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The Significance of the Sublime in Thomas Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College”

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The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms, in reference to Longinus’ description, defines the “sublime” as a “terrifyingly impressive natural phenomenon” (Baldick 248). Edmund Burke, too, endorses this notion of a fearful awe in his philosophical enquiry, stating that “whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime” (part i, section vii). If we follow this line of reasoning, then the significance of the sublime in Thomas Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” is indeed profound, so palpable is the
speaker’s horror at life’s predestined sufferings. For Gray, however, the sublime appears to extend beyond simply terror. His poem presents and sustains a conflict of emotions, juxtaposing the naive vitality of youth and the wretched experience of age. Furthermore, we perceive the subject’s struggle to articulate an insight, which is both private and obscure. In this way, Gray’s sublime becomes characteristic of singularity and isolation, a force that is divisive and distancing.

“Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” is a poem of two distinct halves: what begins as a reflection upon untroubled schooldays, in an exclamatory pastoral style of “[a]h happy hills, ah pleasing shade” (line 11), soon spirals into a macabre repulsion of adulthood, a grisly commentary upon that time of “severest woe” (80) in which the sinews shall strain and the blood burn (85-86). This polemic confrontation of delight and pain corresponds closely with Immanuel Kant’s perception of the sublime; he refers to it as a “negative pleasure” (520) and associates it with the appearance of nature “in its wildest and most ruleless disarray and devastation” (521). As the poem progresses, we sense the destructive energy of which Kant speaks, threatening to overtake the speaker’s calm, steady narrative. Gray’s lyrical framework of winding sentences, which contain a prevalence of long, soothing vowels such as “strayed” (13), “gladsome” (17) and “rolling” (29), is at times interrupted when we understand the bliss to be “momentary” (16), the soul “weary” (18), and the children “victims” (52). Indeed, even they are touched by a sense
of impending downfall. Gray writes that “[s]till as they run they look behind, / They hear a voice in every wind, / And snatch a fearful joy” (38-40). This last phrase is especially intriguing, such is the apparent incompatibility between “fear” and “joy.” The distinct and relatively abrupt change in pace and tone around the seventh stanza, however, subtly embodies this conflicting set of emotions, for it renders the dark imagery terrible and intense but also reveals something of a twisted pleasure and excitement on the speaker’s behalf.

In stark contrast to the definitions offered by both Burke and Kant, Terry Eagleton identifies the sublime as “a phallic ‘swelling’ arising from our confrontation of danger” (54). We can certainly perceive something close to an “adrenalin rush” in the poem when, quite suddenly, Gray’s clauses become short and sharp, the complicated syntax replaced by a listing style, connected continuously by “and” and “or”:

Or pining Love shall waste their youth,
Or jealousy with rankling tooth,
…And envy wan, and faded Care,
…And sorrow’s piercing dart. (65-70)

As Nicola Trott observes, “[t]he modern sublime sought to encompass irregular, even chaotic, forces” (79), and this is exactly what Gray captures. It is as if our subject cannot articulate his ideas quickly enough; he appears panicked and breathless but also elated by the unstoppable and inescapable human fate he is describing. When he cries, “[a]h, show them [the children] where in ambush stand / [t]o seize their prey the murderous band! / [a]h, tell them they are men!”
(58-60), we observe that the exclamatory style, previously employed to depict aesthetic aspects of nature, now reveals images of pain and destruction. Yet curiously, a discernible sense of exhilaration remains. This wild sense of euphoria, in giving oneself up to providence, is a phenomenon that Eagleton acknowledges when he asserts that “[a]s a kind of terror, the sublime crushes us into admiring submission; it thus resembles a coercive rather than a consensual power, engaging our respect but not, as with beauty, our love” (54). And for Gray, it is this lack of control and the contradictory sensations it evokes, which characterizes the sublime.

Burke defines the sublime as “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (i, vii), and “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” certainly embodies this sense of psychological extreme. For Burke, nothing can be terrible, and, as such, sublime, without a definitive air of obscurity, for if a particular danger is anticipated or wholly understood, the alarm it incites becomes correspondingly weaker (ii, iii). As Joseph Addison further recognizes, it is the expansion of our minds, as they strive to accommodate these abstract and alien notions, from which we draw pleasure (424). In the poem, then, we perceive Gray’s subject forced to separate and humanize the various elements of man’s mental downfall, as he seeks to bring them within a familiar, accessible sphere. It is as Trott says: “The sublime escapes the limits of representation…. As a result, the sublime presumes an aesthetic of excess or non-representability” (79). The poetic techniques Gray uses to convey this psychological turmoil are intensely
visual and affecting. He paints a lurid picture of the fallible mind, enclosed by an ever-approaching army of destructive moods. They are “the murderous band” (59), “[t]he vultures of the mind” (62), and they wait “in ambush…/ [t]o seize their prey” (58-59). This extended metaphor of a savage chase, a hunt till the death, reduces human weakness to a base, corporeal form. It is as if each human mind alike unconsciously awaits invasion by primary and bestial desires.

Eagleton further suggests that the sublime is “the infinitely unrepresentable which spurs us on to yet finer representations” (54), and we recognise this linguistic progression within the poem. The speaker assigns each emotional force a physical, tangible identity, using adjectives that reflect symptoms of the concept itself: anger is “[d]isdainful” (63), fear “pallid” (69), and despair “[g]rim-visaged” (69). Moreover, they portray human capabilities and act in a cruel, pitiless manner, taking delight in torture and pain: infamy is “grinning” (74), unkindness “mocks the tear” (77), whilst madness is “laughing wild / [a]mid severest woe” (79). Indeed, our subject depicts these attackers, with their independence of action and their twisted egoism, as psychological parasites. We are told, for instance, of “jealousy with rankling tooth, / [t]hat inly gnaws the secret heart” (66-67), evoking the idea of a slow, internal consumption. Such imagery conveys an unnatural possession and manipulation of the soul by external, detached forces and brings us back to the speaker’s overriding sense of powerlessness. This, Kant tells us, is a crucial aspect of the
sublime: It is only by acknowledging “the inadequacy of even the greatest effort of our imagination to estimate an object’s magnitude” (524) that we may truly claim to have reached the emotive pinnacle that is sublime experience.

Despite his frantic and passionate efforts, the speaker remains unable to offer either solution or comfort. Nor does he propose an explanation of why “[t]o each his sufferings: all are men, / [c]ondemned alike to groan” (91-92); he has both observed and striven to articulate the fortunes of man, but in the end it has surpassed even his ability to resolve. To embrace the bliss of ignorance, to terminate all reflection upon the matter, is his council to both himself and the reader. Such is the overwhelming nature of Gray’s sublime, in its scale and obscurity, that it demonstrates the constraints of human understanding and endorses our own mortality.

Throughout “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” the private and particular nature of the sublime also seems important to Gray. It is a perception shared by Trott, who believes that “the sublime concerns the solitary individual” (72). This is undoubtedly the case for the speaker, whose removal from the action is signified from the start: it is not simply “a prospect” of Eton, but a “distant” one. Moreover, the scene he describes of “distant spires” and “antique towers, / [t]hat crown the watery glade” (1-2) is regal and exclusive; it is a prospect still basking in the prestige of its sovereign founder, Henry VI. It is an “expanse…of grove, of lawn, of mead” (6-7), and its pupils are the privileged and elite. Already, the poem exudes a feeling of segregation and social division, and this is echoed
in the form of poetry itself, that of the ode. Ralph Cohen, in his essay “The Return to the Ode,” remarks that “[a]s learned poets, Gray and Warton, Collins and Akenside continued the tradition which stated that the language of sublimity was not the language of quotidian behaviour and expression” (211). With its demanding syntactic structure and stream of subordinate clauses, “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” certainly fulfils Cohen’s notion of a refined, elevated speech. We can see in the third stanza, for example, that Gray adopts a classic Latinate system, placing the verb at the end of the line, and uses the archaic second-person pronouns “thou” and “thy”:

    Say, Father Thames, for thou hast seen  
    Full many a sprightly race  
    Disporting on thy margent green  
    The paths of pleasure trace,  
    Who foremost now delight to cleave  
    With pliant arm thy glassy wave? (21-26)

In an extract such as this, there is a quasi-euphuistic demand upon the reader to follow the sentence through to the end and successfully connect each of its components. Gray thus narrows the accessibility of his work to the academic and educated and secures the sublime within a restricted, aristocratic sphere. Indeed, it is rather ironic to speak of a collective human fall, the horrifying fate of each and every soul, in a style that would have been inaccessible to many eighteenth-century readers. Yet perhaps Gray’s sublime, in all its aforementioned obscurity and vastness, simply commands this ornate discourse. As Burke highlights, “by
words we have it in our power to make such combinations as we cannot possibly do otherwise” (v, vii). Gray certainly exploits this lexical opportunity, conveying something intangible and arresting. Thus, when Wordsworth, some years later, refers to Gray as a “man curiously elaborate in the structure of his own poetic diction” (268), we may say that such an approach, rather than curious, is both necessary and fitting.

The significance of the sublime in Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” lies in its intensity and dynamism; our speaker’s reflection captures the polemic, abstract, and isolating nature of sublime experience, particularly the way in which it excites and stimulates literary expression. He also demonstrates its origin, as a reaction and a yielding to forces that surpass human rationality. Furthermore, Gray seeks to establish that poetry itself, as an art form, embodies the sublime. In its rhythm, eloquence, privacy, and spontaneity and, most importantly, in the freedom with which it conveys conflicting ideas, the ode defines Gray’s concept of the sublime.
Works Cited


