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The sublime is a nameless and mercurial event… Scholars have only begun to graze the surface of its history, which remains to be written and is truly inexhaustible.¹

Published in 1674 as a preface to the poem’s second edition, Andrew Marvell’s ‘On Mr. Milton’s Paradise Lost’ attempts to give voice to his experience of reading Milton’s epic of the biblical Fall. Marvell expresses initial reservations, casting doubt in turn upon the integrity of Milton’s motivation, his ability to achieve his artistic aim, and the effects of the epic on other writers. But these fears suddenly subside and Marvell begs pardon:

That majesty which through thy work doth reign
Draws the devout, deterring the profane.
And things divine thou trestest of in such state
As them preserves, and thee, inviolate.
At once delight and horror on us seize,
Thou singest with so much gravity and ease;
And above human flight dost soar aloft
With plume so strong, so equal, and so soft.
The bird named from that Paradise you sing
So never flags, but always keeps on wing.

‘On Mr. Milton’s Paradise Lost’ 31–40

For Marvell, Milton’s poem is a thing of amazement. Moreover, as David Sedley has shown, this amazement is intimately bound up with Marvell’s earlier uncertainties.² It seems beyond belief that within his ‘slender book’ Milton could really accomplish his ‘vast design’ (2), encompassing ‘Heaven, hell, earth, chaos, all’ (5). The startling ambition of the project renders its success at best hypothetical (‘if a work so infinite he spanned’, 17),

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suspending the blind poet precariously over the void of failure. Yet, in a flash, Marvell’s anxieties transmute into the realisation that Milton truly has scaled the poetic heights at which he aimed, indeed that, surmounting them, he ‘soar[s] aloft’. ‘Where couldst thou words of such a compass find? / Whence furnish such a vast expense of mind?’ (41–2). Marvell asks, the rhetorical questions at once replaying the reservations of the poem’s first thirty lines and redirecting them: he no longer doubts Milton’s powers but instead confesses himself unable to comprehend their source. Previously fearful that with his epic Milton would ‘ruin...th’ sacred truths’ (7–8), ‘The world o’erwhelming to revenge his sight’ (10), Marvell now acknowledges that Milton has preserved ‘inviolate’ the ‘things divine’ (33–4), the prophetic power of his verse a God-given recompense for his loss of sight (43–4). Similarly, the movement of Marvell’s poem suggests, where at first Marvell’s doubts rendered him metaphorically blind, Paradise Lost has now so overwhelmed his vision that, paradoxically, he is able to recognise, if not to explain, its true ‘majesty’ (31). And this majesty, as Marvell declares in his final couplet, is the sublime. Flying beyond the known frontiers of artistic achievement, Milton’s epic exceeds all bounds of thought and expectation, dispensing (unlike Marvell’s own lines) even with the conventions of poetic form: ‘Thy verse created like thy theme sublime, / In number, weight, and measure, needs not rhyme’ (53–4). Thus Marvell identifies Paradise Lost with the aesthetic category for which the poem would within a hundred years have become a byword.3

This is a book about the Roman poet Lucan and about the workings of the sublime in his epic on the collapse of the Roman Republic, Bellum civile, written some sixteen hundred years before Paradise Lost. I begin, however, with Marvell’s encomium as a uniquely powerful expression of the experience of the sublime, and as a model for the kind of response that poetry of the sublime can engender. In particular, ‘On Mr. Milton’s Paradise Lost’ prompts several observations about sublimity – and about certain conceptual confusions or elisions to which the sublime often gives

3 E.g. Burke (1990) 55, 57, 73–4, 159; see Moore (1990) and the bibliography in Sedley (2005) 171, n. 1.
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rise – that should be kept firmly in mind during any discussion of the concept and that I want briefly to emphasise here at the outset.

First, Marvell’s poem reminds us that, contrary perhaps to common popular usage, ‘sublimity’ means more than mere ‘greatness’ or ‘excellence’ and cannot simply be understood as a synonym for such terms. It is, rather, a distinct and peculiar form of ineffability, a greatness to be sure but one that, because beyond ordinary comprehension, is also paradoxically rooted in the intangible and shadowed by a sense of erasure. As ‘On Mr. Milton’s Paradise Lost’ reveals, it is the connection between the majesty of Milton’s poem, defying all understanding, and his initial misgivings about the epic’s success that enables Marvell to realise its sublimity. It will be one of this book’s tasks to tease out further this strange dynamic.

Marvell’s poem also demonstrates that sublimity functions not only as an objective attribute of things but also as a particular kind of experience, inspired by an encounter between the sublime object and the perceiving subject. It is Milton’s poem that Marvell labels sublime but the ‘delight and horror’ inspired by this sublimity are experienced by Marvell himself. In fact, the situation is more complicated than this, for alongside his readers, anticipating and reflecting their experience, Milton also experiences sublimity, ‘soaring aloft’ ‘above human flight’ in his poetic response to ‘things divine’. We are thus presented with a movement of transference as the sublimity of Milton’s theme inspires him with sublimity, which is in turn expressed in his poem and then transports Marvell into the sublime. Accordingly, we need to exercise care when analysing the sublime to identify its precise location, while at the same time remaining alive to the difficulties of fixing sublimity within either subject or object.

Taken as an object of experience, Milton’s poem is itself for Marvell something sublime. But Paradise Lost also represents subjective experiences of the sublime within its own narrative: in Book 1, for instance, we see Satan, ‘thunderstruck and astonished’, cast out of heaven and rolling in the fiery chaos of hell, but then he rallies, rousing his fallen legions; in Book 6, Michael

4 Milton (2007) i.56.
and the angels, momentarily confounded by Satan’s war engines, swiftly regain the initiative, endangering heaven itself as they hurl uprooted mountains at the suddenly terrified rebels. Such instances contribute to the perception of *Paradise Lost* as a sublime object, while also modelling both the sublimity that Marvell attributes to Milton’s experience as a poet and the sublimity of Marvell’s own readerly response. For analytical purposes, however, it helps to distinguish the sublimity of a work of art from that work’s representations of sublimity. As we will see, the latter may be configured in ways that do not straightforwardly account for the sublimity of the work itself. (Indeed, although the *Bellum Civile* is not such a case, it is worth bearing in mind that sublime experience may plausibly be represented within a work of art without that work itself attaining, or even aspiring to, sublimity.)

**Retrospective: modern experiences of the sublime**

While in large part the history of the sublime indeed remains to be written, its development in the three hundred or so years since the appearance of *Paradise Lost* has been well charted and, before we can turn our attention to Lucan, requires some introduction. Marvell experienced the sublime as a response to a work of verbal art but sublimity, we will see, has been felt to arise in relation to a wide range of objects and as a consequence of a variety of situations. A comprehensive account of these many instantiations is not feasible here. It is possible, however, and helpful, to highlight some examples.

Sublimity attained what is usually considered its greatest cultural prominence (in Western Europe, at least) in the long eighteenth century. During this period sublimity came to be understood in particular as a property and consequence of huge or powerful phenomena in the natural world: storms, earthquakes, volcanoes, great waterfalls, and especially mountains. The discovery of and attraction to the sublimity of the earth’s splendours and terrors constitutes a substantial shift from earlier sensibilities – Marvell

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5 See, for example, the useful overviews provided by Kirwan (2005) and Shaw (2006).
regarded mountains, which with their ‘hook-shoulder’d height / The Earth deform and Heaven fright’, as an ‘excrecence ill design’d’—but was a development that proved long-lasting. In his *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, written between 1680 and 1689, Thomas Burnet gives an early example of the new vogue: observing that ‘the greatest Objects of Nature are...the most pleasing to behold’, he lists ‘the Mountains of the Earth’ as a source of inspiration next only to ‘the Great Concave of the Heavens, and those boundless Regions where the Stars inhabit’:

There is something august and stately in the Air of these things, that inspires the Mind with great Thoughts and Passions; we do naturally, upon such Occasions, think of God and his Greatness: And whatsoever hath but the Shadow and Appearance of the INFINITE, as all Things have that are too big for our Comprehension, they fill and overbear the Mind with their Excess, and cast it into a pleasing kind of Stupor and Admiration.⁷

Throughout the following hundred years, Burnet’s raptures were to be re-enacted repeatedly, with or without religious colouring, in the writings of John Dennis, Joseph Addison, Shaftesbury, John Baillie and the host of other eighteenth-century authors attracted by the sublime.⁸

The idea that the natural world formed a fit, indeed primary, trigger for experiences of sublimity reached an apogee in the poetry of the Romantics; their rhapsodies’ far-reaching influence ensures that sublimity continues to strike us today as an entirely ‘natural’ response to nature in its enormity. Wordsworth’s account of his crossing of the Alps in Book 6 of *The Prelude* (1805) is a locus classicus.⁹ Amid the peaks, the poet feels his ‘Imagination’ ‘lifting up itself’ (525); it grows into a ‘Power’ that ‘In all the might of its endowments, came / Athwart me’ (527–9) and he finds himself ‘lost as in a cloud’ (529), his physical and artistic progress ‘halted’ (530). But, turning suddenly, he manages to contain this incipient threat: ‘And now recovering, to my Soul I say / ’I recognise thy...
glory’ (531–2). Instead of overwhelming the poet, the power of his imagination unites his consciousness with the infinite: ‘in such visitings / Of awful promise, when the light of sense / Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us / The invisible world, doth Greatness make abode’ (533–6). Self-loss transmutes into the sublime.

We find the same dynamic expressed more simply in Wordsworth’s ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’ (1798):

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Wordsworth, ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’ 93–102

As Marvell is struck by ‘delight and horror’ on reading Paradise Lost, so Wordsworth finds himself strangely ‘disturb[ed]’ with ‘joy’ at nature’s magnificence, uplifted as he feels the ‘motion’ and ‘spirit’ through which his consciousness is joined with ‘all things’, his lines’ repeated connectives offering a verbal representation of this unifying thread.12

For all its prominence, however, Wordsworth’s ‘egotistical sublime’, as Keats called it, was not the only form of sublimity constructed by the Romantics, nor was nature’s grandeur sublimity’s only impetus during this period. The ruined monument, for instance, exerts a powerful attraction for Wordsworth’s contemporaries; our reading of such sites in terms of the elegiac conjunction of loss and splendour, the latter paradoxically arising out of the former, owes much to works such as Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ or

10 See further Weiskel (1976) 204 on ‘the positive and negative poles of the Romantic sublime’.
Keats’ ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’. ‘On seeing the Elgin Marbles’ (1817) sees Keats discovering in the fragments of the classical past a mirror for his own reflections upon mortality:

My spirit is too weak – mortality
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.
Yet ’tis a gentle luxury to weep
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep
Fresh for the opening of the morning’s eye.
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old time – with a billowy main –
A sun – a shadow of a magnitude.\(^13\)

Encountering an impasse evocative of that experienced by Wordsworth amid the Alps in *The Prelude* (‘each imagined pinnacle and steep / Of godlike hardship tells me I must die’, 3–4), the poet likens himself to ‘a sick eagle looking at the sky’ (5), the very antithesis of Marvell’s image of Miltonic flight. Yet the ensuing thought that he has ‘not the cloudy winds to keep / Fresh for the opening of the morning’s eye’ (7–8) becomes for the poet a source of ‘dim-conceived’ glory, alike to that ‘most dizzy pain’ induced by the Marbles, ‘That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude / Wasting of old time – with a billowy main – / A sun – a shadow of a magnitude’. The Marbles thus become for Keats a source of sublimity, their mingled majesty and decay inducing in him a strange sense of exaltation even as they reflect his life’s transience.\(^14\)

While the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw artistic engagements with the sublime at their most widespread (alongside the Romantic poets, we might think for instance in painting of Turner, John Martin and Caspar David Friedrich, in music of Wagner and Beethoven, in fiction of Horace Walpole and Anne Radcliffe)\(^15\) the twentieth century witnessed a dramatic shift in

\(^{13}\) Cited by Shaw (2006) 2–3.
\(^{14}\) On Keats and the sublime, see further Ende (1976).
\(^{15}\) See Kirwan (2005) 126–8.
the concept’s status, as the two world wars, the Holocaust and the obliteration of Hiroshima by the first atomic bomb undermined faith in the redemptive potential of the divine, the natural world or one’s own humanity and at the same time terrifyingly reinstated the sublime as a function of traumatic world historical events.\textsuperscript{16} The destruction of the World Trade Center in New York at the beginning of the twenty-first century reminded us that man’s capacity for spectacular violence persists, while technology’s onward march and the increasingly connected and mediated character of life in the internet’s global village, where the virtual and the real become indistinguishable and we never seem more than a mouse-click away from all the information, goods and inhabitants that the world contains, provide cues for further new manifestations of the sublime.\textsuperscript{17}

Hollywood and the ‘blockbuster’ movie offer one location in which responses to this modern sublime may be found, wherein the threat of war, terrorism or environmental catastrophe is staged as escapist entertainment, enhanced by the visual thrills of CGI and 3D, and thereby contained. Rather differently, critics often point to the work of Daniel Libeskind, the architect who designed Berlin’s Jewish Museum (opened in 2001) and who has also been involved in the plans for the reconstruction of the World Trade Center site in New York, for its focus upon the obstacles to representation posed by the events of recent history; in the case of the Jewish Museum, these obstacles – the permanent wounds caused by the Nazi genocide – appear literally as dead-end spaces and cut-up corridors.\textsuperscript{18} The sublime here comes to signify not communion with the infinite but a sense of radical alienation, of a trauma so overwhelming that it defies comprehension.

One of the most searching explorations of the sublime and its relations to the history of the last few decades is to be found in Don DeLillo’s magisterial novel \textit{Underworld} (1997). Its epic plot winds back and forth through the second half of America’s 20th century, a fragmented, apocalyptic katabasis that takes the reader from the

\textsuperscript{16} See e.g. Ray (2005). \textsuperscript{17} See e.g. Nye (1994); Mosco (2004).
\textsuperscript{18} Shaw (2006) 7. For a detailed discussion of the sublime dimensions of Libeskind’s Jewish Museum, and comparison with Peter Eisenman’s Holocaust Memorial, see Ball (2008) 73–86.
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Cuban Missile Crisis and the Soviet Union’s atomic weapons tests in Kazakhstan to the millennial world of cyberspace, in which human desire seems to demand ‘a method of production that will custom-cater to cultural and personal needs, not to cold war ideologies of massive uniformity’ yet in which, simultaneously,

the force of converging markets produces an instantaneous capital that shoots across horizons at the speed of light, making for a certain furtive sameness, a planing away of particulars that affects everything from architecture to leisure time to the way people eat and sleep and dream.19

With its sinuous, vaulting prose and global-historical concerns, the novel’s own dominant affect might well be said to be that of the sublime, but sublimity’s conditions of possibility, and the range of meanings that sublimity might bear, also emerge as one of DeLillo’s recurrent concerns. The explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger on 28 January 1986, for instance, prompts one character, a high-school science teacher, to speculate upon the disaster’s unsettling melding of human tragedy and aesthetic grandeur:

Space burial. He thought of the contrails on that blue day out over the ocean . . . – how the boosters sailed apart and hung the terrible letter Y in the still air. The vapor stayed intact for some time, the astronauts fallen to sea but also still up there, graved in frozen smoke, and he lay awake in the night and saw that deep Atlantic sky and thought this death was soaring and clean, an exalted thing, a passing of the troubled body into vapor and flame, out above the world, monogrammed, the Y of dying young.

He wasn’t sure people wanted to see this. Willing to see the systems failure and the human suffering. But the beauty, the high faith of space, how could such qualities be linked to death? Seven men and women. Their beauty and ours, revealed in a failed mission as we haven’t seen it in a hundred triumphs. Apotheosis. Yes they were god-statured, transformed in those swanny streaks into the only sort of gods he cared to acknowledge, poetic and fleeting.20

There are reflections here of the Keatsian feeling for immortality amid material destruction. Beneath this impulse, however, lies an awareness of the difficulty of attuning oneself to such a mode of perception. Can such terrible events give rise to the sublime, we wonder, and, if so, how?

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The question recurs at the very end of the novel. A young homeless girl is murdered in the Bronx and, in the nights following her death, her face is seen to appear on a billboard advertisement, a Turin Shroud for the consumer age, shining forth through the poster paper under the headlights of a passing train. Ecstatic crowds gather to witness this strange event, this miracle, growing bigger each night, seeking salvation, redemption, stirred by ‘the hope that grows when things surpass their limits’, until one day the advertisement is taken down, replaced by a white sheet bearing a telephone number and the words ‘Space Available’, and the girl’s face abruptly vanishes. But, as the public hysteria subsides, a thought continues to nag:

. . . what do you remember, finally, when everyone has gone home and the streets are empty of devotion and hope, swept by the river wind? Is the memory thin and bitter and does it shame you with its fundamental untruth – all nuance and wishful silhouette? Or does the power of transcendence linger, the sense of an event that violates natural forces, something holy that throbs on the hot horizon, the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt?

Can sublimity today still be sustained? Can it be understood as anything more than a cultural construct, ‘a sign’ to stand against our ‘doubt’? Can it bear even this much weight, or must it stand simply as an index of moral or epistemological bankruptcy, a ‘wishful silhouette’? We seem here to have moved a long way from sublimity as experienced by Burnet or Wordsworth. If previously the sublime operated for most as a fundamentally positive affect, working to affirm human selfhood in the light of the divine, to post-modern, disenchanted eyes it appears at best as a marker of the insecurity of our place in the world, as the mere trace of the implosion of humanity’s claims to greatness.

Yet we should also remember that this sense of uncertainty, disruption and loss has always been present within the sublime. ‘Doubt’ is precisely the attitude upon which Marvell’s realisation of the Miltonic sublime is built, while the impasse encountered by Wordsworth in the Alps provokes in the poet a dramatic crisis of identity. If in one sense contemporary articulations of the sublime such as DeLillo’s or Libeskind’s appear deconstructive, working