How Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?
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Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of The American Society for Aesthetics
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/431887
Accessed: 05/01/2012 12:34

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This essay is a foray into the exotic territory of the sublime, a region not much canvassed in analytic philosophy. I announce at the outset my belief (or, perhaps better, my operating principle) that true, or at least reasonable, theories of the sublime are possible, and what follows tries to set out some of the conditions under which that might be so. Of course, I have a certain view of what a theory of the sublime can and should offer, and I try to make that as explicit as possible. My considerations begin from what I take to be a common, if not very well considered or articulated opinion that because sublime experience often professes to "see" beyond human powers of knowledge and description, the sublime is inaccessible to rational thought. What follows then are the most tentative of explorations.¹

As a preliminary, I need to make some distinctions. The first concerns subject matter. In the portion of European intellectual history that first occupied itself with the sublime, under that rubric, that subject matter changed radically over time, though in a way not much remarked then. In Longinus, the ancient critic the translations of whose text in the late seventeenth century started the trend, the sublime meant a certain sort of art, in particular a style of writing, manifesting certain characteristics and producing certain effects in readers. But by the early nineteenth century, in the writings of the leading poets and philosophers of the sublime, it meant almost exclusively a certain sort of natural scene or a certain way of viewing natural scenes, or even Nature itself. Following the latter trend, I shall not be interested here in the sublime as a kind of art, or style in art. But as will become clear, I shall not be confining myself to the sublime in nature either. Rather, the issues of the sublime I am concerned with can be seen—though I shall not argue this point here—as generalizations of those problems and themes that came to be associated with the sublime in nature; and so it is in that latter tradition, and as a further elaboration of it, that I place the present essay.

The second distinction I introduce is tripartite. First, there are experiences of the sublime or, alternatively, sublime experiences. Second, there is what I shall call sublime discourse. And, third, there is talk about the sublime. Examples of experiences of the sublime are Wordsworth's "vision" atop Mount Snowdon, or Shelley's "trance sublime" mentioned in his exquisite "Mont Blanc" lyric. Sublime discourse I take to be that language that is or purports to be more or less immediately descriptive or expressive of sublime experience, i.e., discourse that proceeds or is represented as proceeding more or less directly from such experience. Thus much of the passage in The Prelude about the Snowdon experience and almost the whole of the Mont Blanc lyric I take to be examples of sublime discourse. Talk about the sublime, on the other hand, is reflective or analytic discourse that takes as its subject matter primarily sublime experience or sublime discourse, but also itself or other talk about the sublime. To the last category clearly belong, for example, Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime, Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime" and the present essay. I think that this three-fold distinction is, finally, hard to maintain very rigorously and that the three distinguished categories tend to run together somewhat uncontrollably. Nevertheless, for all that, I hope that this distinction will be heuristically and provisionally useful.

Against the background of these distinctions, now, I want to announce some assumptions that guide this essay, though I shall not be concerned
to give complete arguments for these assumptions here. The first assumption is that only sublime experience properly motivates sublime discourse and therefore that only sublime experience is the proper and ultimate subject matter of talk about the sublime. My impression is that this assumption is, or would be, widely if not universally shared by those who produce talk about the sublime. I think it is unconsciously assumed by almost all early writers on the sublime—with the exception of Hegel—up through Schopenhauer. It would probably be contested by more recent writers who work on the sublime, deeply influenced as they are by Hegelian modes of thought. For the assumption in question might easily, if not necessarily accurately, be seen as an attempt to uncover a kind of unmediated experiential “given” behind sublime discourse. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that not much reflection has been devoted in talk about the sublime specifically to this assumption and that its full implications have not been worked out. Therefore, although no explicit controversy that I know of swirls about the assumption, more analysis and systematic use of it is likely to develop quite a bit of controversy.

My second assumption is that sublime experience can and does occur in a large variety of personal, cultural, social and historical contexts, all such contexts also inevitably involving experience that is not specifically sublime. An immediate consequence of this assumption is that sublime discourse is not necessarily limited to certain times, places or historical contexts. But I do not thereby assume some sort of simple-minded “universalism.” For one thing, I do not assume, or believe, that sublime experience can or does occur in any and all personal, social or historical contexts. For another, I do assume that time, place and culture definitely color any sublime discourse as well as affect its use and significance. And a consequence of the last assumption is that sublime discourse never occurs “pure”—as a simple “recording,” as it were, of sublime experience, unaffected by other personal, social, cultural and institutional themes, purposes and ideologies. And this suggests, further, that what I am defining as “sublime discourse” is actually, in effect, sublime themes within somewhat wider discursive wholes that do not, in every aspect and detail, originate exclusively or even primarily in sublime experience, but rather in many of a tangle of personal and cultural experiences and agendas that constitute the lives of most people most of the time.

My idea here is that there is—or better, we should look for in our theorizing—some kind of “natural core” in sublime experience that is distinguishable from various personal or cultural elaborations and embroiderings. And further that this “natural core” will manifest what sublime experience at bottom has to tell us—if anything at all—either about the world or about ourselves. Because of current intellectual fashions, some will find this assumption touchingly naive. But as a “regulative idea,” a principle of inquiry, it may be just what is needed at this stage of inquiry into the sublime. At any rate, it is a deep assumption that can hardly be argued for (or against) a priori without some experience of trying to talk about the sublime both with and without the assumption. But such experience is not plentiful; there is virtually no philosophical literature on this topic—that is non-exploitative—since the classic days of Burke, Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer.

Now the assertion of the pan-historical and multicultural nature of the sublime is, I am sure, controversial, but it is not unprecedented. For the assumption, apparently unquestioned fifty years ago when Samuel Monk’s still indispensable book on the subject appeared, still seems to dominate, namely, that the sublime is a topic and an experience confined to a part of the cultural history of Northwestern Europe from about 1675 to 1825. For all that, Schopenhauer explicitly relates the sublime to themes from the Indian Vedas; and Hegel, too, illustrates his “pantheistic” sublime with Indian and Mohammean poetry. Even the great Urtext of the sublime, Longinus, steps outside its own Greek tradition in its striking reference to a passage from the Book of Genesis.

II

A theme running through nearly all sublime discourse generates the main topic of this paper. I regard the theme as of such significance for the sublime that I am willing to say that any discourse, ostensibly expressive of some experience, that presents this theme is necessarily, even if only in that respect, sublime. I baptize it the theme of epistemological transcendence. I
offer in the sequence some passages from a wide variety of sublime discourse to give the flavor and direction of this theme. Listen in them for assertions or assumptions to the effect that human mental powers in general are revealed (in the experience of moment) to have radically limited access to what, provisionally and for want of a more precise designation, I’ll call “reality.” (Please note the defining phrase “radically limited access” in the above formulation. For it is a major point of the present essay to try to make the distinction between having radically limited access to “reality,” on the one hand, and having no access to a special form of reality, on the other. Whereas the latter might be, in my usage, a form of the former, the former does not entail the latter.)

As befits his essential humanism, Longinus introduces the theme mildly enough. Explaining sublimity in art, Longinus says that great artists see that “nature judged man to be no lowly or ignoble creature when she brought us into this life and into the whole universe as into a great celebration, to be spectators of her whole performance and most ambitious actors. She implanted at once into our souls an incalculable love for all that is great and more divine than ourselves. That is why the whole universe gives insufficient scope to man’s power of contemplation and reflection, but his thoughts often pass beyond the boundaries of the surrounding world.” As Longinus’s thought here would not seem to stress the limitations on human powers, so much as their own transcendent nature. And this, too, is a constant theme of sublime discourse; for it is perfectly clear that to claim to see into the limitations of human powers of knowledge and description is somehow to transcend those limitations. This is a powerful and important theme of the sublime, but one that I cannot address here. For now what I want to call attention to in the Longinus passage is the suggestion, in the phrase “great and more divine than ourselves” that what is “beyond the boundaries of the surrounding world” is not necessarily fully grasped. The suggestion is, however, only barely there. But in the following passage, located very near to the above, the suggestion becomes much more explicit and vivid, if not perfectly so. For explaining our awe at sublime natural phenomena like Etna and the Nile, Longinus writes that “man can easily understand what is useful and necessary, but he admires what passes his understanding” (my italics).

By Romantic times the distinction between the known and the unknown becomes more important and its connection with the sublime becomes more pronounced. Listen to William Wordsworth, who describes—in a passage that twice refers to the sublime—the origin of what he calls his “visionary power”: “For I would walk alone / In storm and tempest, or in starlight nights / Beneath the quiet heavens, and at that time / Have felt whate’er there is of power in sound / To breathe an elevated mood, by form / Or image unprofaned; and I would stand / Beneath some rock, listening to sounds that are / The ghostly language of the ancient earth, / Or make their dim abode in distant winds.” The crucial phrase here is “by form or image unprofaned,” clearly suggesting that which is beyond cognitive and descriptive powers. In another passage Wordsworth refers again to “hearing” these sublime intimations, but hearing them when the “fleshly ear slept undisturbed,” that is, hearing, as it were, the “ghostly language of the ancient earth,” which is, literally speaking, no language at all since it comes from that which “though lost beyond the reach of thought and human knowledge, to the human eye invisible, yet liveth to the heart.”

Nearly 150 years later, in the midst of twentieth-century Europe’s great wars, comes the thought of Georges Bataille on what he calls “inner experience,” one of the sources the recent revival of interest in the sublime. Of such experience Bataille writes: “Experience attains in the end the fusion of object and subject, being as subject non-knowledge, as object the unknown. It can let the agitation of intelligence break up on that account: repeated failures don’t serve it any less than the final docility which one can expect.”

Now Bataille’s historical connection with the early modern tradition of the sublime is neither explicit nor direct. We can trace it through Nietzsche and from him back to Schopenhauer. Bataille does however identify himself with (and also radically separates himself from) the Christian mystical tradition stemming from the texts called the Pseudo-Dionysius, which date from almost as far back as the Longinus itself. Now the Areopagite thought (like Word-
s worth’s friend Coleridge) that his or her version of sublime experience reveals “God” and hence calls it the “divine enlightenment.”9 But the text goes on to say that in such experience “[w]e leave behind us all our own notions of the divine. We call a halt to the activities of our minds and, to the extent that is proper, we approach the ray which transcends being. Here, in a manner no words can describe, pre-existed all the goals of all knowledge and it is of a kind that neither intelligence nor speech can lay hold of it nor can it at all be contemplated since it surpasses everything and is wholly beyond our capacity to know it.”10

Nearly a thousand years before the texts of the Pseudo-Dionysius were written and on the other side of the earth, the well-known opening verses of the Tao te Ching firmly establish that text as sublime discourse: “The tao that can be told / is not the eternal Tao. / The name that can be named / is not the eternal Name. // The un-nameable is the eternally real. / Naming is the origin / of all particular things. // Free from desire, you realize the mystery. / Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations. // Yet mystery and manifestations / arise from the same source. / This source is called darkness. // Darkness within darkness. / The gateway to all understanding.”11

Centuries later a Buddhist missionary from India making forays into China also indicated his affinity with the sublime. In a text attributed to the quasi-legendary Bodhidharma, considered the founder of Chan (Zen) Buddhism, the author writes: “Even if you explain thousands of sutras and shastras, unless you see your own nature yours is the teaching of a mortal, not a Buddha. The true Way is sublime. It can’t be expressed in language. Of what use are scriptures? But someone who sees his own nature finds the Way, even if he can’t read a word. Someone who sees his nature is a Buddha. And since a Buddha’s body is intrinsically pure and unsullied, and everything he says is an expression of his mind, being basically empty, a Buddha can’t be found in words or anywhere in the Twelvefold Canon.”12 And, more succinctly, “The ultimate Truth is beyond words. Doctrines are words. They’re not the Way. The Way is wordless. Words are illusions.”13

And finally—the day before yesterday—in a work that is full of the sublime, the Los Angeles writer Kate Braverman invents female characters who are in their various ways in touch with the sublime (and, incidentally, systematically if implicitly refutes Kant, who believed that the sublime is the province of the male). In the novel Palm Latitudes it is the “bruja” from the L.A. barrio, Marta Ortega, who is most self-consciously intimate with the sublime. Marta, responding to a desperate request for advice, thinks the following: “But she could not lie to them, could not hallucinate fences where there were none, illuminations and constructions where there were none. It was ceaselessly flowing, fluid, blue the air, blue the wind, liquid the hills and the skies. We drift in undiscovered latitudes where compasses are irrelevant. We are the shanghaied crew of a derelict asylum ship. We slay dragons until we are empty, our dreams vacant, the seas still. We sway and reel, drunken and hysterical, feeling only the lamp of our hearts fluttering on and off of their own accord.”14 In other words, for Marta and Braverman we—or at least some women and the occasional marginalized man (priests, gays)—live in the sublime where there is, finally, no rational or imaginative grip on things, where the only correct response can be “Silence like an ocean, incalculable, dimensional.”15

III

But how should we interpret this welter of words about wordlessness, of thoughts about the impossibility of thought—this “epistemological transcendence” revealed in a certain kind of experience? Let us try the following as an hypothesis (though, as I shall argue, it is a thoroughly wrong-headed approach): first, assume that all of the above are examples of sublime discourse and hence more or less immediately expressive or descriptive of sublime experience. Let us, second, think of sublime experience as taking the canonical form experience of the sublime and take the latter as like an experience of this page or an experience of Pegasus in that “the sublime” denotes the object of the experience, while leaving it open whether that object exists or not. Third, let us suppose provisionally that the meaning of the epistemological transcendence of the sublime experience consists in important part in the following proposition:
An experience of the sublime presents the object of the experience, i.e., the sublime, as epistemologically inaccessible.

It is important to see (i) as an interpretation of the theme of epistemological transcendence. Thus, this interpretation turns the notion of "(the experience of) radically limited access to reality" into a thesis about (the experience of) an object, or perhaps realm," that is inaccessible to human powers of knowledge or description. Furthermore, using this proposition as the crucial premise we can construct an argument purporting to show that no (true) theory of the sublime is possible. A second premise is, I think, implicit in all sublime discourse, viz.,

An experience of the sublime, insofar as it presents the sublime as epistemologically inaccessible, is correct about the sublime.

Now, not only is (ii) implicit in sublime discourse, but, since we have no access to the sublime outside of the sublime experience, we have no choice but to take the testimony of the sublime experience as authoritative and thus assert (ii). Furthermore, (ii) is to be understood on the model of the following: Any experience of Pegasus, insofar as it represents Pegasus as winged, is correct. In other words, (ii) does not presuppose that the sublime "exists." From (i) and (ii), then, it follows that

The sublime, as an object of experience, is epistemologically inaccessible.

But it also seems to be true, because the sublime is the object of the experience of the sublime, that

A theory of the sublime is a theory of the object of an experience of the sublime.

And it seems obvious that

Any true theory of the sublime constitutes epistemological access to the object of the experience of the sublime and thus to the sublime.

But, from (iii), such access is impossible. Therefore,

A true theory of the sublime is impossible.

Now this argument is precisely what provides the challenge implied in my title: How is a theory of the sublime possible? For it seems that—starting from the very testimony of the sublime experience itself—such a theory is not possible; the argument purports to argue from a certain skeptical strain within sublime discourse to a skepticism outside sublime discourse, namely, in talk about the sublime. Most of the rest of this paper will be a (finally negative) assessment of this argument via an assessment of its first premise.

First let us note that the interpretation of epistemological transcendence embodied in (i) involves a thesis that I will label ontological transcendence. When constructing the above argument I was careful to note that in construing "the sublime" as denoting the object of a sublime experience, we were not committed to the existence of such an object. Nevertheless, it hardly seems reasonable to suppose that such "agnosticism" can be attributed to the sublime experience itself, as it were. That is to say, it is not plausible to assert or imply that the sublime experience presents the sublime both as an object that is epistemologically inaccessible and as possibly not existing. For the latter representation would considerably cut the force of, if not make irrelevant, the former representation. Such an interpretation of the sublime experience would thus be to attribute to it a kind of "pragmatic contradiction." But as part of precisely an interpretation (as opposed to, say, a straightforward description) of sublime experience, such an attribution would also be gratuitous. (If you're interpreting the meaning of a sublime theme, why interpret it in such a way that it is incoherent?) Therefore, it seems to me that the full (hypothetical) interpretation of epistemological transcendence, of which premise (i) expresses only a part (because it is only that part which is needed to generate the problematic conclusion), should be that sublime experience represents something as existing that is inaccessible to the epistemological powers of human beings, something on a level of being, therefore, which transcends that of humankind and all of humankind's possible environments, natural and cultural. It is the latter interpretation that I am calling the thesis of ontological transcendence. Since, then, premise (i) presupposes the latter thesis, the argument is inconclusive if
that thesis is faulty. We must therefore inquire whether the sublime experience does indeed present a kind or level of being as existing that is epistemologically inaccessible.

IV

The inquiry produces a result that is neither simple nor straightforward. For the fact is that the authors of sublime discourse often talk about beings or realms that they do represent as transcendent in various ways. Such beings or realms are usually represented as transcending at least ordinary and familiar levels of reality and sometimes as transcending all levels of reality. By far the most common designation for this transcendent order, at least in European civilization, is "God" or "the divine." Of the authors I have already quoted, Pseudo-Dionysius, Longinus and occasionally Wordsworth speak of God or the divine in such contexts. Indeed, in the tradition of the sublime proper—i.e., in Europe between 1675 and 1825—these terms, or their synonyms, are by far the most common designation for a transcendent order of being. Braverman in her novel, on the other hand, uses a more naturalistic designation, speaking of a "liquid core" or a "fundamental liquid substance." In the Tao te Ching, too, though the word "tao" simply means "way," the Great Tao often takes on a naturalistic character (at least in English translations). Thus "[t]he Tao is called the Great Mother: / empty yet inexhaustible, / it gives birth to infinite worlds." In the Zen tradition this transcendent reality is often called "self-nature" or the "Essence of Mind" in passages where it is very clear that "mind" or "self" do not refer to ordinary minds or selves, or collections of them, but rather to something like "Universal Mind" or "Primordial Mind." Of the authors I have quoted Bataille alone does not refer to such a transcendent reality; indeed, he is very pointed in denying such reference.

Very occasionally a particular sublime discourse identifies the transcendent realm or entity as precisely that which is otherwise noted to be epistemologically inaccessible. The Pseudo-Dionysius is especially noteworthy for doing so. The Tao te Ching also does so clearly, if much less explicitly. Most discourses, however, leave the connection very vague and implicit. And I think that they do so for very good reasons. For no sublime discourse that expresses both the theme of epistemological transcendence and the theme of a transcendent being or realm leaves the latter undescribed. Even the Pseudo-Dionysius, which exerts great care to withhold "names" from God, nevertheless thinks of God quite unapologetically as the "creator" and "cause" of all. This blatant contradiction sometimes occurs in a single clause, e.g., "And so it is that as Cause of all and as transcending all, he is rightly nameless..." The Tao te Ching also describes the great "nameless" Tao as the generatrix of all and as "flowing" through all things. Perhaps echoing the Tao te Ching, Braverman too describes her fundamental substance as "liquid" and as the mother of all particulars. And Wordsworth, when he does not write of his transcendent realm in god-terms, writes of it in mind-terms. Thus he writes of the visionary scene from Mount Snowdon as the "perfect image of a mighty mind" and goes on at some length to describe the powers and operations of such a mind. The Zen tradition, too, though perhaps the most self-restrained in describing its "transcendent," nevertheless writes of it, like Wordsworth, precisely as mind or self.

Now the point here is that none of the discourses that represent a transcendent ontological realm consistently treats it as epistemologically inaccessible. And this is so whether the particular discourse explicitly represents the transcendent reality as epistemologically transcendent or whether such representation is more or less implicit. On the basis of the analysis presented thus far we might be tempted to say that, first, there is no clear result about the content of the sublime experience, such experiences differing considerably among themselves. Second, we might say that (at least some) sublime experiences present conflicting states of affairs, one corresponding to the thesis of ontological transcendence and one implicitly at odds with it.

I want to argue now, however, that no experience, sublime or otherwise, can present a state of affairs corresponding to that thesis and that sublime discourse that represents experience as so doing must be construed as misinterpreting the experience at its source. My argument is simple: just as it is impossible to have a visual experience that presents an invisible object, it is
impossible to have any kind of experience at all that presents an object or realm that is in no way epistemologically accessible. Therefore, to say (or imply or suggest) that I have had an experience of such a description is to say or imply or suggest what is, and must be, false. The appearance, therefore, in what is ostensibly sublime discourse, of statements that apparently instantiate the thesis of ontological transcendence must have its source in something other than experience of epistemologically inaccessible objects. Without going into the subject in great detail, we can imagine several possible such sources. One is a genuine experience of what is, or seems to be, inaccessible to ordinary and familiar modes of epistemological access. Such experience might or might not be a genuine part or phase of sublime experience. Another source might be a desire to explain or justify the theme of epistemological transcendence itself by an intuitive and unreflective appeal to epistemological inaccessibility. Yet another might be a barely conscious assumption of one of a variety of standard cultural codes, say religious or scientific ones, that suggest the idea of ontological transcendence. And yet another might simply be the more or less intuitive casting about, without a nice regard for logical consistency, for language compelling enough to convey the flavor of a complex and unusual sort of experience. And finally, of course, such language could have its source in some combination of the above.

In the last paragraph my “naturalistic” assumptions show themselves: experiences—even sublime experiences—must be of something “true”; they cannot be of something self-contradictory or otherwise incoherent, and if the latter seems to be the case, it must be that the apparently contradictory elements have differing “sources.” Thus sublime experiences cannot simply be fantasies or dreams, in which anything goes. For if they are simply such fantasies—and here is a small argument for this very deep assumption—they have no philosophical meaning whatsoever. For only if sublime experiences can be seen to tell us something (true or plausible) about “the world” or “ourselves,” and/or about what we can do or be, do they become of philosophical interest.

v

There is yet another reason to suppose that the thesis of ontological transcendence is false. This last reason is that there are elements in sublime experience that directly deny that thesis. I call attention to a theme in sublime discourse that I will label the intuition of nothingness or, for short, the theme of nothingness. This theme refers to the fact that, for all the revelatory force that sublime experience is frequently described as having, sublime discourse nevertheless often indicates, in a variety of ways, that there is nothing there to be revealed.

It may seem odd to seek evidence of such a theme in the writings of Wordsworth, whose version of the sublime has been called “positive,” in contrast with the “negative” sublime of other writers.27 Wordsworth’s view is called positive for, among other reasons, the fact that he typically finds in the sublime some greater self or mind—more moral and more creative—than his ordinary self. The particular part of the higher self that Wordsworth typically finds is what he calls the Imagination. Some commentators have, indeed, identified the Imagination as Wordsworth’s ultimately sublime object.28 From this standpoint, then, the “logic” of Wordsworth’s sublime experience seems to be more like that which we find in the Pseudo-Dionysius, with “Imagination” substituting for “God.” However, in the important Mount Snowdon passage of The Prelude, the poet writes of the Imagination as being located, not in himself but in Nature—and, more importantly for my present point, in a chasm: “At a distance not the third part of a mile / Was a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapour, / A deep and gloomy breathing-place, through which / Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams / Innumerable, roaring with one voice. / The universal spectacle throughout / Was shaped for admiration and delight, / Grand in itself alone, but in that breach / Through which the homeless voice of waters rose, / That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodged / The soul, the imagination of the whole.”29 Now the blue chasm, notice, as a chasm, is “nothing,” is a “hole” in something. But this particular chasm is not even a real chasm. It is a chasm, as it were, in “nothing,” in clouds and mist. It is, further, a kind of “no place,” not only because it is not literally a
place, but because it is where "voices" are "homeless," i.e., find no place. It is thus only in the most tenuous sense that this major figure of the Wordsworthian sublime indicates a presence; it more clearly indicates an absence.

The "nothing" also figures in Braverman's version of the sublime. As indicated already, Braverman's novel takes place in a visionary landscape, which, because of the predominance of water in it, is a kind of cosmic wetlands and which, because of its role as generator of everything, is figured as female. Now of course it is very clear in the text that the creative "substance" is only figured as a wetlands, because it is also clear that Braverman does not think of its generative force as an exclusively natural process; it is every bit as much cultural, historical, imaginative and linguistic. Indeed, it is just so complex and mysterious as to support the epistemological transcendence I argued for earlier. Now what this picture has to do with nothingness is this: Braverman's extravagant figures do not and cannot exhaust the meaning of this "substance" for each image can, strictly speaking, only recall one or the other of its manifestations. And though talking thus of manifestations implies a contrast with the entity manifested, existing as it were in a different ontological plane, Braverman's language sometimes explicitly denies such an implication, and she writes of these manifestations as "products" of "the great nothing."30 Such language recognizes that the tumultuous and accidental upheavals of the natural world, of history, of the human soul have nothing—a void—as their center and source, so to speak. It is experience of this nothing, then, with which Braverman's women, and especially the bruja Marta, are intimate. And it is also with respect to this nothingness that Braverman constructs her biggest concrete symbol, as it were, in the novel—L.A., where most of the novel takes place—L.A., "[t]his incomplete city which seems to have no recognizable past, no ground that could be called unassailably sacred. This incomplete city that speaks of an impending terror... It occurs to her that what she most appreciates about this City of Angels is that which is missing, the voids, the unstitched borders, the empty corridors, the not yet deciphered."31 For Braverman, L.A., because of its lacks and lacunae, is just the place where "the great nothing" becomes pregnantly apparent.

For all of Braverman's occasional mention of nothingness, the chief impression that her version of the sublime gives is of fullness and abundance. I mention her here, along with Wordsworth, only to make the point that even in sublime discourse that, on the whole, has a quite different cast, the theme of nothingness saliently appears. It appears as well—and quite strongly—in the Tao te Ching, along with the "generator" theme. The Tao is likened to "the eternal void, filled with infinite possibilities," or a "bellows ... empty yet infinitely capable."32 But the following is the Tao te Ching's clearest and most elaborate expression of the nothingness theme: "We join spokes in a wheel, / but it is the center hole / that makes the wagon move. // We shape clay into a pot, / but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want. // We hammer wood for a house, / but it is the inner space / that makes it livable. // We work with being, / but non-being is what we use."33 And a thousand years later, at the beginning of the Zen tradition, the sutra of the Sixth Patriarch puts it thus: "All Buddha ksetras (lands) are as void as space. Intrinsically our transcendent nature is void and not a single dharma (thing) can be attained. It is the same with the Essence of Mind, which is a state of 'Absolute Void' (i.e., the voidness of non-void)."34

Finally, in Georges Bataille, we find sublime discourse most self-consciously focused on nothingness. Bataille takes this theme to be the very center of the experience I am calling sublime. Thus, in distinguishing his own view of such an experience from one according to which an ontologically transcendent reality is revealed, i.e., traditional mystical experience, Bataille writes: "On the subject of 'visions,' of 'words' and of other 'consolations,' common in ecstasy, Saint John of the Cross evinces if not hostility, at least reserve. Experience has meaning for him only in the apprehension of a God without form and mode. Saint Theresa in the end only valued 'intellectual vision.' In the same way, I hold the apprehension of God—be he without form and without mode (the 'intellectual' and not the sensuous vision of him), to be an obstacle in the movement which carries us to the more obscure apprehension of the
unknown; of a presence which is no longer in any way distinct from an absence."35

VI

There are thus several powerful reasons to doubt the thesis of ontological transcendence. But, as my discussion has also shown, there are some reasons to believe it. One such reason, or possible reason, that I have not stressed is just the theme of epistemological transcendence itself. I put forward the thesis of ontological transcendence as an interpretation of the theme of epistemological transcendence. But of course if that thesis is the only possible interpretation of that theme (or only reasonable one), then the theme of epistemological transcendence becomes itself a powerful reason for believing the thesis of ontological transcendence, for it becomes indirect evidence for the latter. And in such circumstances the weight of considerations for and against the thesis of ontological transcendence might well seem simply to balance one another. In which case, sublime discourse could seem hopelessly confused, indeed, radically self-contradictory. And such a result could mean that, quite irrespective of the argument against theory that I have been discussing, a theory of the sublime would be precluded from the beginning by the very incoherence of its ostensible subject matter.

So to conclude might make nearly everyone happy. It would, I suspect, please those rationalists who have probably always thought—if they have thought about it at all—that the stuff I call sublime discourse is gibberish. And it would very likely gratify those newer bands of irrationalists who, fed up with rationalist traditions, think that the sublime is the cat’s pajamas precisely because it foils rationalism.

(Now each of these factions has a point. Sublime discourse often is, in many respects, gibberish—even if in some cases splendid gibberish—as any language might be that tries to articulate the extraordinary and stupendous in the very throes of confronting it. And it probably does foil rationalism in more than one sense—as does so much else in the world. After all, there is a perfectly good sense—though of course not every possible sense—in which Gödel’s proof foils rationalism or in which that proof shows that arithmetic foils rationalism. That being so, I should be very surprised indeed if sublime discourse and the experience it expresses did not also foil rationalism in quite a few ways.)

Nevertheless I think it premature to conclude, on the basis of the evidence and analysis presented that sublime discourse is radically incoherent. There is another interpretation (possibly many others) of the theme of epistemological transcendence. And that being so, the weight of considerations so far given falls heavily in favor of rejecting the interpretation of that theme I have postulated, i.e., the thesis of ontological transcendence. And doing so at least leaves open the possibility, for the nonce, of a theory of the sublime.

Rather than necessitating the postulation of an entity or a realm that is epistemologically inaccessible, the theme of epistemological transcendence may simply mean that for any possible given set of routes of epistemological access to “reality,” that set is insufficient to provide a complete understanding or grasp of “the real” (and hence the relevance of the allusion above to Gödel’s proof). Epistemological transcendence, in other words, may not presuppose any ontology and may not directly concern “the real” at all, but only the limitations of any attempts to grasp it, whatever it is or is taken to be. I shall not here further explicate this rendition of the theme of epistemological transcendence nor give any attempt to justify it. Trying to figure out more clearly (1) what it might mean, (2) whether it is indeed presented in sublime experience, (3) what, if so, there might be about such experience that could present an epistemological transcendence of that form, and finally, (4) whether epistemological transcendence as so interpreted is warrantable or believable are tasks—among many other tasks—at least for more talk about the sublime, if not for a theory of the sublime.

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The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism mourns the passing away in 1992 of Professor Guy Sircello, whose personal and professional contributions to the field of aesthetics have been enormous. We thank Ms. Theresa Andrews for her help in publishing this paper, submitted to the Journal by Professor Sircello shortly before his death.

1. An earlier version of this essay was read at a session of the American Society for Aesthetics Meeting in Portland, Oregon, in October, 1991. I owe thanks to my commentator, Robert Martin of UCLA, for helping me to see how that version needed improvement.


3. Longinus, op. cit., p. 47.

4. Ibid., p. 48.


7. Ibid.


10. Ibid., p. 53.


13. Ibid.


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., p. 15.

17. Ibid., p. 197.


20. Ibid., pp. 18–19.


23. Ibid., p. 25.


25. Ibid., p. 384.


31. Ibid., p. 33.


33. Ibid., p. 11.
