kantian–Schillerian type of philosophical framework can be used to justify counting whole classes of humans as non-persons.

Kant was writing during a period in which ideals of human nature and of attainment were in crisis; and this was particularly evident in terms of the way that accounts of the character and merits of women seemed to be at odds with ideals and norms that were presented as valid for all mankind. Although racial stereotypes also had a role to play in this predicament, it was not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the racial and cultural consequences of an aesthetics and politics of the sublime would move into focus. For the German National Socialists there was a deliberate attempt to attach the aesthetics of the 'sublime' to certain superior (primarily Aryan) races or specific non-effeminate, non-degenerate human types (Carter 2004). And in the Soviet Union the 'sublime' of labour and of physical work was also linked to a

politics of terror and of transcendence. In Chapters 2 and 10 I will need to consider further whether there is any worthwhile future for the sublime, given this history.

Containing the shock

Although this book cannot hope—and, it should be stressed, does not even attempt—to solve the problems posed by political terror, it is concerned to show how aesthetic debates about the sublime and questions of political theory and value overlap. At stake is the question about what remains when understanding fails and when we are shocked by 'terror', or by an encounter with that which is so strange or shockingly 'other' that our conceptual framework is unable to encompass it. And here it is also necessary to point to a third aesthetic category which emerged late in the eighteenth century, and which involved an attempt to block the power of the 'other' to destabilise the 'I'. Neither fully sublime nor conventionally beautiful, the 'picturesque' involved a tension between man (the perceiver and shaper of his surroundings) and 'wild nature' which was celebrated, but which was positioned as an object of curiosity rather than of power.

I will also touch on the problem of the picturesque in Chapters 2 and 10 in relation to the discussion of the representation of political terror; here I need to note that it started out as a deliberate attempt to block the 'sensuously infinite' and the power of the sublime:

> Infinity is one of the most efficient causes of the sublime ... to give [an object] picturesqueness, you must destroy that cause of its sublimity; for it is on the shape and disposition of its boundaries, that the picturesque must in great measure depend.
>
> (Price 1810: vol. i, 84)

To gain this visual control and 'see' the picturesque, it was customary to view nature through the lens of a *camera obscura*. Although unable to fix the image onto paper, this precursor of the modern camera nonetheless produced a two-dimensional image on a flat ground (supposed equivalent to the retina) from which linear tracings, tonal drawings or paintings were produced. Seen through glass, the shadows become both 'pleasantly coloured' and also 'darker' than in nature. 'The effect is indeed heightened but it is false' (Scharf 1974: 21).

Garden and landscape designers also set out to evoke and contain the sublime, as the full title of Price's 1796 text makes clear: *Essays on the Picturesque (as compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape)*. Referred to across Europe as 'The English Garden', the 'picturesque' landscape was designed to mimic the soft hills and 'natural' curves and the English countryside. The gaze of the observer was directed by the construction of (apparently 'natural') artificial lakes; by the 'artless' planting of woods, via

sinuous pathways; and by means of strategically positioned (fake) ruins, follies or creeper-covered buildings. Although the resulting vistas were described in language and metaphors that evoked Mother Nature, the apparent roughness, wildness and irregularity was a product of a careful calculation of visual horizons, perspectives and frames (Hussey 1927). Infinity, power and wildness were invoked, but nature was managed, manicured, framed and filtered so as to keep at bay any 'abyss' in understanding. Intermediate between the sublime and the beautiful, the picturesque sets out to reassure us that—even where there is disorder—man is in control, and that nature has been constructed for human delight.

For the traveller or painter touring round England, visual control over the disturbing force of nature was relatively easy. But in the case of the less domesticated landscapes of Asia, Australia, North America and the British Colonies, the aesthetic categories of the sublime and the picturesque were often placed in uneasy conjunction. Australian settlers might have named one of the 'lookouts' in the Blue Mountains 'Sublime Point', and there might also be a tradition of American Landscape Painting that is known as 'The American Sublime', but in general eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial artists painted the wilderness in ways that softened or domesticated it so that it became unthreatening and merely 'picturesque'. Strategically placed humans, domestic animals or homesteads softened the scene, and painters adopted perspectives and lighting that toned down the contours and colours in ways that filtered the image through remembered European horizons and tonalities. In these depictions, the aboriginal 'primitives' are generally assimilated into the landscape and become simply a part of the wilderness that the European or colonial traveller presents as 'other' to his own masterful self. Dwarfed by the mountain scenery and by the deserts or wide prairies, the indigenous inhabitants seem merely to enhance the 'picturesque' effect of the overall scene, rather than being positioned themselves as powerful, ominous or sublime.

Race was also very much a feature of the picturesque landscape, and behind the fashion for the picturesque we also find the language of the sublime, in which both the experiencing subject and the sublimities that he encounters are described in racialised terms. Thus, for example, in *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke explains that darkness and blackness are natural sensations that are productive of the sublime, illustrating this with the example of a boy who was blind from birth and who, on regaining his sight, accidentally saw a negro woman. The boy was immediately 'struck with great horror at the sight. The horror, in this case, can scarcely be supposed to arise from any association' (1757/59: 144). For Burke, the horror that 'we' (European males) feel at black bodies is entirely natural and is rooted in human nature. Looking at them causes the radial fibres of the eye to contract and the nerves to be strained, since black bodies reflect no light and function 'as vacant spaces among the objects we view'. The absence of light amongst the colours that impact on the eye produces a 'convulsive' motion of the eye and a kind of physiological shock

that is 'very violent'. Although custom can in time reconcile us to black objects, the black body is naturally productive of terror and hence an efficient cause of the sublime. As such, it is antithetical to the beautiful which is described as a social passion and linked to what 'we' love (144–49, 38–43).

In Chapters 2 and 4 we will see Kant also describing the enjoyment of the sublime in ways that are racially and ethnically specific, so that the 'Oriental' is denied the capacity to appreciate the sublime; this exclusion occurs even though the religions of Islam and (to a lesser extent) Judaism and are discussed by him in relatively positive terms insofar as the sublime is concerned. As we will see, Kant's restrictions operate rather differently in the case of race and ethnicity than in the case of sexual difference, since Kant indicates that certain racial types have an inability to appreciate the sublime, whereas in the case of women it is a quasi-moral duty for women not to develop their personality, reason and understanding in the direction of the sublime. But these tensions with respect to race have also produced a legacy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries insofar as the questions of race and religion are concerned. In 'The Muselmann in Auschwitz', an interview with Gil Anidjar on his book *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (2003), Anidjar suggests that the invention of the category of the 'Semite' (including both the Jew and the Arab) during the nineteenth century can be traced back to Hegel, and specifically to Hegel's reading of Kant on the sublime (Anidjar 2004).

As we will see in the next chapter Hegel argues against the ideal of autonomy implicit in Kant's analysis of the sublime, but Anidjar claims that Hegel nevertheless incorporates an understanding of Kant on the sublime into the racial and historical categories employed in his account of the development of Absolute Spirit. For Hegel, Anidjar claims, 'both Jews and Muslims are thoroughly submitted, they are *slaves*. They are slaves to their god', and there is a kind of 'horrifying beauty' about their enslavement. For Anidjar, Kant's account of the 'religions of the sublime' contributes to the invention of the category of the Semite, as well as to the caricature of the *Muselmann* or Muslim as an inferior overly passive type who then becomes the archetypal *political* enemy of the West (as opposed to the Jew who comes to signify the *theological* enemy).

I will come back to Anidjar's complex insights in Chapter 4 as I explore Kant's—extremely depressing—theories of 'race' and ethnicity and read these alongside his analysis of the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. In fact, as we will see, Anidjar reads Kant on Islam through a framework that is more appropriate to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Kant's 'Orientalism' is extreme, but does not translate into an anti-Islamic position; instead Kant positions Islam on the side of modernity and, like Voltaire, uses Islam as a strategic weapon to critique certain types of non-rational modes of Christianity that are linked to 'superstition' and fear. Anidjar's emphasis on the role of the sublime in later debates about Islam is nevertheless important, especially in the way it picks up an observation that Primo Levi

made about the treatment of prisoners in Auschwitz. Thus Levi records in *If This is a Man*, 'This word *Muselmann*, I do not know why, was used by the old ones of the camp to describe the weak, the inept, those doomed to selection' (Levi 1958: 94n.). Anidjar links some of the most urgent questions of our times—in particular the problem of universalism and the conflation of religious, ethnic and racial categories—back to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates relating to autonomy, personhood, transcendence, passivity and the sublime.

Should the sublime have a future?

Although much of this book will be concerned with exploring the eighteenth-century background that continues to haunt contemporary debates relating to an aesthetics of the sublime, there are serious contemporary questions that are posed by its politics. As we will see in the next chapter, 'September 11 2001' is too easily read in terms of the visual vocabulary of the sublime, and in contemporary responses to this event it is also possible to detect the tonalities of Schiller and other post-Kantian philosophers who linked the 'redemption' and 'spiritual mission' of mankind to the mind-defeating incomprehensibility of the sublime, as well as to its attendant terrors. In the portrayal of the collapse of the twin towers of the New York Trade Center as 'Apocalypse Now'—and films and images of it as a kind of 'sublime'—we see a shattered landscape opening up before us: an image so profoundly disturbing as to demand judgement, whilst blocking any easy response that can rely on the 'universals' of human reason or of a 'consensus' of moral or aesthetic response.

Chapter 2 will link the twenty-first-century terror to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates concerning the sublime and the French Revolution. And here again questions of sexual and racial difference will be key, since what is at stake is the question of how to think of the individual in relation to the universal. Might it ever be appropriate to sacrifice the individual to some greater good? Can 'terror' ever be justified in terms of 'sublime virtue', along the lines that Robespierre asserted during the time of 'Terror'? How appropriate is it to read Kant's account of the sublime as a defence of Robespierre's view of justice? How do women, non-European races and different religions and ethnicities stand in relation to the 'universal' ideals of freedom and personhood that can be found in Kant's aesthetic texts? Might it be possible to use Kant's aesthetics of the sublime to develop an ideal of non-consensual communities in which difference is respected, as Lyotard suggests?

In Chapter 3 I will show, in detail, how Kant's critical system is fundamentally undermined by his continued refusal to allow women access to the enjoyments of the sublime. In Chapter 4 I will look across Kant's system to see how he deals with issues of ethnicity, non-Christian religions (especially Islam) and race. Although Kant's views on ethnicity and race are less deeply embedded in his system (and often seem simply inconsistent), Kant's refusal to allow

all peoples access to the sublime will have serious consequences for those who look to Kant's aesthetics for solutions for moral and political philosophy today. In Chapter 10, I will consider how and why Hannah Arendt turned to Kant's aesthetics to find an answer to mid-twentieth-century terror (especially Auschwitz). Here I will argue that Arendt needed to pay more attention to what Kant said about the sublime, and to the way that he secures ethnic and racial exclusions.

Before getting to this point, however, I will need to explore a curious duality in both Kant and the post-Kantian traditions of writing the sublime: one that relates to the differences between the 'feminine' and the 'female'. This will be the task of Chapters 5 and 6 where we will see that the sublime that leads man's reason and imagination upwards and onwards in Kant and post-Kantian writers is often allocated a feminine (and Egyptian) persona; but that access to this feminised 'other' was barred to flesh-and-blood women who were denied the necessary powers to transcend materiality. Chapter 6 will consider the tactics of three women poets and writers who seem to suggest another model of Otherness, and whose writings contribute to a tradition of 'the *female* sublime'. The question of the anti-fleshy—and that means anti-female—bias in the aesthetics of the sublime will be addressed extensively in these two chapters, and also in Chapter 7 where I will consider some images produced by contemporary women artists, in order to show further what a *female* sublime involves.

In Chapters 8 and 9 I will explore in some detail Nietzsche's critique of the sublime, showing how this links to his critique of the 'feminine' and an ever-elusive, veiled truth. We will also see how Nietzsche does not simply give up on the language of the sublime, but redescribes it in ways that are more physiological, and that involve reconfiguring otherness, identity, truth and value. Nietzsche will be in many ways helpful, but, as we will see in Chapter 9, he remains unable to think the bodily in ways that can adequately register *female* embodiment or the *female* subject position.

Chapter 10 also draws on Nietzsche, as I explore the links between the sublime, 'difference', temporal irruption and the sublime in recent discussions of terror and the 'postmodern sublime'. Here, I will consider the politics of the 'event' and its relation to terror and the sublime, in relation to three thinkers: Lyotard, Derrida and Arendt. As we will see in the next chapter, Lyotard deploys Kant's analysis of the sublime to defend a 'postmodern' politics of difference that privileges respect for discordant voices, rather than an ideal of consensus or 'universal' values based on reason that should ideally remain always and everywhere the same. Lyotard privileges 'dissensus', and turns to Kant's analysis of sublime pleasures to model a framework for political understanding that is not simply relativist, but which is attentive to 'differends', which he defines in terms of untranslatable elements within incompatible, but nevertheless equally valid, linguistic frameworks. The question of how adequate Lyotard's 'postmodern sublime' is for dealing with empirical, human differences and *historical* change will also need to be considered.

The sublime and its 'others'

Throughout, my approach to the sublime will be historical, since I will be arguing that the position of the 'other' that is hidden and that is at stake in the politics of the sublime is one that is first constructed by history itself. I will end by arguing for the need to look within the cultural history of the West for the hidden 'others within', and suggest that the self–other relationship does not have to be thought of always and only in terms of an adversarial relationship. But neither should the 'other' be conceptualised as 'beyond' the temporal or spatial horizons of Western cultures. I will argue that it is important not to simply reproduce the errors of those Romantic and psychoanalytic theorists who supposed that the 'other' that is encountered in the experience of the sublime is simply 'the Other of the same'.

As we will see, the sublime is associated by Romantic writers, such as William Wordsworth, with the ego encountering 'nature' or a 'feminine' other, and then re-establishing control via a return to a self that is confident in its underlying freedom, its mastery of otherness, and in the (male) poet or philosopher's right to speak and be heard. Wordsworth's 1808 poem 'Composed While the Author Was Engaged in Writing a Tract Occasioned by the Convention of Cintra' is one of many examples of his so-called 'egotistical sublime' in which the author first yields to 'mighty Nature' and her 'school sublime', before returning to a triumphant 'I' and 'thoughts no bondage can restrain' (Wordsworth 1888). On the other hand, as we will also see, the language of femininity has been deployed by both Kant and the male Romantics in ways that allowed a variety of male alliances with the sublime—all of which negotiated femininity, but erased (as no more than an echo) the female writers who were contemporaneously expressing their own experiences of the demonic and numinous.

Romanticism grew out of Kantianism, and I therefore find it easy to resist the reading of Kant as a simple defender of reason (and hence as emotionally and imaginatively paralysed) that has been fashionable amongst those feminists and postmodernists who lump Kant in with other 'Enlightenment' thinkers. This is not the Kant that I have been influenced by—and whom I also oppose. There are gaps in the Kantian system: gaps occupied by the 'unrepresentable'; by emotion; sexual desire; and even by a powerful feminine 'Isis' as the construct (and limits) of the imagination. It was in these gaps that Romanticism flowered and in which women Romantics drew breath. But none of this makes the Kantian universe a space in which I, as a feminist philosopher, can move freely. The 'feminine' principle so often advocated by the Romantics is a trap for women, since it treats femininity as 'other', and as excessive to an ego that is normalised as male.

In the last two centuries this (male, Westernised) 'I' that stands in opposition to its 'other' has seemed at times more domineering, but also more and more fragile. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the twentieth century, writing about the