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The Sight of Sublimity

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## Abstract

This work explores the concept of the sublime through my experiences as someone with aphantasia, a condition that prevents the ability to visualize mental images. I begin by discussing my own experience with literature and the sublime, and how I came to be interested in this topic. Then, I provide a brief overview of the history of sublime theory, from Longinus to Burke to Kant. Following the theory, the main topic of this paper involves the writers of the Romanticism Period. Sublimity takes a hold in literature through their pioneering poetry, and it is explored heavily through the body of this paper. As I discuss my own experiences with the sublime in literature, and how they compare to the theories of other thinkers, there are connections made about not only my personal relationship with the sublime, but its metaphorical and societal impact. Overall, this paper aims to show that the sublime is not simply a visual experience, but can also be experienced through language and other sensory means in a unique and deeply personal way.

Literature is something that I personally have always connected with very strongly. Its ability to engage a person and create emotional response without the need for visual or physical input is something that is incredible to me. Great literature has the capacity for an overwhelming amount of personal response, and its abilities have affected me many times in life. Emotional response to literature is a common experience, but the reason it is so riveting for me is because I experience aphantasia. Aphantasia is an inability to visualize mental images or things that are not present- so recalling faces, orientation, and memory recall are very difficult. As someone who experiences this condition, I am often asked why I value my experiences with literature so much. If it is a medium that relies on imagery and visuals to have impact, how can I still be affected by it? This was a question that I was never able to answer myself, and spent a lot of time pondering.

I was introduced to the concept of the sublime in my very first college literature class. Many of the authors we read- Mary Shelley, Daniel Defoe, William Wordsworth- all employed sublime ideas, and the discussion of the topic sparked an interest in me. The stimulation of awe and grandeur that was called the sublime is something that I experienced when I read literature, but the characters always experienced the sublime with visual input of grand landscapes or nature. This began my exploration of my experience with the sublime. I wanted to know how I could experience these feelings when reading even though I could not imagine what the authors wrote. Thus, I decided to investigate the sublime to determine what exactly it was, and why exactly it could have an impact on me.

The basis of sublime theory existed over two thousand years ago, and has continued to expand and change over the course of thousands of years. For this project, it was my goal to read

most of the ‘crucial’ sublime works, whether they be theory or practice, to give myself a more concrete understanding of what “the sublime” is. Through ancient theorist Longinus, to Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, the basis of theory was laid, before expanding through modern times with theorists such as Barbara Claire Freeman. I wanted to have a basis of understanding on how the subtle was conceptualized before I continued. After theory, I investigated the works of Romantic poets- a movement most often associated with the sublime- to see what sublime theory looked like in motion. Most importantly, I spent time with each writing to think about my perspective in association with the reader’s beliefs on the sublime. The project was about my conceptualization of sublimity as a non-visual human, and only through careful self-reflection would I be able to fully understand how my experiences compare to these great authors.

## **I. Elevated Words: Longinus’ Foundational Theory**

The earliest source that is considered in discourse of the sublime dates back to approximately the first century CE, though the exact dates it was written (and the exact author) are unknown. Commonly attributed to a man named Cassius Longinus, his work *On The Sublime*, or *Peri Hypsous*, provides the framework for much, if not all, of the discourse surrounding the sublime in the next two thousand years. Since he is considered a philologist– someone who studies the history of languages, especially by looking closely at literature– Longinus’ theory largely focuses on the literary aspect of the Sublime. This is important to note because he uses both philosophy and examination of language to give us his reasonings on the sublime, and thus much of his discussion is centered around the portrayal of the Sublime within literature, and how it could be accurately replicated or tragically detracted from. In fact, his definition of the Sublime in specific regards to literature reads that it requires “a certain loftiness and excellence of

language,” which “takes the reader out of himself...the Sublime, acting with an imperious and irresistible force, sways every reader whether he will or no” (Longinus 11). He adds to this definition: “that which is admirable ever confounds our judgement, and eclipses that which is merely reasonable or agreeable” (Longinus 11). Through this definition, Longinus provides a framework, or a set of principles, that sublimity relies on in art, specifically written works.

Longinus argues for five main tenets that go into achieving the literary Sublime. The first two, grandeur of thought and frequently spirited passions, are derived from natural endowments. Individuals ripe for the sublime are born with the ability to have big dreams and be open to grand possibilities. Along with a propensity for the “fine madness” of a spirited passion, these two traits betray the “image of greatness of soul” that the sublime needs (Longinus 15). If a person has the first two qualifications, then the last three tenets they can use to achieve the sublime (specifically in written word) are the employment of figures of thoughts and speech, dignified expression or word choice, and elevated structure of writing. These derive assistance from art and experiences that each human has through their life. These experiences of art help a person to hone their abilities in order to create a piece of literature that is sublime. Throughout his treatise, Longinus does his best to break down each tenet and prove their importance to the craft of the Sublime.

He begins discussing the tenets with a closer look of the tenets of natural endowment: genius of thought and overwhelming passion. The former, argues Longinus, is something that is granted to a person innately. “Sublimity is an image of greatness of soul”, he argues (Longinus 15). He also states that the modern age (in his case, thousands of years ago) the souls of people who were incredibly likely to be susceptible to the sublime can be corrupted by worldly pleasures and vices, and that people who have been enslaved by current worldly joys will never

recover the great soul necessary to harness the Sublime- “all that is great in his soul fades away”.  
(Longinus 40)

The close of Longinus’ work provides his discussion on ‘modern times’– or as we read it, thousands of years ago in the first century AD. He concludes his paper with the question: why is this age so barren of great authors? Essentially, he argues that “the genius of the present age is wasted by that indifference which with a few exceptions runs through the whole of life” (Longinus 40). People who have been enslaved by his current worldly joys, he asserts, will never have the great soul necessary to harness the Sublime. Longinus argues that the ‘present’ generation is too far apathetic and society must look forward to encourage a new generation of poets and orators to find wealth in greatness of spirit. Even through the test of thousands of years, these words ring true. Burke discusses the impact of society on the greatness of the sublime. Wordsworth condemns the all-encompassing push towards progress as antithetical to nature’s sublime. Even contemporary theorists like Jean-Francois Lyotard recognize the impact of society- he views modern sublimity as a byproduct of destructive capitalism. The narrative of society’s impact on the sublime becomes important with the discussion of the Romantic poets, who focused on nature’s power with the sublime.

However, Longinus’ theory does not come into complete agreement with the Romanticism movement. As we will see later, Longinus comes into conflict with poets, particularly Wordsworth, because of their differing opinions on how the sublime can be replicated in literature. In Longinus’ time, only certain elevated themes were considered appropriate for poetic expression, like heroic journeys or expressions of love. These constraints around what was considered ‘great’ literature would still be followed for the most part until the

19th century with the introduction to Romanticism in Britain. Regardless of what his critiques on the literature are, he does theory a favor by posing the question that would tie the rest of sublime literary theory together: Is literature trying to replicate the sublime or is the sublime an inherent part of the literature? This is the question that each of the subsequent theorists and poets will either intentionally (or inadvertently) seek to answer.

## II. Elevated Ideas: The Works of Burke, Kant, and Freeman

Edmund Burke, who lived in the 18th century, is the next big revolutionary thinker with his own theories around the concepts of the beautiful and the sublime. Published in 1757, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* is Burke's comprehensive theory in aesthetics and the first modern categorization of the sublime and its compliments. Though he mentions the written aspect of sublimity, Burke is a philosopher, not a philologist, so his work strays away from the largely literature-focused lens that Longinus chose to position his definition of the sublime in. Burke begins his analysis with an examination into the idea of "taste", before discussing the aspects of what makes something 'beautiful' and what makes something 'sublime', the two distinct categories that he works with throughout the treatise. He finishes by defining the "how" and "why" of sublime experiences, and discusses the impact of words on conveying the emotion of sublimity.

Burke's first task is to provide his readers with a definition of the concept of taste. He feels that this is important because taste must have fixed principles that lay the groundwork for many universal human experiences. If it does not have fixed principles, there is no reason to try



to use it. As defined by Burke, taste is “that faculty or those faculties of the mind, which are affected with, or which form a judgement of, the works of imagination and the elegance arts” (Burke 45). He argues that the concept of taste is usually regarded as something that is subjective, but is actually a universal baseline for judgements that all humans share. This definition he provides for taste is a double edged sword: while the definition is the reason we are able to have a basis for an open interpretation of the sublime, Burke argues a definition also risks humans “circumscribing nature within the bounds of [their] own notions” (Burke 45). Taste is a concept just like the sublime, but Burke endeavours to provide ‘points of contact’ to create a definition for taste so that it is comprehensible to the human and still allows the full, natural idea to exist without categorization.

The connection between taste and the sublime comes from knowledge and judgement, which are associated with both. Even though Burke lays the foundation of his argument on the fact that human taste is universal, he makes a point to specify that this is a human’s unchanged taste. When a human goes through life, the knowledge or experience of pleasures of society changes their natural tastes, and “from this difference of knowledge... a difference in taste proceeds” (Burke 49). He also mentions that if someone strays away from their natural tastes, “a natural weakness of understanding” arises, thus impeding the sublime through faulty judgement and producing a lack of sublime capacity (the Sublime is what Longinus argues takes control of a person’s judgement) (Burke 52). According to Burke, while things like alcohol bring someone further away from their natural taste, being exposed to art like music, painting, and literature allows someone to develop their natural faculties and instead become closer to the sublime. Thus

raises the question: what is the sublime? How is it defined, what is its source, and how is it experienced by humanity?

The source of the sublime according to Burke is “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger...whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror” (Burke 58). He makes a very important addition to defining sublimity in his writings that Longinus did not provide: for an experience to be sublime, there must always be a terrible aspect to it. The sublime is produced with the effects of terror, which then builds “an unnatural tension and certain violent emotions of the nerves; it easily follows, from what we have just said, that whatever is fitted to produce such a tension must be productive of a passion similar to terror, and consequently must be a source of the sublime (Burke 106). Because of this addendum to sublimity’s definition, it firmly places sublimity as the oppositional force for beauty, which holds absolutely no terribleness. The two are positioned as opposites in many ways- the beautiful small versus the vast sublime, the clarity of beauty versus the obscurity of sublimity, and the inherent weakness of beauty versus sublime power, but the largest way they are separate is the societal influence of beauty and the supernatural influence of sublimity. As Burke mentions, “beauty [is] a social quality” that has an effect in the socialized mind of humans (Burke 60). However, the sublime’s primary influence is the solitary and the supernatural. Because it is in no way associated with society, the sublime exists as the meta-antithesis of the beautiful, which as we will see later is why many sublime experiences in literature are written with a solitary figure.

Burke also mentions a concept that will be used heavily with the Romantic poets: nature's sublimity. Many of the poets base most of their works on human interactions with nature, whether it be their own, a fictitious character, or humans and society as a whole. For the poets, natural grounds provide the setting for the sublime experiences in these poems because of its natural inclination towards the all-powerful and unfathomable. Nature causes the mind to be "so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it" (Burke 67). Many poets recount their experiences of the sublime and how they are provoked by the grandeur of nature, so it is interesting to note that this is a specific that Burke discusses in his theory.

Sublime experiences are influenced by the conditions in which they are produced, so each experience is unique from another. However, there are three main qualifications that allow for something to be sublime: obscurity, sense of power, and scale. Obscurity occurs when *full* knowledge is obscured, and as a result the sublime is cultivated— "When we know the full extent of any danger... a great deal of the apprehension vanishes" says Burke (Burke 68). But when we are unsure of one or multiple aspects of an object or environment, whether it be size, scale, appearance, etc., a sense of obscurity that enhances the feeling of sublimity is cultivated. Especially in nature, "dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions, than those have which are more clear and determinate" (Burke 70). A vague shadowed mountain shrouded in fog is a much grander sight than a clearly visible mountain, and so the former picture is much more likely to source a sublime experience than the latter.

Burke also argues that in cases where there is a “modification of power”, there is potential for the experience to be sublime. Whatever ‘thing’ that is exerting power over us must be bigger and more powerful than we are able to comprehend because we are unable to escape it. Additionally, “whenever strength is only useful, and employed for our benefit or our pleasure, then it is never sublime; for nothing can act agreeably to us, that does not act in conformity to our will” (Burke 72). Therefore, sublime experiences are when strength is exerted upon us, and so it can be said that the beautiful exists outside the sublime because there is no way beautiful things can exert power over us, rather in fact we often exert our power over them.

The “truest test of the sublime” and whether or not something can be considered as such is the concept of infinity (Burke 76). Aspects like vastness, uniformity, and succession are all aspects that limit a person’s ability to sense the bounds of the sublime through an attack on their senses (usually sight). They cultivate a sense of continuity that is very hard to break, especially if it is paired with the other aspects of the sublime in a vast spectacle. Once one of the senses is struck by something vast, the person may not recover their faculties until the source of grandeur has been removed.

In his final section, Burke discusses the realm of constructed sublime, specifically sublime constructed through literature and words. Words have a great “affection of the soul” which allows writing to conduct the sublime so well (Burke 123). There are multiple ways to create an effect of the sublime through literature, and often a vast array of wording, including aggregate words, is used. Aggregate words allow there to be a conveyance of abstract ideas without having to create an ‘image’ for them, allowing poetry to “affect rather by sympathy than

imitation” like other art forms do (Burke 126). Because there is no goal of exact replication of situation, but rather replication of feeling, words allow the sublime experience to be tailored to each individual, much like how sublime experiences in nature do. And while there are some shortcomings of sublime writing like Longinus discusses, “the ability for words to strongly [convey] the passions... fully compensate[s] for their weakness in other respects” (Burke 128). Since passion is what most strongly creates a sense of sublimity, writing becomes an extremely effective tool to convey the sublime.

In sublimity’s representation, Burke has a nuanced view of how it is constituted. “Words were only so far to be considered as to show upon what principle they were capable of being the representatives of these natural things”, he argues, and they are “able to affect us often as strongly as the things they represent, and sometimes much more strongly” (Burke 128). His argument is that the literature is representative of the sublime, not sublime within itself, but sometimes can even exceed the emotion present within a sublime situation. Overall, I agree with the idea that Burke is presenting here, in that there is merely a reflection of the sublime in writing, but the writing may cause a reaction that is more profound than experiencing the actual sublime. This positionality stands relatively firm with Longinus’ attitude towards the subject, in which both exalt the literary sublime as something that can come very close to the peak human experience of the sublime. However, they both make the important differentiation that the content in the literature merely reflects sublime emotions, rather than being a source of it.

Burke does the job of expanding on Longinus’ theory, but a few decades later, another philosopher brings his new and slightly different perspective on the theory of the sublime.

Immanuel Kant, who published his work *Critique of Judgement* in 1790, became the next voice in the conversation around sublimity. An 18th-century philosopher, theorist, and Enlightenment thinker, Kant was widely regarded as one of the most influential modern philosophers and a key player in the theory of the sublime. He takes the words of Longinus and Burke and expands them to explain his ideas involving different aspects of the sublime and how it is created. Kant explores the bounds of human judgement and how sublime exists within universal human experiences like nature.

From Kant's perspective, the sublime occurs when human understanding encounters something we cannot comprehend, specifically something "which is absolutely great" (Kant 87). This could be quantity, size, or limitlessness, but the effect of these characteristics forcibly creates an experience where the human understanding fails. Failure of understanding and judgement encompass most of Kant's approach to the sublime- because a person cannot use their judgement to comprehend the situation, they feel afraid, and the terrifying sublime is created. Confronting the sublime causes us to lose our sensibilities, and we are forced to either reject the sublime in favor of reason or reject reason in favor of the sublime.

The bulk of Kant's theory focuses on the relationship between size and judgement. If something is infinitely large, often there is potential for the sublime to be created. Kant classifies the struggle between size and judgement into two discrete categories: the mathematically sublime and the aesthetic (or dynamic) sublime. Mathematical sublime situates itself on a basis of numbers, calculations, and comparative measurements, or mathematics. When something is incomprehensible to the human mind using these foundational tools- say, the size of the

universe- the mathematical sublime will occur. Aesthetic sublime, on the other hand, is “a merely subjective standard lying at the basis of the reflective judgment upon magnitude” (Kant 87).

Aesthetic sublimity will often occur in situations where the event, like a thunderstorm, is terrifyingly grand, but holds little power if it is merely an observational rather than experiential circumstance. The aesthetic sublime only holds power if the human mind is present and judgement fails as a result of experiencing the event, and it holds little power if someone is merely hearing about or rethinking the event. He uses these categories to differentiate between the ways sublime experiences can take hold of human judgement.

In terms of categorizing the sublime as a concept or a reaction, Kant says the following: “The sublime is not to be sought in the things of nature, but only in our ideas...consequently it is the state of mind produced by a certain representation with which the reflective judgement is occupied, and not the object, that is to be called sublime” (Kant 88-89). Hence, his ideas about the origin of the sublime contradict what many other philosophers (and later poets) thought. He puts the credit towards the human mind for conjuring up this reaction, rather than the natural landscape that prompted the failure of judgement. This is why he focuses so heavily on his two categories of the sublime, because he focuses the root of sublimity on the failure of judgement in one of two ways, mathematical or aesthetic.

Kant’s theory sparked both support and backlash, but one of the most comprehensive new perspectives on Kant and the literary sublime as a whole is Barbara Claire Freeman and her 1995 work *The Feminine Sublime*. With her work, she effectively analyzes many of the previous big-name sublime theorists with her own personal lens of feminist theory. The 1700’s (when

Kant and Burke were theorizing) is when gender as a modern concept was codified, therefore being configured differently and thought about differently than before. Her goal is to define the concept of the feminine sublime, not as “a specifically feminine subjectivity”, but rather as a way to “indicate a position of resistance with respect to the patriarchal order” that is open to all people in dealing with conceptualizing the sublime (Freedman 10,11). Her reification of gender in regards to the sublime had fascinating implications to many of the symbols, theories, and devices associated with and attributed to the sublime.

Freeman’s critique of Kant is especially interesting: she argues that the Kantian mathematical sublime “arises from a moment when the self confronts and overcomes an obstacle or “blocking agent””, which puts the individual in a place of conquering or overwhelming the blocking agent which often is the mind or the judgement (Freeman 74). Often, the imagination (which is characterized with feminine traits like beauty and curiosity) becomes the blocking agent that attempts to make the sublime ‘make sense’, while human judgement (which is characterized often with masculine traits like strength and power) is the vehicle for overcoming the obstacle. Both cannot exist simultaneously, so “the imagination's defeat is the key to reason's triumph” (Freeman 70). By placing the essence of Kant’s theory in a societal light of gendered expectations, Freeman argues that Kant’s flaw comes from his theory’s inherent lack of coexistence. Because “the attainment of the Kantian sublime is dependent upon a sacrifice”, there is no way it can align with feminine sublimity (Freeman 69). This is a unique perspective than Freeman places into the dialogue of theory, and it does a service to the idea of sublimity as a whole: not necessarily because she is critiquing Kant, but because her theory shows how complex and individualistic the experience of the sublime is. Each philosopher approaches the



idea differently, and this cements the fact that though sublime experiences can be experienced by anyone, the way they are experienced and subsequently thought about vary on an extremely personal level.

### **III. Romanticism: Sublime's Poetical Renovation**

As we have seen many of the early philosophers agree, written word is one of the most effective ways to convey the sublime without an individual actually having to experience it. In his treatise, Burke explains that “poetry, with all its obscurity, has a more general, as well as a more powerful dominion over the passions, than the other art” (Burke 69). Poetry is more effective in creating sublimity because it can create more obscure and unsure images better than a painting, which is usually a clearer portrayal of something. The “coolness” with which paintings can be regarded is in direct opposition to the “warmth” or spirit of passions that is evoked through the written word (Burke 68). Thus, naturally, much of sublime literature comes from poetry, and sublimity may only be created in special circumstances. Longinus maintains that “a writer can only learn from art when he is to abandon himself to the direction of his genius”, and Burke, Kant, and even Freeman all align with this belief of the importance of passion (Longinus 12). Great poets who attempt a movement of sublimity from author to reader must be in possession of not only large amounts of passion, but a great deal of skill.

This skill-and-passion combination became a key aspect of a time in Britain called the Romantic Period, which occurred only a few years after Kant and Burke's publications.

Beginning in the last decade of the 18th century, the Romanticism Movement, as it is commonly called, was an artistic movement that emphasized freedom, emotion, and use of the imagination. The period started with the publishing of the *Lyrical Ballads* anthology in 1798, written by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who were both forerunners of the movement. This collection of their poems was a hallmark of this movement, which began to stray away from the conventions that earlier poets used in their works. It is very important when reading these poems to realize that the Romantics were developing an entirely new style of poetry. They were defying typical conventions of poetry like elevated language and specific scheme, and instead creating more free-flowing poems that allowed for a completely new exploration of the sublime.

Wordsworth's *Preface to The Lyrical Ballads* (1801) explains his thoughts on how *his* new style of poetry was more true to what he aimed to accomplish in conveying ideas of sublimity. He states that "the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose" and adds, "should the Poet interweave any foreign splendour of his own with that which the passion naturally suggests: it is sufficient to say that such addition is unnecessary" (Wordsworth 1800). This proposition was revolutionary, since all poets before tended to stick to Longinus' structure of literary elevation and lofty language conventions to achieve the splendor associated with the sublime. Wordsworth, however, argues that the imitation of "ordinary" language is more akin to showing honesty-- the personification and grandeur of style common in earlier poetry are only occasionally prompted by passion, and often are inserted by prescription. Wordsworth continued to champion the idea of simple language to convey grand ideas throughout all of his works. The question then becomes: how is it possible to achieve the Sublime in literature if previous conventions that have allowed others to replicate sublimity have

been set aside? According to Wordsworth, it is relatively simple. “[P]oetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” he explains. “It takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind” (Wordsworth 1800). Therefore, he is not arguing against passion’s influence on the actual feelings of the sublime, but rather argues that after the sublime is experienced, it may be recalled with the buffer of tranquility to create poetry that is authentic and true to sublimity without the addition of unnecessary wording to artificially manufacture that feeling.

In addition, the concept of nature is incredibly important to the Romantic poets, who derived much of their ‘sublime inspiration’ from experiences that they have with the natural world. Wordsworth continually delivers this idea of nature as the source of his inspiration, notably in the way he characterizes his own experiences with the Sublime in his poem entitled “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798”. In this poem, there are recurring instances of Wordsworth’s experiences above the abbey inspiring large emotional reactions- because of the grand landscape around him, the inclination to deep thought is the direct consequence of a sublime experience. Describing his experience, he recounts that he felt “a presence that disturbs [him] with the joy/ Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime/ Of something far more deeply interfused” than simply an appreciation of his surroundings (Wordsworth, Lines 95-98). This is his recount of the feelings associated with a sublime experience.

Interestingly, we see throughout the poem that Wordsworth feels much more comfortable with the natural sublime than with experiences of society. Stemming from his distrust of capitalism, his distaste with industrialism, and his love for nature, readers see that Wordsworth feels comforted by the sublime. In essence, the gift that Tintern Abbey's scenery has given him is the understanding there are things beyond the visible or experiential and he finds solace in these more readily than in human institutions. Wordsworth writes, "In hours of weariness, sensations sweet" – referring to the sublime experiences he experiences in nature– "passing even into [his] purer mind/ With tranquil restoration" (Wordsworth, lines 28, 30-31). These lines allow us clarity into two aspects of Wordsworth's relationship with the sublime. First, is that he states clearly that the sublime is a feeling that can be remembered but not replicated. He has the ability to summon the essence of sublimity when he is feeling overwhelmed by urban industrialism, which allows him to escape himself to become a "living soul" that transcends the human world, but he very clearly calls the resulting emotion "tranquility" and not "sublimity". Second, it shows that Wordsworth does not believe in the localization of the sublime. He was originally inspired to sublimity by his surroundings in Tintern Abbey, but without the sublime inspiration, the feeling can only be replicated in the less intense form, which is tranquility. The fear of experiencing the grandeur and scale of the sublime is no longer there, leaving only the positive emotions of the experience able to be replicated by the human mind.

Continuing to explore his relationship with nature, tranquility, and sublimity, Wordsworth wrote the first two parts of "The Prelude", a poem originally drafted in 1799 to his friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The poem continued to grow, and by the time of his death in 1850, was fourteen parts and still was not finished. "The Prelude" is arguably Wordsworth's 'contemporary

epic' and discusses his upbringing from an autobiographical poetic perspective. In the first book, titled "Childhood and School-time", he seeks to explain how his life is intertwined with nature and how his early personal experiences incline him to a life of passion and sublimity. He recalls his earliest memories involve "the fairest of all Rivers" in combination with his Nurse. Early on, Wordsworth feels that nature has given him "Among the fretful dwellings of mankind/ A knowledge, a dim earnest, of the calm/ That Nature breathes among the hills and groves" (Wordsworth, lines 13-15)

A key tenet of Romantic sublime is the belief that the natural sublime is the originator of sublime emotions, but Wordsworth makes the distinction that writing it down or recalling the memory allows a ripple to be created. According to his ideas, the original experience may not be currently occurring, but because an individual has that prerequisite experience they are able to recall and re-experience the sublime feeling (albeit to a lesser degree). With this position, he agrees with Burke in his idea that literature is able to reinvigorate those feelings of the sublime, and comes into agreement with Jean-Francois Lyotard, who argues that great works of art are transformative, that there is a before and after so grand that the person experiencing the even changes their thought process or outlook- which seems very similar to the "unknown modes of being" that Wordsworth characterizes his primary sublime experience with in "The Prelude" (Wordsworth, line 420).

He also comes into contact with nature often as he grows older, which develops his comfort with the beauty of nature and the experience of the sublime. Through many interactions, he begins to see the duality of Nature: something that is both beautiful and admirable, but is

capable of being terrifying. Nature is characterized by Wordsworth as something cruel and also something kind. She often loves to seek "a favor'd Being" and give him "gentlest visitation" by her beauty, and yet other times "it delight[s] her...to employ severer interventions" of terror (Wordsworth 1850). This shows the duality that nature is capable of, and why it is so perfect of a vessel for the sublime, because it contains both sublimity and beauty in it and depending on the context (or as Wordsworth describes it, the "dealings" of the whims of Nature).

Much of Wordsworth's poetry deals with the idea of presentation. Nature presents landscapes to him, and the sublime emotion is caused by the presentation of the surroundings to his human judgement. However, another Romantic poet does much of the opposite in his representation of the sublime: Percy Bysshe Shelley. Shelley came about twenty years after Wordsworth in the second generation of Romantic poets. These poets were slightly different in their approach to the sublime: though the way it was presented through their works was still new, they were able to build off of the conventions of Wordsworth and other early Romantics, rather than having to completely create a new poetic style. As a result, they were able to hone into their messaging in a more complex way than their predecessors. While Wordsworth's style mostly focused on presentation of the sublime, Shelley manipulates the Romantic style to focus on representation of the sublime.

Shelley's representation of the sublime is most easily seen in his poem "To A Skylark", completed in 1820. In this poem, Shelley represents the human soul by a skylark, and writes an extended metaphor using the traits of a skylark to describe the human soul. The bird's ability for flight, freedom, and beauty allows the narrator to show the passion of the soul through the

actions of the bird. Even the bird's song is representative of the soul's capacity for the sublime, in which the soul can deliver "profuse strains of unpremeditated art" when exposed to sublime landscapes or experiences (Shelley, line 5). By following the 'bird' through landscapes and songs, the author is able to convey the soulful experience of passion by saying that "Heaven is overflow'd" with the sublime (Shelley, line 30). Using this extended metaphor allows for Shelley to more deeply develop the characteristics of the sublime, and his style uses a lot more concrete imagery to describe sublimity, which Wordsworth tends to be further away from in his emphasis of sublime obscurity.

Shelley does employ his fair share of sublime obscurity, however, and though "Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni" retains the stylistic idiosyncrasies that are characteristic of his time while matching in imagery more closely to Wordsworth. This poem gives Shelley's most concrete definition of the sublime within his works:

The everlasting universe of things  
 Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
 Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—  
 Now lending splendour, where from secret springs  
 The source of human thought its tribute brings  
 Of water (1-6)

Shelley's approach to the sublime is of something unexplainable, but yet he uses more concrete language and imagery than previous Romantic poets to attempt to describe the concept.

Most notably, a lot of his language, like the choice to use words such as “flows” and “waves”, shows his idea of the sublime’s water-like characteristics. He describes sublimity in this way, and it creates a fusion of the universe and his mind through flow: flow of the sublime, flow of the water imagery present within the poem, and flow of the poem itself. Sublime landscapes are about flow to Shelley, and it is very clear that he regards the flow of the soul to be a direct consequence of the flow of sublimity. After describing the greatness of the mountain and the vastness of the landscape he sees, the narrator feels a clarity of mind, which he states renders and receives fast influencings/Holding an unremitting interchange/With the clear universe of things around (Shelley, lines 38-40). We can see that Shelley puts a great deal more emphasis on the inner workings of feeling and soul than Wordsworth. While Wordsworth simply uses the sublime feelings he experiences to exalt nature, Shelley consistently describes the relationship between the soul and what he is experiencing to find a deeper connection between humanity and the universe.

However, the two poets agree in a majority of their ideas. It is important to note both Wordsworth and Shelley’s strict adherence to their natural tie with sublime. They argue that human society is mean and vulgar and below sublimity, which is why nature is the place which provides them with sublime experiences. I find it very interesting that Wordsworth specifically does not entertain the possibility of human society being sublime because he does not feel it can convey it. However, I would have to argue that society and its ideas *do* have potential for the sublime that the poets do not consider. As Lyotard comments, the sublime is “hidden in the cynicism of innovation”, which is extremely relevant with the landscape of early 19th-century industrialization that Wordsworth finds himself in (Lyotard 18). Because nature was familiar,



comfortable, and lacking the cynicism of society, it naturally became a much better canvas for the Romantic sublime.

When considering what makes something sublime- obscurity, sense of power, and scale, according to Burke- we can see that the industrialized landscape of Wordsworth's day (and by extension, ours) has vast potential for the sublime. The rapidness of new technology being developed, along with the incredible power and rapid diaspora with which they spread is a sublime experience in and of itself. However, it may be because the technologies were still in their infancy, and have not had time to seem sublime because of their relative size specifically in comparison with nature. Nature seems vastly larger than society, which is why nature becomes the easy and incontestable target for their sublime. Conversely, the contemporary world holds so much technology with so much precision in almost every aspect of life that it is impossible for the human understanding to comprehend, therefore giving it a much greater potential now to evoke the sublime and piquing my interests rather than the interests of the Romantic poets. The theoretical aspect of sublimity has certainly changed alongside the growing industrialization of society, so it is important we track modern patterns of sublime writing as they continue to present themselves in the future.

#### **IV. Personal Contextualization of the Sublime**

The goal of this project was one of exploration, not only within the literary landscape but also within my personhood. In delving into this project, my goal was to learn how to connect deeper with literature. Being able to connect with my responses to literature can help me better

understand how I exist both as a reader and a writer, especially with regards to visualization and imagery. The literary sublime in regards to the Romantic poets especially intrigued me because they derived their experiences from natural experiences, and I felt that poetry did well in encompassing their imagery. But in studying the presence of imagery and sublimity, I wanted to also consider my positionality as someone without a visual memory. This vastly changes the way I experience the sublime myself, and also changes the way I interact and respond to the poetry I was reading.

I wanted to do some research on the condition of aphantasia because I knew it was a relatively uncommon condition and wanted to see if any of the research done would show me something I hadn't expected. From exploring, I found out that research into aphantasia has only begun to pick up within the last decade, and very notably within the last three years, as some individuals are experiencing aphantasia associated with the COVID-19 virus. Much like conditions such as parosmia, which gives a person abnormal taste and scent sensations and may last long after they have recovered from COVID, aphantasia has become a reported symptom of the virus as well. There are many more researchers, studies, and professionals available than in decades previous. As a result, there is more information available to people with aphantasia to research and understand their condition better.

I did not experience aphantasia as a result of contracting COVID-19, but rather as a result of a traumatic brain injury (TBI) I sustained as a child in 2013. Before my TBI, I was able to dream and imagine; I have recollections of dreams and my family remembers me sharing my dreams with them growing up. At the time of the injury there were much more important things

to worry about, but as years went on and my other complications began to smooth out, I noticed that I hadn't dreamt since the accident. I began to also notice that even though I was able to recollect memories and recall environments, none of the recollection was happening with my visual memory. I found this very interesting, and began to talk to family members and friends about their experiences with visual memory. Because only 1-3% of the population experiences a form of aphantasia, I only found one friend who experienced the same thing, but they had *never* had a visual memory; they were born with aphantasia. Mine had seemingly happened as a result of head trauma- but was that possible?

Turns out it is possible. In 2020, University of Exeter professor Dr. Adam Zeman proposed a categorization of 'non-congenital aphantasias' which included two parts: neurological aphantasia (which occurs because of brain trauma) and psychogenic aphantasia (which occurs because of psychological disorders). Neurological aphantasia sounds exactly like what I experience, in which the onset occurs following brain damage and damages the visual cortex, which allows the brain to gather information from the eyes and integrate the visual information into the rest of the brain. If the visual cortex cannot work properly, then the brain cannot receive the visual messages, thus creating a lack of visual memory.

When thinking about the lack of visual memory I had, one important question about my research surface: "Was I able to experience the sublime?" and then, consequently, "If I can, was I able to experience it as strongly as everyone else?" These questions were something I considered the entire time I was reading the theory and poetry I had set out for myself. If the answer was no to the first question, it would be impossible to answer the second.

Luckily, when I began to read the theory, I figured out that I can, in fact, experience feelings of the sublime. I recall times when I've driven across vast landscapes of hills or rode across an ocean that stretched as far as I could see, and remember feeling an incredible smallness and apprehension, but awe at the same time. This was the sublime that all of the theory discussed and I was happy to recall these memories, because I vividly recall the experiences. However, when I thought about it more, I realized that I was not really experiencing the feeling of "tranquility" that Wordsworth describes when he recalls memories of the sublime. He mentions that the tranquility is just a less intense form of the sublime that occurs when he recalls his sublime experience. So why do I experience sublimity, but not that tranquility that happens after?

I think that the lack of a secondary sublimity I experience is because of my lack of visual memory. If I cannot have the visual memory recall of the original sublime landscape that made the original sublime experience, there is no tranquility that comes from the memory. From what I understand, the sublime relies heavily on the visual to create the sense of the sublime, so because I cannot recreate the visual inside my head, there is no reinvigoration of the sublime. This is very interesting to me because I can still recall the sublime experiences, but do not really experience any grand emotions associated with the recollection. Thus, I experience sublimity, but not necessarily to the degree of some individuals. Shelley is someone who discusses the merit of dreams as a connection to the sublime, which I found especially interesting in regards to visual memory. He theorizes that "gleams of a remoter world/Visit the soul in sleep", and I found it so intriguing that dreams- something I can no longer experience- were a key connection to the sublime in the mind of Shelley (Shelley 49-50).

The theoretical writings were especially helpful and allowed me to form an understanding of the sublime and how I believe it exists and can be experienced. Each author was able to add to my understanding of the sublime, and each of their writings allowed me to handpick what I agreed and disagreed with based on my worldview and experiences. It was especially helpful to recognize that one concrete definition of the sublime did not exist, and from this realization I was able to read each separate theory with understanding of how they impacted each other but ultimately were all different theories.

For example, Kant's theory on *a priori* and the "state of mind" necessary for the sublime makes a lot of sense in context with my aphantasia. *A priori*, which refers to reasoning or knowledge which proceeds from theoretical deduction rather than from observation or experience, is how I experience the recollection of sublime experiences. I cannot experience the visualization of sublime experiences, so I rely entirely on theoretical deduction and physical experiences to build my knowledge. At the same time, Freeman's theory on feminine sublime allowed me to understand the deep sublime narrative of struggle and domination, and the way she advocated for coexistence while not undermining the conflict the sublime causes makes a lot of sense to me. The way that the theories interact with each other is just as important as the theories themselves.

It is also important to address why I chose the medium of literature to study my aphantasia rather than a medium that would provide me with the visual aspect my brain cannot manufacture. In short, I feel that there is a sort of grandeur that can be replicated through

literature better than any other medium. Like Longinus and Burke discuss, crafting something that leaves room for the human brain to replicate the scope and grandeur the author is discussing allows for a replication of feeling in those that hold grandeur of thought and affections of passion. However, I would argue that the true mark of the Sublime is not perfect replication, but imbuing the essence of the Sublime within the writing. As someone who cannot perform the visual replication that is allegedly necessary for the greatness of this literary form to occur, it mandates that there must also be something within the writing itself that does not necessarily rely on visualization to take it to its most complete form. I believe that true Sublime literature holds sublimity within itself, and that by reading the writing each person has engaged in a sublime act. Burke mentions the grandeur and lack of knowledge that is reliant on the sublime, and the careful attention the authors put into the writing relies on an impossible to pinpoint vastness of possibility. The wide range of diction, meter, metaphor, and other tools they could use is gradually infinite, and the way they specifically chose to construct the sentence is a piece of Sublimity in itself, let alone what the actual writing expresses. This double layer of writing sublimity and visualizing sublimity is hard to differentiate, but I believe I have that advantage because it is impossible for me to experience the latter form.

At the end of the study, this project has taught me three important things. Firstly, that the sublime derives its importance from humanity, and the fact that it has been researched and discussed for so long is because of its universality. As many of the theorists discuss, sublimity and its basis is a universal human experience- hence why society has been so interested in a topic that cannot be defined and yet has a universal background. Second, the fact that literature is so important to the development and exploration of sublime theory. As discussed, literature leaves

so much room for interpretation and personal worldview that each author is able to approach the same concept from a different viewpoint and create an entirely unique perspective on the sublime. Third, and perhaps the most important, is that there is no true definition of sublime. At the start, I was ready to make it my mission to read the different authors regarding the sublime and synthesize my knowledge into a concrete definition of this elusive subject. But now I realize that a definition of sublime is not really possible. Because of how individualistic the experience of sublimity is, there is not a single definition that could be specific enough to describe the sublime while still allowing the vast array of experiences, emotions, and worldviews to exist within the definition. Despite its universality, sublimity is a deeply personal idea that can only be defined on an individual level. I now understand what the sublime looks like for *me*, but there is no way for me to apply my definition to another person because the way they may think, feel, and experience the sublime is different than myself, even if it is by minutiae. Sublimity is a journey towards self-understanding, and at the end of the day great sublime literature- however that may be defined- is how we can explore and define the sublime for ourselves.

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