
Sublimity in Wordsworth and Smith

Romantic literature is deeply concerned with manifestations and attainment of the sublime. The notion itself asserts gender upon both subject and object, and pervades any attempt to gain historical knowledge. This fetishization of the sublime, however does not prevent the concept from being subverted consciously and unconsciously in the literature of the period. The poetic conceptualization of sublimity by William Wordsworth and Charlotte Smith has a fracturing effect on the constructed nature of gender, as well as the sublime itself.

Caught within the 'masculine-feminine' dialectic, the sublime is stereotypically conflated with 'male' characteristics. In a supposedly non-gendered paradigm, the sublime "...concerns the solitary individual...the more powerful feelings of terror or pain...[and] a sense of height or loftiness..."(Trott 72). In a more philosophical context "...Kant analyses...the sublime as a presentation of an indeterminate concept of reason"(Trott 73). Although these definitions may at first seem direct and simply denoting the signifier; they also reveal the underlying agenda of such distinctions. Rationality, reason and logic are all supposedly 'masculine' characteristics in the Romantic worldview, and therefore sublimity becomes associated with the male. Grappling with abstractions and feelings of intellectual terror become male tasks, and the female is relegated to purely concrete concerns.

To varying degrees, William Wordsworth's dealings with the sublime represent a stereotypically 'male' notion of this aesthetic construct. In *Tintern Abbey*, the sublime is something which the speaker had not been able to experience as a young man, one not schooled in rationality. His inability to appreciate or perceive this quality in nature is due to "The coarser pleasures of...boyish days,/And their glad animal movements..."(Wordsworth 73-74). Relating it to youth feminizes this lack of appreciation. His feverish enjoyment is discarded because of its lack of the 'masculine' trait of reason. Once the speaker learns to reason, the natural world becomes a template for abstraction and on it he places "A motion and a spirit, that impels/ All thinking things, all objects of thought..."(Wordsworth 100-101). In predictable fashion, the text creates an obviously 'masculine' figure to function as the sublime. This sublime "spirit" only affects the males of society and the matters with which males concern themselves. It is this aspect of sublimity that the speaker turns to "...in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din/ Of towns and cities/...In hours of weariness [for] sensations sweet,/ Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart..."(Wordsworth 25-28). When exhausted by the toils of urban life, the speaker ruminates on his encounters with the sublime, and these thoughts invigorate and restore his 'masculine' faculties. Of course, this leaves no space for a discourse concerning the femininity of the sublime because that would entail females possessing mental faculties which could perceive it. At a superficial level, Wordsworth's textual sublime would appear to encompass only what is

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'male' and 'masculine'.

Upon confronting this text beyond its explicit notions of sublimity, however, one finds that the genderedness of the sublime unravels. In the previous quotation, the speaker seeks solace in his memories of the sublime, yet when he does this he finds "...sensations sweet,/ Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart..."(Wordsworth 27-28). Such sensations would normally be associated with passion and effusive emotion, rather than rationality. The pleasure brought by the sublime is here 'feminine' in the Romantic paradigm. This is obviously contradictory as this piece of text also asserts the 'masculinity' of sublimity. The feminine continues to encroach upon the sublime within the text by allowing the speaker's sister to share in its knowledge. She is able to begin to experience it because the male speaker and his sister share "The mind that is within [them]..."(Wordsworth 126). This can be interpreted as either the male having a 'feminine' mind or vice versa. Either way, the concept of gender as an essential feature linked to physical reality is subverted. Also at work, is the availability of the sublime to the female. The text decenters itself and its idea of the sublime to the greatest to degree by the speaker declaring "...Nature never did betray/ The heart that loved her..."(Wordsworth 122-123). The actual entity of the sublime, or at least that which inspires the sublime, is articulated as female. The emotional involvement by the speaker also is paradoxical considering the standard notion of sublimity being that which is rational. By simultaneously asserting and negating the sublime as a 'masculine' construct, "Tintern Abbey" fragments not only Romantic sublimity, but also the attempt to delineate gender.

Appropriating the concept of the sublime from male poets, the texts of Charlotte Smith attempt to reconfigure the sublime within a 'feminine' perspective. The 'feminine' sublime contained in her texts is not one of magnificent reflection or spiritual advancement; rather it is the burden of rationality within a time and place that does not recognize its beholder. It can be seen as a subversion of the sublime and gender. In "To Night" the speaker experiences the sublime without enjoyment, instead it simply represents an escape "...cheerless as thou art;/ For in thy quiet gloom the exhausted heart/ Is calm, though wretched; hopeless, yet resign'd"(Smith 10-12). A sense of downtrodden rationality pervades the text, revealing that the 'feminine' sublime is not lacking in perceptive difficulty. Rather, it is a refuge for women in the Romantic period from the prevailing notions of gender, which confine them during the day. Notably, the presumably female speaker is not reacting emotionally to this encounter with the sublime, further conflicting with accepted ideas of the 'feminine'. "Written in the Church-Yard at Middleton in Sussex", a morbid example of the sublime, considers a scene in which the sea has eroded away the wall of a cemetery and the corpses have been washed into the sea; the speaker is "...doom'd- by life's long storm opprest,/ To gaze with envy on their gloomy rest"(Smith 14-15). The effects of the sublime again are liberating in a very abstract manner and with a sense of hopelessness. This oppositional attitude is in complete contrast with the traditional view of sublimity and works toward repositioning it within a 'feminine' space.

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Smith's manipulation of this ideologically significant concept provides a foundation from which more 'feminine' space can originate.

The male is also present within Smith's texts in a highly unconventional form, which ruptures both sublimity and 'masculinity'. The dominance of male over female is dealt with in "Written at the Close of Spring" in referring to the husband's "...tyrant passion, and corrosive care..."(Smith 11) as destructive to the wife. This removes the veil of rationality as 'masculine' and replaces it with raw emotion, which would normally be considered a 'feminine' quality. Although this text does not deal directly with the sublime, it certainly disrupts the cultural assumptions surrounding gendered characteristics. In a similar but more pertinent vein, "The Sea View" elucidates the male destruction of the sublime; revealing how "...man spoils Heaven's glorious works with blood!"(Smith 15). Again the sublime and its ability to infuse reason upon the individual are lost on the male, and instead he soils it with violent passion. Attributing a traditionally 'feminine' quality to warfare is perhaps the most powerful inversion of gender within Smith's texts. Battle, being the sole dominion of males, is conflated with the irrationality usually ascribed to females. Smith's texts subvert the conception of both sublimity and gender in such a way that neither can be said to have any essence. The fragmented results are indicative of nothing other than the inaccurate and arbitrary nature of the constructs themselves.

The use of sublimity and gender within the texts of Wordsworth and Smith expose the lack of continuity within these concepts and allow them to collapse under their own contradictions. Both poets' texts transmit ideas of the gendered sublime which render themselves impossible under analysis, however, this is not to imply that they are without critical worth. All of the texts considered examine the sublime as both 'masculine' and 'feminine' and realize that it is neither. Likewise, the concepts of 'masculine' and 'feminine' are shown to be distorted and without any essential meaning. The fetishization of the sublime can therefore be rendered as simply a mechanism to enforce the male superiority over the female within Romantic society. The sublime persists in the present and into the future as a specter of socially constructed genders. These conceptualizations must continually be decentered in order to prevent the arbitrary essentialist ideas of the past to remain within the cultural consciousness.

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