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Intensity and Its Audiences: Toward a Feminist Perspective on the Kantian Sublime

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How does one stand to behold the sublime?
—Wallace Stevens, "The American Sublime"

It is because her appetite for immediacy is so huge that she feels so powerfully the impossibility of directing it at a listener—even at a reader. Her hunger for direct language turns into a sense of knowledge, a suppurating consciousness of possessing something dangerous to those about her. This is the precise breeding ground of the unspeakable. The unspeakable is willed—it has not, that is to say, a pre-existent content that is itself already unspeakable—but its gratuitousness is grounded in, is rendered visible in the colors of, the individual obsession and the obsession of the age.
—Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on Lucy Snowe in *Villette*[1]

The goal of this essay is to begin a reassessment of Kant's aesthetics and specifically his account of the sublime. This reassessment is intended to demonstrate its indebtedness to some recent feminist critics of philosophy and literature. Somewhat artificially, I will characterize the criticism in question as containing two categories or directions of investigation. The first sort is aimed at the unmasking of gender prejudice and ideology in the standpoint or conceptual framework of writers such as Burke and Kant.[2] The second sort of criticism is less familiar and harder to characterize, but it can be located among the works of literary critics who make use of recent poststructuralist philosophy and psychoanalysis. Terms like "poststructuralist" are often used to cover a multitude of texts. The focus of the later sections of this essay is a narrower segment of such writing, including principally the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, along with that of Neil Hertz, Frances Ferguson, Joshua Wilner, and Naomi Schor.[3] Although many poststructuralist currents are beginning to circulate through the precincts of English-speaking philosophical

aesthetics, the strands of thought represented by these writers have remained largely unknown. (Schor's book is probably the most likely to be familiar to American philosophers.) And while a single essay cannot do justice to the complexity of these writers, it remains a secondary aim of my essay to encourage aestheticians and feminists to encounter this body of work for themselves.

I begin by offering a selective summary of the elements of experience and philosophical theory that go into Kant's account of the sublime. I then outline the first type of criticism of Kant's aesthetics and raise questions about this version of the masculinist orientation of the sublime. Without disputing the idea that there is something right—and importantly right—about the ideological critique of Kant's orientation, I attempt to nudge the discussion of Kant in another direction. This leads me to invoke Sedgwick's accounts of the sublime, especially as she unearths its outlines and details in writers like Charlotte Brontë and Emily Dickinson. Sedgwick's account makes a theme out of the affinity between the experiences of the sublime and of the various degrees of the inexpressible. Finally, I use Sedgwick's investigations to motivate a discussion of some features in Kant's account of the sublime.

My general interpretive suggestion is this: Kant teaches us that the experience of the sublime requires a certain "preparation" or "culture." Otherwise we experience, for instance, a repulsion or a shrinking back from the sublime and not the alternation between repulsion and attraction that constitutes the fullest experience of the sublime. Sedgwick's work suggests that just as the experience of the sublime requires a kind of preparation, so it requires a kind of completion or aftermath. And if there is no suitable region—whether natural or social or aesthetic—in which this experience can be expressed and hence fulfilled, the aftermath is likely to be both aesthetically and humanly difficult. Given what Kant says about the experience of those who lack the necessary "preparation" for the sublime, we might go so far as to characterize the deprivation that Sedgwick speaks of as a transformation or deformation of the experience and not merely as a contingent or purely personal fact about the person having the experience. Such a thought need not lead us to abandon all thought of our aesthetic judgments as grounded in a transcendental principle. But it might lead us to a greater appreciation of the historical conditions within which the hope for such a principle was formed. After all, neither the hope for the transcendental ground of communicability nor the particular empirical acts of communication in question must necessarily be thought of as themselves immune to historical pressures and changes.

My contention is that the terms of Sedgwick's analyses—and, of course,

the writers that her terms illuminate—will clarify these further aspects of the sublime and overcome the obstacles to its communication. It is my further hope that the critical turns in this reading of Kant will prove useful to feminist critics and to other readers of Kant. Whether or not this hope is fulfilled, the material I am introducing into the discussion would seem to possess some immediate pertinence to a feminist investigation of aesthetics. For it is noteworthy that among Sedgwick's primary subjects are women writing in the aftermath of the great projects of the philosophical Enlightenment, of political revolution, and of literary Romanticism. In this historical moment, some women of the middle classes were absorbing the fact that the achievements of the eighteenth century had often excluded their own aspirations.[4] Or else they discovered that their aspirations had been included in ways that transformed them almost beyond recognition, transformations that made those very aspirations into vehicles of constraint and isolation. Sedgwick's work operates at a level where an increasing material comfort was not only consistent with a traumatic deprivation of the human need of expression but may actually have worked to exacerbate this deprivation. That for some women these deprivations were involved in an astonishing access of insight and productivity should not make the circumstances seem any the less shameful.

The Kantian Sublime: An Introduction

When Kant first began to write about the sublime[5] he was taking on a field of critical investigation and an episode in the history of taste that was already five or six decades old. The sublime was the name given to a region of experience where the mind takes pleasure in powerful natural forces and in tremendous vistas. The experience of the sublime was (and often still is) bounded by wonder, awe, and dread. The paradox of the pleasurable terrors and exhilarations of nature became linked in aesthetic reflection to the paradoxical effects of epic and tragic poetry. The resultant sixty or seventy years of intense focus on the issues of the sublime can be regarded as a kind of historical transition from the fading authority of nature as the scene of God's voice to the rising power of nature as a source of Romantic writing. As early as Addison's *Spectator* essay, theoreticians of the sublime were uncertain about whether the sublime satisfies the mind's eagerness for an image of freedom and power

external to itself or whether it represents the mind turning inward on itself and relishing the immensity of its own imaginative appetites.[6]

The writings of Edmund Burke signaled a new stage of sophistication in accounting for workings of the imagination in the experience of the sublime. He emphasized the covertness of the mind's responses to the sublime, and he outlined its capacity for turning inward and aggrandizing itself in the experience of the sublime. The mind, Burke argued, acquires a peculiar sense of seriousness deriving from a (real or imagined) danger against which it also knows itself to be protected. Burke is thus not only among the first psychologists of the sublime; he is also its first demystifier.[7]

Kant honored Burke's theoretical advances even while he wished to rescue from Burke's empiricism a transcendental necessity within our feelings for the sublime and the beautiful.[8] (For Kant, such a rescue operation was far from merely theoretical.) Not surprisingly, Kant tried to reconceive the by then fairly traditional characterizations of the "inner" and "outer" locations of the sublime. Kant's model locates the sublime as an inner response to an outer occasion—an inner response that provides us with a perspective on our "elevated" destiny, our true "sublimity." From the perspective of the sublime experience, the sublimity (the actual elevation or *being* elevated [*Erhabenheit*]) of our moral autonomy could be both glimpsed and fortified.[9]

For Kant the element of initial or recurrent pain in the sublime has less to do with the Burkean "danger" than with a movement of self-deprivation on the part of the imagination. The mind feels the inadequacy of its efforts to imagine the ideas (e.g., of God and of freedom) as represented in nature. Of course, such an inadequacy only shows up in a mind that is striving to make nature into such a representation or, in Kant's terms, striving to use nature as a "schema" for representing the ideas of reason (124 [265]). Kant thinks that every human mind is capable of these ideas of reason because each of us is capable of the moral law. But he does not think that every mind is equally "prepared" for the effort to *find* these ideas represented in nature. Hence, the experience of the sublime is not, for Kant, as widely available as the experience of the beautiful. In abiding by this sense of inadequacy, the imagination "by its own action" deprives itself of its full freedom and shows us its capacity for obedience to a kind of law that is beyond its habitual employment (129 [269]). The imagination thus points beyond itself, and the mind as a whole receives—somewhat mysteriously—a greater scope and energy than it previously possessed.

The Sublime: Some Uses and Abuses

Given the theoretical and experiential emphasis on the power and grandeur of the sublime, it is perhaps not surprising that accounts of the sublime became entangled with masculinist ideology and sensibility. And, given the centrality of the sublime in the rise of eighteenth-century aesthetics, it is perhaps also not surprising that the feminist critiques of philosophy should have singled out the sublime as a major target for criticism.[10] Accounts of the sublime constitute an especially vivid instance of a tendency in philosophy to set up certain experiences—characterized in male-inflected terms—as universally valid norms for the character and judgment of all human beings.

The process is sometimes said to go like this: First, certain objects or experiences are characterized in more or less overtly "masculine" terms (in the case of the sublime, terms such as "powerful," "active," "threatening," "dominating," "masterful," "warlike," and so forth). Second, the capacity for having certain experiences is given a systematic form and a central place in the philosopher's vision of the aesthetic, cultural, and moral education of humanity. Third, women are "discovered" to have either no capacity or only a deficient capacity for undergoing this set of experiences. Fourth, the (male) philosopher therefore feels justified in concluding that women are less capable of developing into full-fledged human beings in these crucial aesthetic and moral dimensions.

Such a pattern of "argument" was not invented by eighteenth-century aestheticians, and, of course, the pattern has not ceased to have its proponents.[11] The main outlines of this pattern can be found in Burke and at least in the pre-critical Kant, most egregiously in the third section of *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime.*[12] I am suggesting, however, that we need to ask some further questions about the implications that we are to draw from this pattern. If we dwell on the pattern too exclusively, we are likely to miss something about Kant's aesthetics. Perhaps more important, we may miss a chance to retrieve for aesthetics some of the very aspects of human need and feeling that Kant himself is commonly supposed to have neglected or distorted.

It should be noted that there are now writers who would deny that any of Kant's projects can be rescued from the taint of patriarchy or from the cauldron in which bourgeois aesthetic ideology was brewed.[13] There is not enough room here to give these charges the answer they deserve, but I do want to say a word or two about some tendencies that seem inherent in this type of critique. Perhaps Kant helped to create intellectual tendencies that served the needs of nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetic ideologies.

(This might well be true of what I take to be certain influential misinterpretations of "disinterestedness" and the so-called autonomy of art.) But Kant is also the principal philosophical thinker who demanded a place for the idea that human freedom is an end in itself, requiring no religious or political purposes to legitimize it. Perhaps this idea will prove to be ultimately—or humanly—untenable. But the idea seems too important for the theories and practices of human liberation to jettison merely on the grounds that it is subject to abuse.

Of course, liberating ideas can be perverted by later ideologies, and they may well contain some of the seeds of their own perversion. But since virtually any idea is susceptible to being thus tainted by ideology and mystification, we are left with the task of sorting out what we can still use of the past from what is no longer usable. The reason for such an effort is not mere piety toward the past. Overcoming our tendency to distort and flatten the past in the name of a less oppressive future may help us approach a more specific problem in the critical work of the present. For the tendency to reduce a philosopher to the ideologies that he or she participates in is likely to leave us more or less in the dark about a question that still seems crucial: How does any thinker ever make an advance toward the overcoming of the mystifications that surround us? Unless we imagine that we are somehow less liable than Kant to be deceived by ideology and mystification, then the connection between Kant's philosophical criticism and its ideological matrices ought to remain of more than academic interest to us.

Another issue that needs sorting through has to do with our ability to appreciate the ways in which past generations of women writers were responding to issues and materials that they first encountered at the hands of men. Let us assume that the theories and discourses of the sublime were initially the province of male writers, and assume further that the accounts they gave of this experience were marked by the masculine perspectives within which the accounts were arrived at. A couple of points are still worth making. First, that the initial mapping or modeling of the experience was carried out from a male perspective does not mean that the experience is somehow preeminently the property of men. To the extent that Burke and Kant thought otherwise, we can show that they were wrong. Second, when later generations of women writers (from Gothic to George Eliot) turned to the topics of "the Sublime," these topics took on different colors and were turned to different narrative and figurative uses. Nevertheless, the changes and discontinuities will not show up clearly—or perhaps not show up at all—apart from an understanding of the later writers' points of departure within the themes and figures of the (male-inflected) sublime.

It is possible—and sometimes necessary—to remind ourselves, that the later women writers are often responding to issues and materials that are recognizably continuous with the eighteenth-century sublime. These issues and materials of human feeling and expression may have been exploited by eighteenth-century male consciousness, but they were not created by it. And if "the Sublime" as an episode in the history of taste was, in the first instance, a creature largely of male consciousness, that was scarcely the end of the story. To dismiss the male-inflected eighteenth-century maps of the sublime because of their vivid display of the tensions of patriarchal consciousness is, at least potentially, to cut ourselves off from a dimension of the power and originality of the next two generations of women writers.

A Tension in the Paternal Sublime

I want to cite one place where Burke and Kant offer us an instructive tension in their accounts. Let us look again at the tendency to characterize the sublime objects as "active," "powerful," "forceful," and so forth. Suppose we grant that these terms carry with them certain conventional and historical associations with masculine activity—or, more exactly, with paternal power.[14] Suppose that we grant further that Burke and the pre-critical Kant are inclined to exploit the masculine drift within their characterizations of the objects of the sublime experience.[15] And suppose, finally, that Burke and Kant were also sometimes inclined to characterize the human male as especially capable of experiencing the sublime.[16] But at this stage, we are in a position to see that these thinkers have introduced a tension into this particular gendering of the sublime. For the *object* provoking the sublime experience cannot be characterized as masculine in the *same* sense or fashion in which the *subject* of the sublime experience is characterized as masculine.

This is not primarily a point about the logic of their positions. It is perhaps possible that Burke or Kant could have found ways of removing the tension; for instance, by characterizing the masculinity of the sublime event as other than the masculinity of the sublime spectator. My point is that to have removed the tensions would have been to remove something significant about the experience that they were trying to account for. (As far as we can tell, neither of them tried to remove this tension.)

There is a larger point to be made here. For Kant, at least, the experiences of the sublime involve an initial passivity in the subject's relation to the sublime

object. This passivity (which the imagination to some extent imposes on itself) is then found to grant us at least emotional access to a heightened sense of our capacity for independent activity. The access that the sublime grants us to our capacity for activity in the truest sense does not guarantee that we will fulfill the promise of autonomy. (For Kant, nothing can guarantee this). But it does give us at least a kind of route by which we might move from the elevating and sublime experiences that open the perspectives of freedom to the actual exercise of our freedom. Whether we make this leap or not, Kant has rendered the relation between "activity" and "passivity" significantly more problematic than he found it. And this ought to have been especially true for any simplistic equation of masculinity and activity. Whether or to what degree, Kant recognized[17] that his work had rendered any such equation problematic, the accounts in the *Critique of Judgment* tend to emphasize exactly the confounding of active and passive that is so disruptive to canonically male forms of consciousness.

A contrasting analogy might be useful: the fact of relatively sedentary men watching the activities of physically powerful men (who are frequently characterized as embodiments of quasi-natural forces)—moreover watching these activities from a position of safety—remains central to the masculine side of American bourgeois, petit bourgeois, and working-class culture. Let us even suppose that there is a certain continuity between the eighteenth-century concern with the masculine or the paternal sublime and the relation of many American men to football, boxing, racing cars, and various items of lethal weaponry. Putting moral and political questions aside for the moment, what is missing from the modern versions of male spectatorship is precisely the Kantian shift toward an emphasis on the significance of the spectator's judgment. Of course, various claims are made about the spiritual benefits of loyalty to particular teams or particular cars. And there are beer commercials promoting a sense of masculine camaraderie that is linked to sports and is, apparently, otherwise unavailable to American men.[18] In my experience, however, no theorist sympathetic to the modern male spectator has gone so far as to claim that the true sublimity of football is to be sought in "the mind of the judging subject." But this is roughly what Kant does claim about the sublime, or at least about the ultimate point or destination of the experience of the sublime.[19]

Someone might wish to respond by suggesting that the Kantian shift is different only by a degree of emphasis. The modern celebrations of (male) spectatorship stop short of examining its inherent passivity (perhaps especially its passivity in relation to more active and more powerful men). Nevertheless

(so the argument might go) Kant is engaged in a related evasion; namely, that of converting the passive spectator into something ultimately more significant and even, in a sense, more active.

One need not deny that Kant was capable of exploiting his own account in an ideologically motivated fashion, as long as we bear in mind three further features in Kant's account of the spectator's situation. First, Kant's particular conversion of the spectator into something more than a spectator cannot occur without to some extent challenging the simplistic picture of the masculine-as-active (whether overtly or not). Second, the movement of conversion, as we shall see, leaves residual difficulties, both about the "preparation" required for such a conversion of the spectator and about his or her need of further expression. (I shall be arguing in the last section that Kant's description of the experience of the sublime at the very least leaves open the possibility that the experience remains in some sense incomplete until further mental activity and expression have occurred.) Third, the recovery of a mode of activity on the part of the judging subject is not primarily enacted as a successful "recuperation," in the poststructuralist sense of a compensation whose deficiencies are covered over by some further ideological mystification. The human imagination (and not just the male imagination) must renounce certain connections or identifications with nature in order to claim its heritage of sublimity and its consequent heightened capacity for moral action. Hence, to the extent that the self-definition of the eighteenth-century male depended on certain relations to nature (e.g., as an object of knowledge, conquest, domination, or technological mastery), this self-definition is at least partially undermined by Kant's critical philosophy. It is not just that the spectator of the sublime is the true home of the sublime, and that certain kinds of activity are not as sublime as men had thought. In Kant's account, every action and even every apparently great deed turns out to be passive, if it is not commanded by the moral law or encouraged by some relation to the free play of certain spontaneous activities of the mind.

One may attack these conceptions of morality and of beauty on other grounds. But one should not miss the tendency of these conceptions to subvert conventional eighteenth- (or twentieth-) century pictures of the masculine "activity" that lurks in Kant's idea of the sublimity of moral action. This idea of moral action as having to overcome false (and often masculine) pictures of what genuine activity amounts to is closely tied to the role of the sublime in his aesthetics.[20]

Sedgwick on the Sublime and the Untellable

Some of the criticisms that I have examined in the first part of this paper have shared a willingness to reduce the complexity of the relations between the subjects and the objects of aesthetic experience. Applied to Kant's aesthetics this seems to be especially ironic, since it is here that Kant took the greatest pains to reinstate the complexities and indeed the legitimacy of our subjective responses to nature. It would be unfortunate if this side of Kant's work were slighted or missed entirely in the general move to denounce the "rationalist" or "universalist" aspects of his vision of human freedom and its aesthetic requirements. This brings me to the second type of feminist critic and to the second part of my topic. Here we shall discover a feminist criticism that might render Kant's account at once more complex and more responsive to the various situations in which our feelings seek expression.[21]

Though the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick only infrequently addresses philosophical texts directly, I think her work is of great importance to current aesthetics. I want now to follow out some of her clues about the location of the sublime in relation to regions of the unspeakable and the unutterable. It is, of course, no secret that the experience of the sublime is bound up in certain issues of the limits of representation. It would certainly be worth exploring the relationship between the ways in which Kant characterizes the sublime as bound up in the "inadequacy of nature" to represent or to exhibit ideas of reason (124 [265]).[22] I shall use Sedgwick's analyses as a means of isolating a somewhat different sort of "unrepresentability" and a different sense of the inexpressibility of certain aspects of the experience of the sublime.

Crudely and provisionally, here is an account of one strand of Sedgwick's work: she focuses attention on the various rifts that may be created between the one who experiences the sublime and those other human beings who might otherwise have been the natural audience for her account of her experience. I follow Sedgwick in thinking that the very intensity of the experience of the sublime contains in it the wish to communicate that experience to others. Taken together, the intensity and the wish can generate a need for expression that is itself too intense for the normal channels of human expressiveness and of ordinary communication. One version of such blockage goes like this:[23] "The hunger for direct language" becomes greater than the wish to express any particular feeling. Indeed, in some cases, the need for expression itself becomes the content of the state of mind (and body) that is seeking expression. But this is very likely to make any specific expression all but impossible. The

experience of this need for expression abolishes—or appears to abolish—any place "outside" the subject, in which an audience for her feelings might exist. The very intensity of the need refuses to allow the kind of distance that ordinary human beings require, if they are to be the audience for our expressions of feeling. (Despite the renewed emphasis on the importance of sympathy and the "sharing" of experiences, we still do not possess much work on the social and epistemological conditions within which the "good listener" can exist.)

Now suppose we think of someone having such experiences, while living in the social situation of a middle-class woman in the first half of the nineteenth century. I am thinking here (not exhaustively) of an existence surrounded by the genteel encouragement to expand your capacities for self-expression and cultivation, but only so far; encouragement to speak your mind, but only on certain topics; encouragement to learn certain things about the life of the mind, but never to think of yourself as contributing to that life; encouragement to have certain delicate feelings, but never to exceed a certain point of decorum, never to display the wrong kind of intensity, and never to aspire to certain regions of exhilaration.

Suppose we add to this sphere of an all-too-discouraging encouragement (sometimes politely called the "socialization" of women), an intimation of someone who possesses what Virginia Woolf called "the heat and violence of a poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body."[24] This seems a likely formula for producing the kind of freighted and desperate explorations and experiments in expression that Sedgwick is investigating. And indeed in one direction, the sense of suffocation that is produced by the failure of so intense a drive to expression lends itself to the imagery of the Gothic, with its live burials and other uncanny terms of isolation. (Sedgwick has been justly acclaimed for her efforts to understand the Gothic as something other than a projection of a merely "psychological" condition or as an episode of taste possessing merely historical interest.) In another direction, this drive to expression—at once self-inhibited and self-sustaining—becomes embodied in radically new forms of poetry and fiction. Such writing transcends distinctions between Romantic and modern (and all the more so between the modern and the so-called postmodern). And such writing equally transcends distinctions between experimentation with artistic forms of expression and the experienced violence of an author's (or character's) efforts to create a kind of rift between her consciousness and ours.[25]

For Sedgwick, it is the creation or invention of such rifts that are among the most aesthetically shocking and humanly violent accomplishments of Brontë and Dickinson. Indeed, on her account, these rifts are the means by which these writers unleash their capacity for a genuine sublime of art—or, as she puts it, they manage to free up the "impersonal authorial energy of the true sublime."[26] Kant says very little about the sublime of art, hardly more than that such a sublime must be "confined to the conditions that [art] must meet in order to be in harmony with nature" (sect. 23, p. 98 [245]).[27] Sedgwick's account provides one way of thinking about one of the most persistent issues concerning the Kantian sublime within the realm of art. For it can seem as if the audience of an artwork is, generally speaking, *too* safe to be subjected to the alternation of terror and attraction that is required for the sublime experience to take place. In Sedgwick's account, Brontë creates a rift between audience and narrator, far greater than the merely conventional distance between novel and reader. She then provides the means by which this distance can be all the more vividly and painfully apprehended, if not quite entirely overcome.

Such discoveries about the relation of the formal means of artistic expression to the narrow circumstances in which a human existence must seek expression are often described as some combination of the "psychological" and the "formal." But such descriptions are inclined to miss both the intensity and the confusion of the intersection between these realms, and the realms themselves are anything but clearly understood. Such descriptions also miss the ways in which such intersections of the formal and the psychological are not merely the special concern of a certain individual called perhaps "a writer" (or called perhaps, from another angle, a "madwoman in the attic.")[28] These intersections and these perplexities are representative of perplexities in us, which we may only rarely find the resources and the willingness to fathom.

Some Implications of Sedgwick's Account for the Kantian Sublime

Sedgwick's account seems to me to have implications beyond the terms that it proposes for itself and its subjects. It helps our understanding of the sublime and of other intensities in human experience. It points to an ordinarily less visible edge of our need for expression. And it gives us a chance to think about the circumstances that form the obstacles as well as the means for both human and artistic expression. I would like to open up a few further lines of

communication between her work and the work of philosophers concerned with aesthetics.

As I suggested at the beginning, Sedgwick teaches us to pay attention to the aftermaths of our experience as well as to its prerequisites. More exactly, she teaches us to think about the connection between "having" certain experiences and being able—and being allowed—to express them and to talk about them in an appropriately receptive setting. As we have seen, Kant suggests that a certain "culture" is a necessary "preparation" for experiencing the sublime (sect. 29, p. 124 [265]). Sedgwick's account suggests that certain human beings in the grip of their experience of sublimity will also experience a need for expression that, for various reasons, is likely to go unmet. One may lack the empirical company that permits such expressions, or one may feel that the possibility of expression is lacking, or one may even come to speak (or write) and act in ways that undermine that possibility. Under those circumstances, the experience of the sublime will be modified or even deformed. These modified versions of the sublime can be cognitively and aesthetically revealing, and they can be the spur to a fantastic artistic inventiveness (though these advances are likely to contain significant human costs).

I would like to go a little further and describe the possibility of communication or expression as in a certain sense the completion of the experience of the sublime, as Kant describes a certain kind of education as the appropriate preparation for this experience. I recognize that there is an asymmetry in this formulation that renders it unclear and somewhat paradoxical. It is as if I am trying to describe as a prerequisite of the experience a possibility that occurs only after "the experience itself" has already taken place. Some of the air of paradox might vanish if we could get a more adequate picture of what I have been calling "the experience of the sublime." Already in Kant's account, it is notoriously difficult to separate the act of judgment from the experience of aesthetic pleasure, and this difficulty makes it hard to characterize the temporal "feel" of a Kantian aesthetic pleasure.[29] In any event, the experience of the sublime will certainly be hard to describe on any model that takes the flow of experience to be, so to speak, one-directional. In fact, Kant's sublime should be problematic for those empiricist accounts that see the subject as the passive recipient of experiences from the "outside," as well as for those more recent accounts that see the subject as constructing its experiences (and its own selfhood) from the materials provided by an essentially passive world. To think of the communication of an experience as a kind of completion of the experience will entail further modifications of our sense of what an experience is. But I think that these modifications and disruptions will turn out to be continuous with those entailed by Kant's account. My sense that the experience of the sublime requires a kind of completion as well as a preparation is still largely on the level of an intuition. But I can at least say a little more about how we might work with this intuition.

The claim that the various expressive aftermaths of the experience of the sublime are to be conceived as part of that experience is not intended as an empirical prediction about how people will in fact experience the sublime. Nor is it intended as an invitation to reclassify certain experiences as, for instance, not really of the sublime but merely somehow marginally related to the sublime. It is intended rather to provide a kind of perspective on a whole range of experiences and of the associated possibilities and impossibilities of communication and expression. The perspective can only be shown to have validity by the critical and philosophical work that it enables. The range is intended, for instance, to include the work of the writers that Sedgwick has discussed. But it is also intended to include the work of writers who are otherwise as different as, for instance, Sylvia Plath, Toni Morrison, and Samuel Beckett. Since I cannot prove the relevance either of my intuition or of the perspective that I would like to develop out of this intuition, I shall try at least to exemplify its importance in relation to a few other aspects of the sublime.

If the possibility of expressing the sublime is as integral a part of the experience as I am taking it to be, then I suspect that its effects will be wide-ranging. This is because, whatever one's external possibilities of communication and expression may be—whatever empirical aesthetic company one keeps—there are *already* reasons internal to the experience of the sublime that make this experience hard to express. Two of the reasons were mentioned at the beginning, and I shall now conclude this essay by articulating some features of these "internal" obstacles to the expression of the sublime and on their possible connection to the (comparatively) external difficulties of expression that we have been considering.

First, there is a kind of uncertainty or oscillation about the location of (the experience of) the sublime. (This uncertainty is related to what I characterized earlier as an "undermining" of the conventional masculinity of the sublime.) Our experience of the sublime has two poles, one of them pointing toward natural objects (or events) and one of them pointing toward a heightened activity within the mind of the judging subject. I am suggesting that it is a significant feature of the sublime, and of the judgment or experience of sublimity, that we are not always able to locate its characteristic heightening of our feelings. We may, as Kant insists, seek the sublime most "properly"—

most appropriately—in the "judging subject." But, as Paul Guyer has convincingly demonstrated, we cannot dispense with the natural object that provokes or instigates the sublime.[30]

Thus our analysis of the sublime may set up a relatively stable model: first, we are aware of the natural object or event that provokes our experience of the sublime, and then comes the recognition that the true or authentic sublimity resides in us. At any given moment, however, our experience of the sublime may very well be in transition from one pole of the experience to the other. It seems to me that the analysis of the sublime (as anchored in the judging subject but still occasioned by something in nature) can enable self-perceptions that end up by becoming part of the experience itself. If I seek the sublime in my own mind, considered as a judging subject, surely this is not merely a piece of analysis that I can keep at arm's length from my experience of the sublime. This perception and this seeking become part of my experience of the sublime that provoked them. And this effort to understand my self as contributing to the sublimity of the experience will enter into the difficulties of expressing that experience. (These difficulties seem to me analagous to the difficulties confronting Lucy Snowe in Sedgwick's account.)

Second, aesthetic judgment, though invariably characterized by Kant as containing a transcendental principle or moment, also apparently contains the material for various empirical employments. In section 41, Kant describes a possible use for the judgment of taste as furthering our ability to "communicate our feeling to everyone else," hence as furthering the satisfaction of what he calls a "natural inclination." Kant is clearly aware of the need and the wish to communicate our feelings. He discusses it under the heading of "the empirical interest in the beautiful" and he characterizes it as "something that everyone's natural inclination demands" (p. 163 [297]). Moreover, he connects this need to our "fitness and propensity" for society, or what he calls "sociability" (163 [296]). Kant never explicitly discusses this sort of empirical interest as explicitly occasioned by the sublime. But he does isolate what he characterizes as the common, "natural inclination" to communicate our feeling to everyone else. There is no obvious reason why this should not apply to our feeling for the sublime.[31]

What kind of aesthetic and personal costs would there be for human beings trapped in circumstances that denied any likelihood of fulfillment to such natural human inclinations? Kant is pretty explicit about our relation to beauty in a state of isolation:

> Someone abandoned on some desolate island would not, just for himself, adorn either his hut or himself; nor would he look for flowers, let alone grow them, to adorn himself with them. Only in society does it occur to him to be, not merely a human being, but one who is refined in his own way [*nicht bloß Mensch, sondern auch nach seiner Art feiner Mensch zu sein*]. (This is the beginning of civilization.) For we judge someone refined if he has the inclination and the skill to communicate his pleasure to others, and if he is not satisfied with an object unless he can feel his liking for it in community with others. (p. 164 [297])

It looks as though Kant is suggesting that, although the judgment of beauty might exist in some rudimentary form in a state of isolation, human beings would do nothing to cultivate it—or, indeed, to cultivate themselves. On Kant's account, isolation seems to prevent us not so much from *having* the capacities for beauty or for human expression but from *caring* about those capacities. There is more than a hint that such capacities can continue to exist only by being developed. And without at least the presence of the possibility of the accord of other human beings, no one would care enough to develop those capacities within himself or herself.

Now it seems to me that if there were an empirical interest in communicating our sense of the sublime, the stakes would be at least as high. Instead of thinking of someone abandoned on some actual, desert island, let us think of someone like Lucy Snowe. Sedgwick's account of *Villette* teaches us, among other things, that the desolation *within* society has its greatest effect on us not only at the moment of greatest deprivation but often at the moment when it looks as if rescue—or company—might actually be at hand. On Kant's account, isolation seems to prevent us from caring about beautiful adornments or other refinements of human expression; on Sedgwick's account, the experience of the sublime may itself prove isolating. And it is likely to make us care so much about the possibility of human expression that we are swamped by the specific occasions in which the possibility is uncertainly realized.

Moreover, under the conditions of an isolation that cannot be known to be permanent and irremediable—which might provide a kind of relief—the pain and perplexity of the sublime would become acute. Under such conditions, who can afford the knowledge of the sublime? Who could survive its promise of community and communication, in the midst of an isolation whose sources cannot be traced either to society's exclusions of you or to your withdrawal from society?

Kant may have wished to claim that our access to a transcendental ground for such judgments is sufficient to sustain us in our continuing aesthetic

education and practices (as he would certainly wish to claim that it was enough to legitimize our judgments of the beautiful and the sublime). But would he have been right about this? Is it quite human to think that we can live on so slim a promise of future accord and community, surrounded by the disappointments and even disasters of our actual efforts at communication? At such a moment, we may wish to turn to another writer whose version of the sublime is rendered thematic in Sedgwick's account:[32]

> The soul's Superior instants
> Occur to her—alone—
> When friend—and Earth's occasion
> Have infinite withdrawn—
>
> Or She—Herself—ascended
> To too remote a Height
> For lower Recognition
> Than her Omnipotent—

This is indeed a version of a sublime past "Earth's occasion," which is also, to say the least, beyond any specific interest in some piece of nature, which might have occasioned the experience of the soul's "height." Dickinson is not merely finding some outer "correlative" for an inner feeling of elevation. Her poem charts a geography that transcends our capacity to recognize anything spatial. And the poem takes its speaker beyond anything other than the soul's autonomous power over herself. (I must at least mention Dickinson's hint that this autonomy is all but identical to the soul's capacity to recognize herself, dispensing with intermediaries.) Here is the Kantian sublime, without the instigation of nature—but also without much possibility of being communicated to an audience. To congratulate Dickinson on achieving these heights would be beside the point, and not merely because she wouldn't be listening. The harder question to ask is, Where are we located when we attempt to recognize her achievement? Or, in the words of the epigraph from Wallace Stevens, How do we stand to behold her sublime?

These questions may seem to end up taking us beyond the realm of aesthetics and into questions about what sustains us, in the press of our own circumstances and in the knowledge that our capacities for creative withdrawal are somewhat less than those of Emily Dickinson, Charlotte Brontë, or, for that matter, Immanuel Kant. But I hope to have suggested that such questioning at least begins in a region that admits of systematic study. Moreover, this region ought to be of interest to those who are looking for connections between eighteenth-century aesthetics and the broader issues of isolation and expression, as these issues have been formulated by a feminist criticism.

Notes

1. *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Methuen Press, 1986), 138. For their encouragement and for their suggestions about earlier versions of this essay, I want to thank Mary Devereaux, Karen Hanson, Christine Korsgaard, Paul Mattick, Barbara Packer, Eve Sedgwick, Garrett Stewart, Kathleen Whalen, and Joshua Wilner. My work on this material was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

2. See Paul Mattick, Jr., "Beautiful and Sublime: 'Gender Totemism' in the Constitution of Art," Chapter 1, this volume. Some of my thoughts about these topics were presented as a response to a shorter version of Mattick's paper, which was delivered at a panel on feminist aesthetics at the 1988 meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics. See also my "Engendering Aesthetics: Sublimity, Sublimation, and Misogyny in Burke and Kant," in *Aesthetics, Politics, and Hermeneutics,* ed. Gerald Bruns and Stephen Watson (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming). Gary Shapiro and Martha Woodmansee encouraged my first tenative efforts to present the core of this material at the 1988 meeting of the International Association for Philosphy and Literature. Robin Schott's *Cognition and Eros: A Critique of the Kantian Paradigm* (Boston: Beacon, 1988) presents many of the fundamental moves of this sort of critique, most often in their Frankfort variations. Mary Wiseman and Barbara Freeman supplied suggestions and encouragement.

3. See especially Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions.* Thanks to Sedgwick, I was able to consult an early unpublished essay entitled "Emily Dickinson's Sublime" and a typescript of her *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990). Also relevant is her *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire.* See also Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). Hertz's work shares a region of concern and procedure with Sedgwick's. Moreover, since Hertz explicitly addresses Kant's *Critique of Judgment,* his work has more than once provided me with a bridge between the language of Kant's analyses and the characteristic sublimities of Romanticism. On the specific questions of gender and sublimity see Hertz, *End,* chapter 5 and the afterword; and Joshua Wilner, "The Stewed Muse of Prose," *Modern Language Notes* 104 (1989): 1085–98. Wilner and Sedgwick both implicitly characterize De Quincey (and behind him Coleridge) as a place where the concerns of German idealism could have been thematically transmitted to a writer like Charlotte Brontë. See also Naomi Schor's *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987) and Frances Ferguson's *Solitude and the Sublime: The Aesthetics of Individualism* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

4. This is also a period in which writing became conceivable as a socially acceptable and economically feasible activity. See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* [1929] (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1957), 68: "The extreme activity of mind which showed itself in the later eighteenth century among women . . . was founded on the solid fact that women could make money by writing. Money dignifies what is frivolous if unpaid for. . . . [A] change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle class woman began to write." Woolf goes

on to link *Villette* and *Middlemarch,* among others, to the existence of these eighteenth-century "forerunners." This period is, of course, in many ways not over.

5. In his pre-critical *Observations Concerning the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* [1757], trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960).

6. See Joseph Addison, *The Spectator,* 23 June 1712, reprinted in *The Spectator in Four Volumes,* ed. Gregory Smith (New York: Dutton, Everyman's Library, 1907; reset, 1945; repr. 1973), 279ff.

7. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Beautiful and the Sublime* ed. J. T. Bolton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), sect. 17, pp. 50–51. The double movement of the mind in Burke's version of the sublime (outward to the seriousness and danger of the occasion, inward to a kind of self-aggrandizement) is very close to a kind of imaginative bad faith or duplicity. This may well be one of the reasons why Burke's version of the sublime has been so appealing to contemporary literary theoreticians, since the doubleness or duplicity of the sublime has been taken by some literary critics to illuminate the intricate evasions at the heart of a literary imagination.

8. See *Critique of Judgment,* trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 125–26 [266 in the Academy edition; *Gesammelte Schriften,* 29 vols. (Berlin: Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1900–1985)].

9. This is a somewhat controversial reading. In particular, I have stabilized a distinction between *die Erhabene* (the sublime), "which resides in the judging subject" and *die Erhabenheit,* which is how we experience the elevation of our autonomously practical reason. There is thus a double transition, from the so-called sublime in nature to the authentic, internal sublime response, the capacity for which in turn points toward the true sublimity of our moral destiny. So far as I know, these terminological possibilities have not been exploited in the literature. And there are occasions in which Kant does not abide by the neatness of the distinction between "the elevating" (the aesthetic sublime) and the "elevated" (the sublimity of our moral autonomy, which is revealed by the aesthetic sublime), the inner destiny of human beings. I discuss these issues at greater length in the larger project to which this essay belongs.

10. Indeed, it is one of the ironies of our recent philosophical history that the critique of sublime seems to have reemerged as a theme almost as early as the renewed interest in the sublime itself. Prior to the 1980s, there seems to have been little philosophical interest in the sublime, at least for several decades. We have to go back four or five decades to find much mention in Anglo-American circles of the importance of the sublime in eighteenth-century aesthetics. To my mind, at least, a significant by-product of the feminist critique of the sublime has been to make its topics and its conceptual territory more available for study. Such a consequence is not unique to this part of our cultural and philosophical history and I believe it constitutes a major confirmation of the value and fruitfulness of feminist critique and investigation.

11. One of the first thinkers to diagnose this pattern seems to have been Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). See, for instance, the passages reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women,* ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York: Norton, 1985), 142–43 and passim.

12. Trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960). One quotation may serve to indicate the flavor of the chapter: "The virtue of a woman is a beautiful virtue. That of the male sex should be a noble virtue. Women will avoid the wicked not because it is unright, but because it is ugly; and virtuous actions mean to them such as are morally beautiful. Nothing of duty, nothing of compulsion, nothing of obligation! Woman is intolerant of all commands and all morose constraint" (81). Though paternalistic, this is not an entirely negative thing to say. It would be interesting to compare such thoughts to the work of Carol Gilligan, Nell Noddings, and other writers who present gender-based contrasts between ethical sensibilities. It would also be interesting to compare Kant's pre-critical thoughts on these matters with the development of his moral thought in the Third Critique and in later work. Paul Guyer has pointed out to me the existence of a Schillerian strain in Kant's later work, a strain that conceives of a greater role for feeling in the moral life. We might conceive of this line of thought as partially anticipated in distorted form in some of Kant's paternalistic reflections on women.

13. Apart from various feminist critiques of the idea of universality or "disinterestedness" in ethics or aesthetics, Terry Eagleton and Pierre Bourdieu have argued for what they take to be the class origins of the very idea of taste. Most such accounts seem to be working with a very crude and un-Kantian notion of "disinterestedness." Specifically, they seem to underrate the significance of the fact that part of Kant's contrast is between my disinterest in the object—conceived as my capacity to make something of the representation of the object "within myself"—and my interest in the object conceived as "the respect in which I depend on the object's existence" (46 [205]). Nothing much is clear about this distinction. And, beyond the usual Kantian obscurity about the object and its representations, what seems especially unclear is the supposed connection between this aspect of "disinterestedness" and any ordinary sense of impartiality—a connection that Kant and his critics seem to be equally convinced of.

14. In my experience, the most convincing recent accounts suggest that the sublime occurs in the first instance not as masculine power *tout court* but as paternal power. That is what makes the experience of the sublime so suitable a successor to the experience of God's power and anger. See especially Hertz, *End,* chaps. 1 and 3. Teresa de Lauretis remarked upon a related set of theoretical issues about conceptualizing power in a seminar conducted at the School of Criticism and Theory, held in Hanover, New Hampshire, July 1991. These issues go beyond the scope of this essay.

15. This is not to deny that traces of the pre-critical views survive in the Third Critique. But I remain, to say the least, unconvinced by the effort to reduce the force of the Third Critque to the impact of a few passages (such as the oft-cited passage about the sublimity of the warrior).

16. See Mattick, "Beautiful and Sublime," for extensive identifications of such masculinist language and inclination. See also my "Engendering Aesthetics," 7–9, for a depiction of Burke's slide into a specifically male vantage point on the objects of aesthetic experience.

17. Kant, of course, insists on the connection between the sublime or "the elevated" (*das Erhabene*) and the subject's corresponding "elevation." In sect. 28, p. 121 [262], he suggests that nature is called sublime *because* it elevates (*erhebt*) the imagination.

18. On the other hand, there are advertisements for jeans and cars that suggest that such camaraderie is more or less overtly linked to social class and taste.

19. Kant is often attacked for making too much of the spectator's relation to the arts. Nietzsche goes so far as to accuse him of "unconsciously introduc[ing] the spectator into the concept 'beautiful' " (*Genealogy of Morals,* Third Essay, sect. 6). This accusation becomes part of Nietzsche's larger accusation that Kant has "emasculated" and "effeminized" aesthetics, in part by the very notion of disinterestedness. However partial a criticism this remark turns out to be in relation to the beautiful, Nietzsche here at least seems to be quite indifferent to Kant's entire discussion of the sublime. There is nothing "unconscious" about the way Kant characterizes the spectator's mind ("the judging subject") as the ultimate location of the sublime. Kathleen Whalen has reminded me that some of Ted Cohen's essays on baseball constitute an aesthetics of spectatorship possessing at least a quasi-Kantian emphasis. Cohen's analyses, however, do not emphasize the spectator at the expense of the activity and, accordingly, they seem more attuned to the beauties of a sport, conceived as a kind of "symbol" of the possibilities of human freedom.

20. On heteronomy as passivity, see *Foundations of the Metaphysic of Morals,* trans. L. W. Beck (New York: Bobbs-Merril, 1959) 77 and *CJ,* sect. 40. On the relation of sublimity and morality, see the conclusion to the Second Critique concerning the starry heavens and the moral law. But the idea of moral awakening as a sublime moment runs throughout the book, especially

in the discussion of the moral incentive. I am indebted to Christine Korsgaard for a timely reminder about this connection. The role of false pictures of the active and the passive in philosophical and literary accounts of freedom and of originality is a central topic of my forthcoming book on Kant's aesthetics and its Romantic and Gothic aftermaths.

21. Those who have been most fruitfully influenced by poststructuralist thought are often excessively casual about the details of philosophical arguments and texts. For instance, Naomi Schor's otherwise fascinating book *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* begins by dismissing the entire issue of what she calls "methodology": "[A]ll literary methodologies, all critical theories and histories of critical theory serve to validate idiosyncratic relationships to the text. Unless the poetician or hermeneut be mad, however, the laws she abstracts from her personal storehouse of myths and the interpretations she translates from the hieroglyphs of her unconscious will encounter in other readers recognition and response" (6–7).

22. The sublime is also bound up with "the inadequacy of the imagination" for representing or exhibiting ideas, for example, the idea of certain wholes (109 [252]). Jean-François Lyotard has put forward an extended idea of the sublime as involved in a much wider range of efforts to represent the unrepresentable; see his *Peregrinations; Law, Form, and Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 40–43 and passim. In response to this genre of analysis, Paul Guyer has reminded us that, although the sublime involves something that cannot be represented, we are nevertheless capable of saying quite clearly and quite precisely what it is that cannot be represented; see his *Kant and The Experience of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). This essay is exploring the sublime not so much as an experience of what cannot be represented, but the sublime as an experience that is hard to represent or express—hard, that is, for the one that is having it. Lyotard and other theorists have tended to assimilate all of these dimensions to the single dimension of "an experience of unrepresentability."

23. This account refers in part to the passage quoted in the second epigraph to this essay.

24. Virginia Woolf, *Room,* 50. This phrase is part of her imagining the figure she calls "Shakespeare's sister." In the light of Sedgwick's work, we should consider Woolf's later comments about Jane Austen and the Brontës, 77–78.

25. I am here primarily summarizing her analysis of Lucy Snowe, the narrating character of *Villette.* Part of Sedgwick's complex and powerful reading—which needs to be studied in detail—is centered on Lucy's capacity for a sometimes willful silence and the connection of this capacity to Brontë's ability to present her own various versions of the sublime.

26. *Gothic Conventions,* 153.

27. This subordination of the sublime of art to the sublime of nature has been sometimes reported as if Kant thought that art was incapable of the sublime.

28. See Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). The title signifies a particular historical way of conceiving the fate of women writers, of female creativity, and indeed of feminine sensibility, held in certain kinds of "domestic" confinement, especially in the nineteenth century.

29. Indeed, perhaps some of the difficulties in determining the precedence of "feeling" and "judgment" in Kant's account might diminish if we had a greater appreciation of the difficulties in expressing either the judgment or the feeling in all their temporal and "phenomenological" complexity. Much of the oddness of Schiller's procedures to Anglo-American ears may stem from his presupposing a temporal or developmental complexity of human experiences that sounds to us like the merest of psychological guesswork.

30. Paul Guyer, "Kant's Distinction Between the Beautiful and the Sublime," *Review of Metaphysics* 35 (1982): 753–83.

31. Here is a possible reason: Kant thought that experiencing the sublime requires a "greater culture" of the cognitive faculties (and especially of reason); therefore the experience of the sublime is rarer than the experience of the beautiful (sect. 29, p. 124 [264]). Accordingly, Kant

may also have thought that we have less inclination to communicate this experience, since we might reasonably conclude that the possible audience for our expressions of the sublime is more restricted.

But Kant's suggestion about the relative rarity of the experience of the sublime may be false. And even if the experience is rare, the lesson I am imputing to him may not be the lesson we are inclined to draw: our stake in wishing to communicate the sublime might well be increased by our sense of its rarity.

32. See *Gothic Conventions,* 131–36. The poem, which is quoted here in full, may be found in *The Complete Works of Emily Dickinson,* ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), no. 306.