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English 2117

12 April 2018

Logic, Emotion, and the Sublime

A recurring theme during the romantic period, spanning from 1785-1832, is the sublime. There is no readily available description of the sublime that would do it justice, as it is an almost entirely abstract concept that is conceptualized differently by each individual. It is a mysterious force that has gripped the minds of many, not uniquely in the romantic period. “To a Skylark” by Percy Bysshe Shelley and “Ode to a Nightingale” by John Keats both focus on the song of the skylark and nightingale to makes connections about the sublime, and “The Windhover” by Gerard Manley Hopkins uses the flight of the titular bird; therefore all three use bird imagery to discuss the sublime. However, these three poems suggest that experiences of the sublime somewhat depend on how it is approached.

“To a Skylark” by Percy Bysshe Shelley employs a logical approach in the pursuit of experiencing the sublime. Shelley uses a skylark’s song as a means to understand the sublime; trying to understand the song is trying to understand the sublime. There is a clear logical structure that is used to try and understand the bird’s song, and it is composed of three different rhetorical approaches beginning with the bird’s environment. The first six stanzas focus on the sky, because the skylark flies too high to be seen which he characterizes the bird as “from Heaven, or near it” (Shelley 3). Without being able to see the source, he focusses on the sky which ranges from day to night. However, this line of inquiry is not sufficient and, in an attempt

to further understand the bird, the line of inquiry shifts and the next six stanzas ask what else could be like the bird. He compares the bird to a poet, a "high born maiden," a glow-worm, a rose, and the sound of "vernal showers." However, like the first line of inquiry, the comparisons bring Shelley no closer to understanding the bird or the sublime, and he shifts again to asking the bird to "Teach us, Sprite or Bird, / What thoughts are thine" (Shelley 61). The remaining nine stanzas are the last attempt at understanding by directly asking the bird. The poem applies a consistent structure, as each stanza's first and third lines are six syllables long, the second and fourth lines are five syllables long, and the final line is twelve syllables long. Also applying a regular rhyme scheme of ABAB CDCD and so on, this emphasizes the logical approach of the poem.

The speaker's approach to understanding the sublime is meticulous and consistent, but it is not successful. The speaker begins the poem with the motivation to understand the sublime, and he is no closer to understanding at the end as he was in the beginning, nor does he think anyone else could do so. The speaker associates the sublime with happiness, and he thinks that even if humans could ignore the negative he still does not know "how thy joy we ever should come near" (Shelley 95). He further implies the connection between the sublime and happiness by wishing the bird would teach him "half the gladness / That thy brain must know" (Shelley 100-101). Shelley's motivation goes even further than just the task of understanding, as he also wants to teach others about the sublime. He speculates that if he could understand the bird and the sublime "the world should listen then — as I am listening now" (Shelley 105). He aspires to understand the bird, because it has power over him, as he is listening to it, and he could have that power over others, because they would listen to him in the same way. Ultimately, though,

Shelley never experiences the sublime, which suggests that the sublime is not something logical or that can be approached with the intent of controlling it.

In contrast, “Ode to a Nightingale” uses an emotional approach in pursuit of experiencing the sublime. As in “To a Skylark” the nightingale’s song is used as a means of representing the sublime. However, whereas Shelley uses beautiful images, Keats uses sensory images to experience a feeling which leads the sublime, and they often lack clear logical structure or separation from one and other. Within the first two stanzas all five senses have made an appearance, but they are not used in a specific or consistent sequence. Not only lacking consistency, they are also sometimes used unconventionally, such as when he cannot identify the flowers at his feet, but knows they are flowers (Keats 42). The most conventional way to identify flowers is by sight, however instead he identifies them by scent, thereby mixing the two senses. The mixing of two different concepts is not unique to the senses, as distinctions between emotions and state of beings are also blurred. The poem begins with the statement that his “heart aches” because he is too happy, thereby mingling happiness and pain, which are traditionally very separate (Keats 1-6). Additionally, during the speakers experience of the sublime the distinctions between life and death are blurred. This poem does, however, stick to a specific structure of ten lines per stanza and a regular rhyme scheme of ABABCDECDE. The consistent structure does not emphasize logic, such as with Shelley, instead it neatly packages an emotional subject, that is rarely written about, in a way that is approachable to readers.

Keats’s approach has very little structure or clarity of progression, but the speaker has experienced the sublime. The nightingale is a focal point for the experience of the sublime, as leading up to it there is very intense sensory experience of his surroundings, and then a focus on

the nightingale. Like Shelley, Keats cannot see the nightingale which then leads him to associate the sublime with something out of this world, as he mentions that he may "drink, and leave the world unseen, / And with thee [nightingale] fade away into the forest dim" (Keats 19-20). Furthermore, when Keats experiences the sublime he is unified with the bird, along with the blurring of life and death, and experiences of the natural world dissipate. Instead he turns to focus on his state of being, and that in that moment it seems okay to die with no pain while the nightingale "art pouring fourth [its] soul abroad / In such an ecstasy" (Keats 57-58). As the speaker's last breath is exhaled, the nightingale is pouring out its soul, and through that they are united. Yet the bird is immortal, and the speaker subsequently breathes, which demonstrates the blurring of life and death. Furthermore, Keats's speaker's motives are different from Shelley's speaker, which may be a factor in why he experiences the sublime and Shelley's speaker does not. Keats's speaker seems to have no direct motive for experiencing the sublime, as the poem emphasizes emotion and feeling which suggests that Keats was in nature and through his senses and emotions he experienced the sublime. This further implies that the sublime cannot be approached logically.

"The Windhover" by Gerard Manley Hopkins employs aspects of both a logical approach and an emotional approach. With a varied syllable count, enjambment, and inconsistent rhyme scheme, the poem overflows from its constraints; as well, all of these suggest that the subject of the poem, the sublime, is too large to be contained by a specific form. The poem follows the sonnet form with fourteen lines, and a volta somewhat after the first eight. The syllable count is so varied because Hopkins is using a medieval metre with five heavily stressed syllables, and then unrestricted unstressed syllables; this logic underlies the seemingly illogical. The volta is

when Hopkins sees the bird, but begins slightly before then, which is unlike Shelley or Keats, and clear logic begins to further break down. Basic grammar or conventional logical sequence mostly disappear and is partly evident in the list: “air, pride, plume” (Hopkins 9) which, superficially, seem to have very little connection. The sequence of that list is unconventional, but if they were filled with more words they would all describe the bird; again, underlying the seemingly illogical is logic. The volta is also the beginning of the emotional experience which is the sublime. The speaker refers to himself for the first time by referring to his “heart in hiding” which “stirred for a bird” (Hopkins 7-8) which implies that he is affected emotionally by the bird.

Hopkins’s speaker, like Keats’s speaker, experiences the sublime, however he does so through a combination of a logical approach and an emotional one. Additionally, he has no clear motivation for understanding the sublime, and it seems to be an experience that overtakes him. Hopkins’s speaker experiences the sublime in a christian context, with references to Christ and God throughout; such as dedicating the poem “*To Christ our Lord*” and references like “minion” and “daylight’s dauphin.” Furthermore, the sublime is an emotional experience for the speaker, like Keats’s speaker, which he uses the word “buckle” to help convey. The footnotes mention that this use of buckle can encompass all of its possible, and paradoxical, meanings: “to prepare for action, to fasten together, to collapse” (Greenblatt 1550). Therefore, this nicely summarizes the overwhelming emotional experience of the sublime, as the ambiguity behind ‘buckle’ invokes a paradoxical reaction, as it is not clear how to react. This paradoxical emotional reaction intensifies in the last line of the poem: “Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion” (Hopkins 14). The first two words, “fall” and “gall,” convey violence and then “gold-vermilion” conveys

intense worth. Breaking down logic once the sublime is introduced, along with the paradoxical emotional reaction suggests that the sublime transcends both logic and emotion which blends and furthers the other two poems.

Interestingly, Hopkins was writing about a romantic period theme in the victorian era, when it was not being written about, in a manner that reaches back to the middle ages and forward to the 20th century. Hopkins transcendence of time somewhat reflects the prolonged obsession with the mystery of the sublime. The sublime is not uniquely a romantic period theme, and is taken up again in the 20th century, however readers and writers alike seem no closer to understanding it than they were before. The sublime recedes as it is approached. From “To a Skylark” readers learn it cannot be conceptualized logically or with intent to control. “Ode to a Nightingale” demonstrates that it can be experienced through a emotion and senses, and readers can seemingly conclude that all of the unconventional uses of opposing sense experiences can eventually lead to the sublime. Then finally, those conclusions are challenged by “The Windhover” who employs a blending of logic and emotion while ultimately experiencing the sublime with almost no mention of senses. Experiencing the sublime is as mysterious as the sublime itself, by beginning with opposites and then arriving at paradoxes it is an ephemeral topic with no clear conclusion, and those writing about it employ various strategies to attempt do so.

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