

WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

PROVENANCE AND PROBLEMATICS OF
'SUBLIME AND ALARMING IMAGES'
IN POETRY

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I STARTED off the speculations in this essay—and I should add that they are speculations rather than things I shall necessarily hope to prove—from a remark of Thomas Warton in the Postscript of his *Observations on the Fairy Queen of Spenser*, where he speaks of 'those sublime and alarming images, which true poetry best delights to display'. Warton writes this in his general advocacy of an earlier literature of romance and chivalry to which his own 'age of reason and refinement', as he calls it, might give short shrift, but one senses, behind what he says, something that opens out the whole matter towards a wider conception of the importance of the imagination. Those images of the marvellous, the sublime, and the terrible have, he suggests, a function: to 'rouse and invigorate all the powers of imagination'. If this is so, why has the idea of the sublime been such an intermittent one? Has it, in fact, any permanent usefulness? What should we make of it today? We know Longinus *On the Sublime*; we know Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*; we could list some works which most people would agree in finding 'sublime' or at least containing unmistakable touches of sublimity—*The Divine Comedy*, *King Lear*, *Paradise Lost*. But Warton's 'sublime and alarming images' have not always been thought to be useful or desirable, and it seems that the imagination may be invigorated in other ways. This is the area into which I wish to insert some questions and tentative answers.

Since the sublime is a concept that is notoriously difficult to define, it may be best to begin from the period of its maximum discussion in English literature, the middle and later eighteenth century. The title of Edmund Burke's treatise at least served to indicate that what was beautiful was not necessarily sublime,

and vice versa; and from a reading of the treatise it would become clear that the sublime was a higher category than the beautiful, something to be strained for by the utmost use of the faculties of the artist and something to be received with awed recognition by anyone to whom representations of it were exposed. Indefinable though the sublime might seem, it was a quality he was sure did exist, and it existed in nature for all who had eyes to see; indeed during times of crisis it was an inescapable and monstrous *donnée*—an earthquake, an eruption, a hurricane, a great fire which must make any observer realize how hard it is to disentangle thrill from pity. A true recognition of the sublime involved an intense and uncommon emotional response, a response characterized by the presence of opposites: 'not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror; which, as it belongs to self-preservation, is one of the strongest of all the passions. Its object is the sublime. Its highest degree I call *astonishment*' (IV. vii). To the general requirements of astonishment and terror, Burke added such other factors as obscurity (the vague and shifting portrait of Milton's Satan being more sublime than clearly delineated monsters in paintings of the temptation of St. Anthony), power (because power is associated with violence and danger, or, in religion, with a salutary dread), privation (emptiness, darkness, silence, solitude all being natural associates of fear), vastness (whether of the very large or of the very little, but suggesting the pull of infinity in either direction), and what he called magnificence (instancing the apparently confused but grand richness of a sky of stars). Of these, it might seem that 'privation' and 'magnificence' are in prospect of contradiction; but presumably Burke was acknowledging that there are different manifestations of the sublime, and that not all the named qualities would always be found in an experience of sublimity.

The eighteenth century found these qualities in James Macpherson's Ossianic poems of the 1760s; we, looking back, would be more likely to see them in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, or in some of the poetry of Blake, Coleridge, or Shelley. Yet Macpherson influenced Wordsworth, and influenced Blake even more, and in his introduction to a recent reprint of the Ossianic poems¹ John MacQueen invited a reconsideration of Macpherson's achievement in terms of a Tolkien-like creation of an imaginary but self-consistent world—a world which never really existed in either Scottish or Irish history or legend but which

¹ *Poems of Ossian*, Mercat Press, Edinburgh, 1971.

was devised to fit the shadowy, portentous workings of the pre-Romantic imagination. Macpherson's contemporaries were hungry for grandeur, for liberation, for the primitive, for the sublime, and they absorbed what he had to offer—an inchoate sublime rather than sublimity in truth—unaware that better was to come. Macpherson is a good example of how, if the time is ripe for it, powerful impulses and large general emotions can be conveyed through imperfect or even windy and pretentious verbal expression.

As a hundred winds on Morven; as the streams of a hundred hills; as clouds fly successive over heaven; as the dark ocean assails the shore of the desert: so roaring, so vast, so terrible the armies mixed on Lena's echoing heath. The groan of the people spread over the hills: it was like the thunder of night, when the cloud bursts on Cona, and a thousand ghosts shriek at once on the hollow wind.¹

It might seem hard to deny sublimity to a passage that strives so manfully to reach it! Yet the effect, not at all bad to begin with, is weakened, not strengthened, by the final strained and melodramatic touch of the thousand shrieking ghosts; later poets would manage such a scene without recourse to Macpherson's blatant Gothic buttonholing. At the same time, it is by no means impossible to see why Macpherson's readers were impressed by the sense of vast interlocking clashes in human and natural life, and were also attracted by it, as something quite new in that century's literary experience. The images, if not sublime, were at least alarming, and had something of that pleasing terror that Burke demanded.

Yet the image in that quoted passage which will perhaps stick in the mind of a modern reader is that of the 'dark ocean' which 'assails the shore of the desert'. It is hard not to connect this with Wordsworth's story, in Book V of *The Prelude*, of his friend's dream of the Arab

riding o'er the desert sands,
With the fleet waters of the drowning world
In chase of him; whereat I waked in terror . . .

(V. 135-7)

Wordsworth, more than any other poet, seems to have been created to make something of the eighteenth-century ideas of the sublime, and all these ideas can be persuasively illustrated from his work. The association of the sublime with the alarming, the importance of elements of awe and terror, is particularly

¹ 'Fingal', Book III, *Poems of Ossian*, p. 105.

his, as the episode of the stolen boat in Book I of *The Prelude* makes very clear. The fright the boy receives when he imagines the peak striding after him is no doubt some kind of moral lesson for his nocturnal escapade, but the whole power of the passage lies in how far it goes beyond such moral questions, in the boy's being haunted later by 'huge and mighty forms', sublime masses half-way between inorganic and organic which trouble his waking hours as well as his dreams. Mountains, traditionally sublime, are here given virtually another dimension.

A rocky steep uprose
Above the cavern of the willow tree,
And now, as suited one who proudly rowed
With his best skill, I fixed a steady view
Upon the top of that same craggy ridge,
The bound of the horizon, for behind
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
She was an elfin pinnace; lustily
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat
Went heaving through the water like a swan;
When, from behind that craggy steep till then
The bound of the horizon, a huge cliff,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
And growing still in stature the huge cliff
Rose up between me and the stars, and still,
With measured motion, like a living thing,
Strode after me. With trembling hands I turned,
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the cavern of the willow tree;
There in her mooring-place I left my bark,—
And through the meadows homeward went, with grave
And serious thoughts; and after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; in my thoughts
There was a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Of hourly objects, images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through my mind
By day, and were the trouble of my dreams.

When Keats spoke of Wordsworth's 'egotistical sublime' he was perhaps paying him a greater tribute than he intended, since

an unembarrassed feeling for sublimity was an innate part of Wordsworth's character, and would have found some outlet whether stimulated by Lakeland landscape or not. The argument as to whether sublimity resides in manifestations of the natural world or in some quality of soul in the experiencer of these manifestations comes to a head in Wordsworth's awareness of it. When he tells how, in his youth, 'the midnight storm / Grew darker in the presence of my eye' (*The Prelude*, II. 392-3) we must believe him, yet no poet has done more to recommend to us a belief that the natural world has in it sublime powers, or powers pointing towards sublimity, and that this sublimity is important to us, much in the way Thomas Warton described, in its capacity to 'rouse and invigorate all the powers of imagination'. The soul, in Wordsworth's experience, keeps

an obscure sense
Of possible sublimity, to which
With growing faculties she doth aspire.
(II. 336-8)

This assertion of the 'beyondness' of the sublime, like Burke's mention of the idea of infinity, suggests that on a lower level of finding communicative images for poetry, the poet might be hard put to it to avoid abstraction, high-flown generalizing, or wrong assumption of common ground with the reader. Wordsworth, however, had a remarkable gift for taking the reader with him to the brink, and hopefully leaving him there. Not all readers will quite know what is happening to them, or what is being asked of them, but to any who are sympathetic, the experience is both vertiginous and exhilarating—sublime, in short. As his own imagination is baulked, but productively and illuminatingly baulked, by the thought of his having crossed the Alps without realizing it (*The Prelude*, Book VI) and been unwilling to admit that there was no further summit to scale, so the reader's understanding is jolted beyond any simple-minded idea that a mountain is climbed 'because it is there' into the far more audacious conception of climbing into a beckoning infinitude, into 'something evermore about to be'.

Our destiny, our nature, and our home
Is with infinitude, and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be.
(VI. 538-42)

Wordsworth, although he is pre-eminently a poet of nature, extends the sublime firmly into human life and action. Landscape sublimities abound in 'Tintern Abbey' and *The Prelude*, but it would equally be difficult to deny a human sublimity to solitary figures like the discharged soldier in *The Prelude* (Book IV). The image here is admonitory and awesome, yet at the same time perfectly realistic: a tall, gaunt, muttering figure leaning against a milestone on a lonely road in the moonlight: a soldier on his way home after service in the tropics. Wordsworth at first observes him in secret, and is rather frightened, but then he speaks to him and they walk on together. It is interesting that the word 'sublime', though qualified, is used here by the poet himself, aware of the potential of the incident.

Towards the cottage without more delay
 We shaped our course; as it appeared to me,
 He travelled without pain, and I beheld
 With ill-suppressed astonishment his tall
 And ghastly figure moving at my side;
 Nor, while we journeyed thus, could I forbear
 To question him of what he had endured
 From hardship, battle, or the pestilence.
 He all the while was in demeanour calm,
 Concise in answer; solemn and sublime
 He might have seemed, but that in all he said
 There was a strange half-absence, and a tone
 Of weakness and indifference, as of one
 Remembering the importance of his theme
 But feeling it no longer.

(IV. 464-78)

In real life he only 'seemed' sublime, but in the poem he has become sublime in Wordsworth's presentation of him. His strangeness, his desolation, his loneliness, his history affect the poet more deeply than the man could possibly imagine, and change a happy self-congratulatory mood into one of troubled thoughtfulness. So one does not need the expected grandeurs of Alpine peaks; a simple human encounter on a country road will suffice. It is perhaps in the same way that Shakespeare's *King Lear* shows its sublimity not only in the violent elements of nature and extremes of human feeling in the storm scenes, but also and even more supremely in the reconciliation-scene between Lear and Cordelia, when in answer to his comment that she, unlike her sisters, has some cause to hate him, she replies 'No cause, no cause' (IV, vii. 75). This, from Lear's tormented point of

view, might be regarded as a sublime lie; on the part of Cordelia, it is the simple truth. The sense of awe which is the core of the sublime is here very clear, coming from a revelation of the extraordinary forgivingness and self-abnegation of Cordelia's nature, and it contrasts with the much less definable awe that lurks in Wordsworth's encounter with the soldier; Shakespeare's is more moving, Wordsworth's is more interesting. Awe at what happens to human beings, whether or not they are placed in awesome circumstances, is surely one of the directions the sublime can take, and once the excitement of the pre-Romantic and Romantic rediscovery of nature and its grandeur had passed its main first phase, while at the same time the novel was rapidly developing as a rival to poetry, it was possible for such a novelist as Dickens to obtain effects at times which have something of this 'human sublime'. The death of Jo the crossing-sweeper in *Bleak House* might be taken as an example. Jo has quite an important part in the plot of the book, but it is on his death that Dickens pulls out all the stops. It is an emotional scene, perhaps too emotional for our anti-sentimental age, but Dickens concludes it with a splendid distancing device which raises it at least somewhere near the sublime.

After a short relapse into sleep or stupor, he makes, of a sudden, a strong effort to get out of bed.

'Stay, Jo! What now?'

'It's time for me to go to that there berryin-ground, sir,' he returns, with a wild look.

'Lie down, and tell me. What burying-ground, Jo?'

'Where they lead him as wos wery good to me, wery good to me indeed, he wos. It's time fur me to go down to that there berryin-ground, sir, and ask to be put along with him. I wants to go there and be berried. He used fur to say to me, "I am as poor as you to-day, Jo," he ses. I wants to tell him that I am as poor as him now, and have come there to be laid along with him.'

'By-and-bye, Jo. By-and-bye.'

'Ah! P'raps they wouldn't do it if I wos to go myself. But will you promise to have me took there, sir, and laid along with him?'

'I will, indeed.'

'Thank'ee, sir. Thank'ee, sir. They'll have to get the key of the gate afore they can take me in, for it's allus locked. And there's a step there, as I used fur to clean with my broom.—It's turned wery dark, sir. Is there any light a-comin?'

'It is coming fast, Jo.'

Fast. The cart is shaken all to pieces, and the rugged road is very near its end.

'Jo, my poor fellow!'

'I hear you, sir, in the dark, but I'm a-gropin—a-gropin—let me catch hold of your hand.'

'Jo, can you say what I say?'

'I'll say anythink as you say, sir, fur I knows it's good.'

'OUR FATHER.'

'Our Father!—yes, that's wery good, sir.'

'WHICH ART IN HEAVEN.'

'Art in Heaven—is the light a-comin, sir?'

'It is close at hand. HALLOWED BE THY NAME!'

'Hallowed be—thy—'

The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead!

Dead, you Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day.

(Chap. XLVII)

The sudden switch from the exclamatory 'Dead!' to the level straight admonitory 'Dead, your Majesty', the dislocation from the fictional crossing-sweeper to the real Queen Victoria, is a touch of genius producing something of that Burkean astonishment we are warned to expect from the sublime.

The position of the novel, in respect of the sublime, is ambiguous. On the one hand, it would not be difficult to obtain general agreement that some novels, *Wuthering Heights*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Return of the Native* among them, are as sublime as anything in poetry. In these three books, grandeur of nature—wild moorland, wind and storm, wild seas—combines with extremes of human feeling to deliver the genuine elated *frisson* and the requisite enlargement and amazement of mind; certainly the imagination of both writer and reader is stimulated and shaken to an unusual degree. As Emily Brontë, Herman Melville, and Thomas Hardy were all in fact poets as well as novelists, it may be thought that they are special cases. The novel has origins in both romance and documentary, but if realism was the mainstream nineteenth century development in fiction, then that development was on the whole a powerful force working against the sublime. If George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is taken as an outstanding and central book of the period, it is clear that its heroine, Dorothea, is not to be allowed, in her life and environment, any of the sublimity George Eliot might have found in the St. Teresa she is compared with in the novel's Prelude: indeed, Dorothea at the end, having made one ardent but disastrous marriage and settled for a less than brilliant but

contented second one, is left in our minds almost as a figure symbolic of the values of the anti-sublime—of the ordinary, the everyday, the domestic, the 'hidden life' and the 'unvisited tomb'. It is true that the associations of the word 'sublime' are so complex that it can be used even in a domestic context, as we are reminded by Robert Burns in his 'Epistle to Dr. Blacklock':

To make a happy fireside clime
 To weans and wife,
 That's the true pathos and sublime
 Of human life.

Perhaps in this case it was Burns's own wife, Jean, who showed the sublime by looking after his illegitimate children as well as her own! I think, however, it can be taken as generally true that in so far as the novel became a popular and dominating form during the course of the nineteenth century, its concerns were not those of the sublime, and so sublimity was driven back into the arms of poetry, but a poetry less and less interested in that particular quality. It is only by straining the word 'sublime' considerably, and softening its contours, that one could find it in either Tennyson or Browning. There is some kind of desperate sublimity in Hopkins, but peripheral to the category as being so specialized, so idiosyncratic, so compressed. In Arnold's 'Sohrab and Rustum' there are some slightly suspect but still very fine touches of the sublime. But the most convincing approach to the sublime in Victorian poetry is surely James Thomson's long poem *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874), where vastness and obscurity, darkness and terror, power and astonishment, all discover a new lease of life. The sublime has now migrated from the heathery battlefields and tossing seas and blustery mountain-tops and settled in a large city. This, one feels, is as it should be, with the huge growth of cities, especially industrial cities, during the nineteenth century, and with the sense that a heightening, often an alienated heightening, of human experience was associated with them. The solitary wanderer through a remote and empty landscape, traditionally open to sublime encounters and visionary experiences, could readily give place to the wanderer in city streets who might know as much loneliness in the midst of hurrying crowds. Wordsworth was aware of this, as was Baudelaire, and later T. S. Eliot; but it was James Thomson's lot, for a variety of reasons, to express most powerfully the sublime potential of the new urban environment.

Thomson's city in the poem is not any actual city, though it is certainly based on London, and probably also uses his early memories of Glasgow. It is very large and very old, it has huge buildings, great bridges, squares, cathedrals, mansions, slums, endless streetlamps. Since the time is night, the streets are relatively empty, but because it is a metropolis there are plenty of shadowy nocturnal prowlers who are the denizens of the night city and the actors of the poem—the outcasts of daytime society, the tramps, the drunks, the drug addicts, the half-crazed, the lonely, the homeless, the sleepless (insomnia, after drink, was Thomson's own particular torment). The poem has a certain grandeur which comes from its relentlessness, from its over-all drive towards a pessimistic philosophy, but I would like to single out two particular images which seem to me useful examples of Thomas Warton's 'sublime and alarming' classification. The first of these is descriptive of sudden violent movement in the otherwise largely dead city, a little incident which is 'alarming' because unexplained, a part of the nightmare.

It is full strange to him who hears and feels,
 When wandering there in some deserted street,
 The booming and the jar of ponderous wheels,
 The trampling clash of heavy ironshod feet:
 Who in this Venice of the Black Sea rideth?
 Who in this city of the stars abideth
 To buy or sell as those in daylight sweet?

The rolling thunder seems to fill the sky
 As it comes on; the horses snort and strain,
 The harness jingles, as it passes by;
 The hugeness of an overburthened wain:
 A man sits nodding on the shaft or trudges
 Three parts asleep beside his fellow-drudges:
 And so it rolls into the night again.

What merchandise? whence, whither, and for whom?
 Perchance it is a Fate-appointed hearse,
 Bearing away to some mysterious tomb
 Or Limbo of the scornful universe
 The joy, the peace, the life-hope, the abortions
 Of all things good which should have been our portions,
 But have been strangled by that City's curse.

(IX)

The other image appears near the end of the poem, and is by contrast static. On a bleak northern ridge of the city there is a

colossal bronze statue of a winged woman who is based on the figure of Melencolia in Dürer's well-known engraving. She is seated, and her wings are folded. Thomson makes her the presiding deity or patron saint of his night city—she is the embodiment of whatever it is that makes the night city dreadful. She possesses a strange mixture of lethargy and enormous latent power, and in her we can recognize, more strongly than in the first image of the thundering wagon, something that is both sublime and alarming.

Anear the centre of that northern crest
 Stands out a level upland bleak and bare,
 From which the city east and south and west
 Sinks gently in long waves; and thronèd there
 An Image sits, stupendous, superhuman,
 The bronze colossus of a wingèd Woman,
 Upon a graded granite base foursquare.

Low-seated she leans forward massively,
 With cheek on clenched left hand, the forearm's might
 Erect, its elbow on her rounded knee;
 Across a clasped book in her lap the right
 Upholds a pair of compasses; she gazes
 With full set eyes, but wandering in thick mazes
 Of sombre thought beholds no outward sight.

* * *

Titanic from her high throne in the north,
 That City's sombre Patroness and Queen,
 In bronze sublimity she gazes forth
 Over her Capital of teen and threne,
 Over the river with its isles and bridges,
 The marsh and moorland, to the stern rock-ridges,
 Confronting them with a coëval mien.

The moving moon and stars from east to west
 Circle before her in the sea of air;
 Shadows and gleams ride round her solemn rest.
 Her subjects often gaze up to her there:
 The strong to drink new strength of iron endurance,
 The weak new terrors; all, renewed assurance
 And confirmation of the old despair.

(XXI)

That was Thomson's city of the imagination, and its images linger in the imagination of readers. But it is worth quoting a fragment of prose the poet wrote about the real London he lived

in; this was written in 1872, when he was in the midst of writing *The City of Dreadful Night*. 'The isolation of thought is sometimes almost appalling. Walking in the streets at night and sunk in musing, I come up to the surface and regard the moving people; and they seem to me distant and apparently unrelated as ships on the horizon traversing the ocean between unknown foreign ports; and there are moments when they seem incalculably and inconceivably remote, as stars and star systems in infinite space.'¹ This, although prose, is almost like the sketch of a poem. It is as if Thomson was searching for the images that would extend his observation of people's self-abstractedness in a crowd out into a world of the imagination, comparing them to ships on major oceans, then to stars, and finally to galaxies. The effect, perhaps because it is being pushed in the direction of the infinite and the sublime, is ambiguous: the mind is at the same time aware of the awful trap of human isolation and exhilarated by the splendour of the company in which the isolated move and have their being.

Thomson's 'stars and star systems' reminds us that by the later nineteenth century science was delivering a new sort of sublime, for any who wanted to take it up. The enormous stretches of time being revealed by geology and palaeontology, the concept of biological evolution, the new discoveries in astronomy, were all potential sources of sublimity, especially if one believed it was necessary to counteract grubby Zola and dreary Gissing with something more uplifting. And since the sublime may involve the alarming in any case, it would not matter too much whether one was optimistic or pessimistic about descents or ascents of man. Yet not much came of all this; poets remained, by and large, aloof from science. At least Edward FitzGerald had perceptively laid his finger on the problem, in a letter to Edward Cowell in 1847:

Yet, as I often think, it is not the poetical imagination, but bare Science that every day more and more unrolls a greater Epic than the Iliad . . . I never take up a book of Geology or Astronomy but this strikes me . . . So that, as Lyell says, the Geologist looking at Niagara forgets even the roar of its waters in the contemplation of the awful processes of time that it suggests . . . [This vision of Time] is in itself more wonderful than all the conceptions of Dante and Milton.

The 'wonder of science' is in some ways a very Victorian idea, even if saying that it is more wonderful than Dante and Milton is highly idiosyncratic, considering the reverence paid then to these

¹ *Poems, Essays and Fragments*, 1892, p. 261.

two poets. One would agree with FitzGerald that a contemplation of Niagara might result in a fine poem if any means could be found of dealing with it. However, despite Tennyson's reference to evolutionary ideas in *In Memoriam*, which are impressive enough as far as they go, it is perhaps in prose rather than in poetry that we find really productive use being made of the 'new sublime' of the enlarged time-scale shown by science. In one novel already mentioned, Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878), the generally agreed sublimity of the background landscape of Egdon Heath (and it is actor more than background) is attained not only from traditional associations of bigness, darkness, deprivation, solitude, and wind and storm, but also from a careful imaginative rolling back of the heath layer by layer through medieval history to Roman roads to prehistoric Celtic burial-mound to the last Ice Age. The heath would be a formidable, alien presence even if we knew nothing of its history, but Hardy likes to use the new knowledge of prehistory to remind his readers (if they were unaware of such things) that 'even the trifling irregularities were not caused by pickaxe, plough, or spade, but remained as the very finger-touches of the last geological change' (Chap. 1).

So far, I have been discussing writers who were working within a literary tradition that included ideas about the sublime, and even if they did not avail themselves of these ideas they had not thrown them out, nor, if asked, would they have brushed them aside as completely irrelevant. James Thomson, for instance, uses the words 'sublime' and 'sublimity' in *The City of Dreadful Night* and clearly is not unaware of the high area he is attempting to work in. Thomas Hardy in *The Return of the Native* refers to the 'chastened sublimity of a moor, a sea, or a mountain' as being for his age more congenial than the 'orthodox beauty' (and we notice the Burkean opposition of sublime and beautiful) of spas and vineyards and southern gardens. But when we ask what has happened now to the idea of the sublime, how it has fared in the twentieth century, we find it much harder to receive any very intelligible reply. If any eager student was to look up the elegant and learned *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* in its most recent edition, all he would be told is that the sublime is 'not greatly in fashion today'. At this point my lecture might, no doubt, come to a stop. But I am nothing if not curious, and one of the things that attracted me to this subject was precisely the apparent reaction against the sublime in twentieth-century poetry. How thoroughgoing was this? Are

there exceptions, and if so how did they arise? Does the idea survive in other, possibly disguised forms or formulations? Or is it, in any case, perennially available, as the *Princeton Encyclopedia* to its credit does suggest, with a last nod back towards Longinus and the concept of a 'great soul'?

Modern poetry set itself against the idea of a hierarchy of subjects or of feelings, and this being so, it would not be surprising if the sublime, like other very grand but sometimes rather hollow or pretentious things, had to take its chance with the rest, and might not survive if less-exalted material proved more resilient and more suited to the needs of the time. T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams have other qualities than sublimity—great qualities; sublimity they were not trying to obtain. But with others the situation is less clear-cut, and I would mention specifically Ezra Pound, Hugh MacDiarmid, and Wallace Stevens.

Ezra Pound's poem, or suite of poems, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), opens with the much-quoted and at least partly autobiographical 'Ode pour l'Election de son Sepulchre', which begins:

For three years, out of key with his time,
He strove to resuscitate the dead art
Of poetry; to maintain 'the sublime'
In the old sense. Wrong from the start—

No, hardly, but seeing he had been born
In a half savage country, out of date . . .

Mauberley is full of ironies, far from straightforward, but it is not in doubt that the speaker still sees 'the sublime' as a category, and one to which he bears an ambivalent relation. The self-correction between lines 4 and 5 leaves a door open, but a door to what? As a leader of the modern revolution in poetry, Pound might hardly be expected to want to maintain anything that belonged to a dead tradition, and the sublime, as we have seen, had become weakened and sporadic in English poetry since the time of the great Romantics. Nor would he, in any case, admire the visionary and obscure grandeurs of a concept of the sublime that went against all his passion for clarity of delineation. His 'sublime' seems to hark back rather to Greece, to Homer and Sappho, and to the sense that pervades *Mauberley* of the gulf between the exalted, exemplary arts and culture of ancient Greece and the 'tawdry cheapness' which he says 'shall outlast our days'. The sublime then reverts to its simplest (etymological)

meaning of 'high, elevated', and Pound is not saying that he wants it given up, but as an American from 'a half savage country' he admits a certain bafflement as to how, if at all, the sublime in his simplified sense can be embodied.

Well, he did not embody it in *Mauberley*, or in his early poems in general, but *The Cantos*, unfinished though they are, do offer hints of sublimity as well as having satire, lyricism, historical documentary, and virulent propaganda. The sublimity comes through some of the vistas of time as they recede through history into legend and myth in a remarkable way that forces even the unsympathetic reader to raise his sights and, for a moment or two, to wonder. It also emerges when some of the central ideas are fused into a telling image, as in the startling first lines of Canto 95:

Love, gone as lightning,
enduring 5000 years.
Shall the comet cease moving
or the great stars be tied in one place!

It may be that since *The Cantos* is a modern re-tooling of the idea of an epic poem, some of the sublimity traditionally thought to adhere to epic writing has brushed off on Pound's poem, despite its many structural differences from previous epic. Its distinctive feature, of course, is that it willingly, and very much in a modern spirit, juxtaposes the sublime and the anti-sublime, as in the transition from the Confucian tranquillity of Canto 13 to the foul 'Hell' Cantos 14 and 15. Cinematic, anti-decorum effects like that are very much a part of their period, and Pound protests too much in *Mauberley* when he taunts the age for its 'kinema' and its pianola, and even more for its having allowed its Caliban to oust its Ariel—who more Caliban than Pound (yet Ariel too; he is himself pure 'kinema', a restless montage of opposites)?

One of Pound's admirers is the Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid. His poetry, and his interests, differ in many ways from those of Pound, but he shares with the poet of *The Cantos* a belief that the sense of awe is important. Many of MacDiarmid's poems are meditations on some object or theme or situation which he has chosen to allow himself a very free-ranging imaginative journey into high matters of human fate, whether biological, political, or social. He is an uneven but certainly a great poet who is not afraid to take the risk of being thoroughly serious, in a period which finds it easier to disguise serious concerns in

irony or black comedy. But undoubtedly he has within himself many of those leanings towards vastness and power and solitude, and above all a sense of the importance of the non-human part of the universe (if human beings would only see it), which characteristically move towards the sublime. Even in a short four-line poem like 'The Skeleton of the Future', an evocation of Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow, there is an unmistakable flash of the sublime, particularly under the Burkean aspect of mingled delight and terror:

Red granite and black diorite, with the blue
Of the labradorite crystals gleaming like precious stones
In the light reflected from the snow; and behind them
The eternal lightning of Lenin's bones.

But among his longer poems, I would instance 'On a Raised Beach', 'The Glass of Pure Water', and 'Stony Limits', to say nothing of the book-length *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, as examples of a modern sublime. *A Drunk Man* has a comic sublimity, where the fantasy world of the imagination is richly peopled with images and characters and ideas thrown together audaciously, yet bringing out, through the shock of contrast as well as through reiterated images, a steady pulse of serious ideas on Scotland, on evolution, on man in the universe. In this poem it is the presence of the infinite, of the undefined and indefinable ends of life, rather than such specific images as that of light or wave or crystal which we find Ezra Pound reaching for, that suggests sublimity. In other poems, too, this stretching out towards the infinite is a marked feature, a token of an almost religious spirituality sometimes thought very strange in one who claims to be a scientific materialist and Marxist. But in 'Stony Limits', which is an elegy on Charles Doughty (1843-1926), he praises Doughty for being somewhat similar—a great explorer of Arabia, a trained geologist, but also a man open to the mysterious admonitions of the loneliest landscapes of endless desert and infinite stars:

I have seen Silence lift his head
And Song, like his double, lift yours,
And know while nearly all that seems living is dead,
You were always consubstantial with all that endures.
Would it were on Earth! Not since Ezekiel has that faw sun
ringed

A worthier head; red as Adam you stood
In the desert, the horizon with vultures black-winged,

And sang and died in this still greater solitude
Where I sit by your skull whose emptiness is worth
The sum of almost all the full heads now on Earth
—By your roomy skull where most men might well spend
Longer than you did in Arabia, friend!

'On a Raised Beach' removes the prop of any figure or character and presents the speaker face to face with nature at its most formidable and uncommunicative: stones. Tantalized and almost maddened by the knowledge that if stones could speak, or if they retained in code and not merely in contour the story of what they have been through in millions of years, they could take us back long before man and all organic life, the poet nevertheless persists in his belief that (like birds) stones have gates which are always open; no more than birds can they shut them, and therefore the stone should also have its song, if it was possible to hear it.

Nothing has stirred
Since I lay down this morning an eternity ago
But one bird. The widest open door is the least liable to intrusion,
Ubiquitous as the sunlight, unfrequented as the sun.
The inward gates of a bird are always open.
It does not know how to shut them.
That is the secret of its song,
But whether any man's are ajar is doubtful.
I look at these stones and know little about them,
But I know their gates are open too,
Always open, far longer open, than any bird's can be,
That every one of them has had its gates wide open far longer
Than all birds put together, let alone humanity,
Though through them no man can see,
No man nor anything more recently born than themselves
And that is everything else on the Earth.
I too lying here have dismissed all else.
Bread from stones is my sole and desperate dearth,
From stones, which are to the Earth as to the sunlight
Is the naked sun which is for no man's sight.
I would scorn to cry to any easier audience
Or, having cried, to lack patience to await the response.
I am no more indifferent or ill-disposed to life than death is;
I would fain accept it all completely as the soil does;
Already I feel all that can perish perishing in me
As so much has perished and all will yet perish in these stones.
I must begin with these stones as the world began . . .

That poem was published when MacDiarmid was living on a remote Shetland island, very poor and very ill, in the 1930s.

It shows the sublime through a hard and awesome environment, like Hardy's Egdon Heath, or Emily Brontë's Yorkshire moors, or Wordsworth's Lake District, or the nocturnal deserts of James Thomson's London. Granted that particular kind of recurring context for the sublime, where can we fit in Wallace Stevens, who seems at first sight too gorgeous and too happy and too playful to join any such company?

Perhaps two adjoining poems from his volume *Idea of Order* (1935) will offer some pointers. 'The Idea of Order at Key West' presents a woman walking by the sea at dusk, and singing. The noise of the sea—its own song—is there in the background but is not what the listeners listen to. The poem suggests how the two very different voices may indeed interrelate:

It may be that in all her phrases stirred
The grinding water and the gasping wind;
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

But out of her singing comes something else, something to put the theatrical sublimity of the scene—the 'meaningless plungings of water and the wind', the high horizons, the vast stagy distances—in its place. The human voice creates and imparts an order that in the process of solidifying, paradoxically abstracts, refines, redefines, shimmers in outlines of a new sublime, far removed from, yet no doubt making use of, the melodramatic 'mountainous atmospheres / Of sky and sea', sublime enough things in their own limited world. The poem concludes by stealing off into the sublime it has set up:

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
Why, when the singing ended and we turned
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
As the night descended, tilting in the air,
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

Much of Stevens's poetry is concerned with the search for a supreme or perfect quality, a good, a reality of the highest kind,

and it would not be surprising if ideas of the sublime were suggested by this search. But is it a different, a special kind of sublime? The poem which follows 'The Idea of Order at Key West' is called 'The American Sublime', and its title forces us to ask that question. Here is the poem:

How does one stand
To behold the sublime,
To confront the mockers,
The mickey mockers
And plated pairs?

When General Jackson
Posed for his statue
He knew how one feels.
Shall a man go barefoot
Blinking and blank?

But how does one feel?
One grows used to the weather,
The landscape and that;
And the sublime comes down
To the spirit itself,

The spirit and space,
The empty spirit
In vacant space.
What wine does one drink?
What bread does one eat?

Although this remarkable little poem does make one or two statements, it is mainly putting questions, and the questions could only come from one who believed in the importance of the sublime but who was puzzled, even baffled, as to how one could approach it, as an American living in the twentieth century. How does one stand, how does one feel? Money-conscious pragmatists and materialists are not in touch with it. But then even the great American landscapes, sublime in the old sense, Grand Canyons but not of the spirit, frontiers of a too naïve myth, are not helpful: one grows used to them. And as for 'wine and bread': ritual sacrifice, sacramental faith seem irrelevant to him, he finds no entry into the sublime through exalted traditions. All that is left is 'the spirit and space', both of them empty and blank, the one inhabiting the other and the sublime becoming the result or accompaniment of this. Perhaps the old 'terror' of the sublime lurks here, not in wind and wave, or in

precipice and torrent, but in sheer blankness and vacancy. Looking from this poem back to 'The Idea of Order at Key West', we can believe that the 'ghostlier demarcations' of its last line, the quasi-invisible reclamations of the work of art, are beginning to form themselves towards vacancy, like melting crystals, and at their finest will draw us into the sublimity of the apparently uninhabited space, where there is nothing but art and the artist's figuring of the artist, which is not to say the artist himself.

The 'American sublime' is a protean concept, and it would apply to Norman Mailer as well as to Wallace Stevens. It might encompass Whitman and Ginsberg, Hart Crane and Thomas Wolfe. But its existence would not be denied: it is part of the nature and history of the place. The European sublime, on the other hand, has fallen on evil days. Who was more sublime than Rilke it might be asked? Yet Rilke, great poet though he was, may be said to have given the sublime a bad name. Certainly, to many poets writing from the Second World War onwards, the sublime would seem an insulting category; survival rather than heroics, irony rather than high meditation, the everyday rather than the beckoning gleam, have been in order. If one wants poetry diametrically opposed to the sublime, it is there—and very good poetry it is too—in the books of Zbigniew Herbert in Poland or Miroslav Holub in Czechoslovakia. The sense of living through a violent and cruel era, when it is best to preserve a wary stance and check ideals ceaselessly against reality, counteracts all the old attractions of the sublime. Here is a short poem by Holub which says much in meagre space. It might be described as a concrete poem, since it has five lines with five letters in each line—a perfect square. A perfect State would have a like sublime simplicity and symmetry; all people would fall into their place, and contribute to the regularity of the structure, and to its unshakability. The poem is called, however, 'Very Brief Thoughts on the Letter M':

A, b, c, d, e,
f, g, h, i, j,
k, l, n, o, p,
q, r, s, t, u,
v, w, x, y, z.

This does not mean that the sublime is not a permanently accessible idea. The images of the sublime, drawn from whatever is most powerful or startling in nature or from the greatest

human artefacts, and even in the absence of such images, the delineation of great energy and astonishment in emotional or imaginative human situations, go, as Longinus said, with certain great qualities in the mind itself, and are therefore always liable to return. Perhaps the sublime is being reborn in science fiction, and the last refuge of the sublime is in the stars. The popularity of this genre, in fact, probably indicates that it is fulfilling a need not otherwise supplied. No doubt poets have to do what they have to do, but it would be surprising if sooner or later some of them did not find ways of reintroducing a note of acceptable grandeur.