

Still Looking for the Sublime: Science, Arts, and Spirituality in the Era of Emotionally Overwhelming Environmental Disruption

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Men say they know many things;
But lo! they have taken wings,—
The arts and sciences,
And a thousand appliances;
The wind that blows
Is all that any body knows.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or Life in the Woods* (230)

Picking up the Pieces

After more than seven years, Thoreau's poem still resonates strongly with me and my research. In my monograph *Techno-Thoreau* (2019), for example, I dare to analyze Thoreau's philosophy in *Walden* as proto-ecological and to argue that he developed a multi-sensorial approach to nature, which bridges gaps between empirical and transcendental poles of knowledge (Lombard 7). The poem used as an epigraph for this short creative essay suggests such an epistemological shift while criticizing humans' inability to consider nature as a source of valuable knowledge. First, the poem sheds light on humans' hubris or lack of humility inasmuch as they pretend to know more than what already lies in nature. Second, it juxtaposes the "arts," "sciences," and technology ("appliances") as the means humans have so far used to acquire such knowledge, while the only relevant information is accessed through the empirical experience of the environment ("The wind that blows / Is all that any body knows"). Thoreau's spelling of 'anybody' as "any body" also alludes to a bodily experience, which involves sensory systems (e.g., hearing the wind or sensing its touch) that may or may not be human. In his influential *Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1962), Leo Marx emphasizes that *Walden* "has a strong contrapuntal theme" since Thoreau, "assuming that natural facts properly perceived and accurately transcribed must yield truth, . . . adopts the tone of a hard-headed empiricist" (243). Yet, Thoreau's use of the metaphor of the blowing wind implies that poetic language and even imagination may play important roles in helping us figure out the mysteries of the world. This is probably clarified in a passage from the same famous memoir, in which Thoreau does not give up on imagination or idealism in his quest for 'truth':

Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us. (276)

Building on the tradition of the sublime, Thoreau juggles ambiguous notions of “truth,” “eternity,” “divine,” and “reality” (Thoreau 276). The sublime, he claims, is found in eternity, itself encountered, along with God or the divine, in daily experiences of reality, or of “the present moment” (276). While empiricism serves to understand our environment, such notions draw from the sublime by alluding to something transcendental, which is difficulty expressed through language. The sublime therefore becomes a gateway to representations of the ineffable – an aesthetic and rhetorical strategy to account for inexpressible affects, emotions, or feelings. In this particular extract, Thoreau seems essentially inspired by the traditional ‘natural’ sublime since he associates the divine with a nature that seems somehow superior to, or at least separated from, the human realm. However, the passage also offers significant revisions which move away from traditional theories of the sublime.

In the influential Burkean sublime moment, literary critic Philip Shaw explains that “[t]he self may delight in sublime terror so long as actual danger is kept at bay,” while Kant’s notions of “mathematical” and “dynamical” sublimities offer a “source of delight” which can only be felt when “contemplated from afar” (54-82). Such theories represent the human observer in a fraught relationship with an overpowering nature that is inevitably beheld from a safe distance. Thoreau revises this traditional propensity by evoking a necessity for bodily *contact* (“instilling and drenching”) with “the [divine or sublime] reality that surrounds us” (276), thus suggesting that visual observation might not be sufficient to grasp the sublime. Thoreau, however, does not stop there. As I also argue in *Techno-Thoreau*, he oscillates between considerations of nature, humans, and technology, occasionally bringing them together to showcase an aesthetic shift from the strictly natural sublime to a variation of the technological sublime insofar as he includes technology *within* a natural landscape that had been so far, at least in American nature writing (e.g., in William Bartram’s *Travels* [1791]), romanticized as “pristine,” “untouched,” or “untrammeled” (qtd. in Lombard 21).

The ‘technological sublime’ and ‘toxic sublime,’ the latter coined by Peeples, are two helpful examples to analyze Thoreau’s sublime, which I examine more extensively in *Techno-Thoreau*. These revisions of the sublime do not shy away from including technology, viewing it as “awe-inspiring,” and from identifying and criticizing the impacts it might have on our environments. These two notions, among others even more recent such as the “haptic” (McNee) and “poetic apocalyptic” (Salmoise) sublimities, also shed light on the importance of combining artistic expression with scientific knowledge *and*, possibly, spirituality. In other words, literary

descriptions of the sublime bring us closer to what science has not (yet) and perhaps never will unveil, or cannot suitably represent or express, thus giving visibility and meaning to the abstract and unknown. In that way, the sublime “can help reenchant our sense of dwelling within the earth” (Meillon 208) and help us find beauty and meaning in our physical reality, be it natural, human, or technological. To some extent, the sublime also echoes Terry Tempest Williams’ notions of “terrible beauty” and “beautiful catastrophe” (70, 387). Indeed, the title of Williams’ memoir, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* (2008), speaks for itself inasmuch as it is an invitation to see beauty and the sublime in places where Longinus, Burke, or Kant would never have bothered to search. Wastelands, ruins, rubbles, and prairie dogs can bear marks of the beautiful and/or of the sublime. Finding the sublime takes a significant amount of time, as the several pages dedicated to watching prairie dogs in Williams’ book suggest. Likewise, unravelling what the sublime means takes time, interest, and devotion: only after hours of observation does Williams write about the ecological teachings of prairie dogs such as “resiliency” and “what it means to live in community” (139). Such a view of the non-human encourages us not to see *any* species as “pests” (even mosquitoes) or expendable “rodents” but, rather, to value all species as members of our precious ecosystems (71). With that in mind, Williams goes back to Thoreau, claiming that “[s]ilence alone is worthy to be heard” (90, emphasis mine). She also describes her beloved Utah as “big, broken country born of faults, tilts, and thrusts, and a history of weathering” (90). “For all its stillness and the vast expanse of *silence*,” she claims, Utah “is a tortured terrain” (90, emphasis mine). In order to reenchant such a “tortured terrain,” one has to listen to the *silence*, the invisible, as well as to what humans have themselves *silenced*. According to Williams, humans need to pay attention to what has been neglected or, in other words, to look for the sublime in the places, objects, and beings that may still be tinged with its (re)enchancing potential.

But How Does It Really *Feel*?

Focusing on affects, feelings, and emotions could help redefine our relationship with the sublime. Although there are various approaches to affects, I refer to Heather Houser’s definition: “body-based feelings that arise in response to elicitors as varied as interpersonal and institutional relations, aesthetic experience, ideas, sensations, and material conditions in one’s environment” (*Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction* 3). Such affects can also be “narrative” inasmuch as they “are attached to formal dimensions of texts such as metaphor, plot structure, and character relations,” which is particularly relevant to the literary sublime (3). As for “emotions” and “feelings,” they are often considered synonyms, but the American Psychological Association (APA) notes an interesting nuance: emotions have “an overt or implicit engagement with the world,” while feelings are “purely mental” (APA Dictionary of Psychology). In that sense, “affects,” according to Houser’s interpretation, are variations of feelings which are “body-based” and may not be exclusively mental.

The new materialist turn as well as affect theories and cognitive sciences also emphasize the importance of affects, emotions, and feelings. What are the emotions and feelings that have been customarily (and more recently) associated with the sublime? What are the neurological processes and sensory systems involved in (and responsible for) their production? How can they be interpreted; or, in other words, what do they say about our relationship with environments and the non-human? Such questions are decisive in any attempt to apprehend the contemporary sublime, and their responses will establish the lasting relevance, affordances, and/or limits of the sublime as a concept in the Environmental Humanities.

While tracing the origins of emotions in the face of the sublime, art historian John Onians explains that “[n]euroscience teaches us that the resources that sustain vision also sustain the imagination, which is why, as Burke reminds us, we are so intimidated by the greatest thing imaginable” such as God’s overwhelming power: “God’s superlative greatness gives him superlative power, and that fills us with dread and respect” (96). More specifically, Onians comments on what happens in the body when negative sublime-related emotions are created:

It increases the heart rate, triggers the release of glucose from energy stores, and improves muscle readiness. And these are particularly telling manifestations because they help us understand one of the most intriguing aspects of our strong negative emotional response to a life-threatening situation: the sense that we can seem to enjoy it. (97)

Burke’s “delightful horror” (67) comes to mind here, which hints at our possible ability to transform presumably negative emotions, such as horror, into a positive, pleasant emotion. Onians then adds that “indeterminate or confused object[s]” produce “mental movement,” whereas “clear positive associations” are just “essentially restful and positive” (100). What Onians indirectly evokes are the ineffable and inexpressible features of the sublime. As Jedediah Purdy argues, both the Anthropocene and the sublime are customarily linked to senses of excess, overwhelm, and disorientation, which leave us confused and possibly troubled (421). Onians suggests, however, that these negative affects are somehow malleable; that they can be transformed into more positive emotions and feelings of delight or joy, or that they can simply be experienced differently because of a series of parameters such as the framework, the environment observed, or personal background. A compelling example Onians provides to demonstrate how the sublime can be manipulated or provoked by human-made objects is the impact of architecture on acoustics. Richard Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” (1870), for example, may not have the same sublime effect if it is performed in a church – which both bears signs of religious symbolism and offers an awe-inspiring, human-made reverberation – or in the middle of a secular, public space such as a busy street. What I would like to suggest now is that, in the same way architecture, or materiality more broadly, may support the sublime, the sublime *could* support materiality.

In the course of my research for my current project on the rhetorics and narratologies of the sublime in contemporary American environmental literature, for instance, I have come across various imaginative ways of deploying the rhetoric of the

literary sublime. As early as Burke's treaty, literary descriptions were referred to as the optimal way of accounting for the sublime. In contemporary American literature, I have noticed, in works such as Jon Krakauer's mountaineering memoirs, Wendell Berry's novels, or Kristin Kimball's memoirs, that sublime moments may be described by means of uncommon confluences of pain, tedium, and suffering with satisfaction, relief, and joy. In these literary works, the sublime is a rewarding and revelatory moment, which results in an enriched sense of environmental awareness. The experience is also described as profoundly *participatory*, and not as an unengaging contemplation of a remote landscape. Any experience of Thoreau's 'present moment,' these works suggest, requires a creative engagement with the environment, and thus the active involvement of the body, the senses, and the imagination.

Although my current research project exclusively deals with American literature, I have so far only been to the United States once – America, the country where the concepts of wilderness and frontier have remained evocative of vast spaces and boundless possibilities. I remember the sight of the Grand Canyon while waiting for the well-known breathtaking sunset, and the whole scene looking like a painting. The national parks contain series of picturesque sceneries, as Alison Byerly argues, namely "object[s] of artistic consumption" (53), which may no longer echo this awe-inspiring sublime landscape that is evoked in the words of Thoreau and John Muir. However, I remember the smell of the graceful mountain hemlocks before the pervasive odors of the tourists' lunch, blue jays' calls before the noisy engines of their cars, and the rough feel of the sequoia's bark before the minutes of rest spent on one of the park's benches. I wonder whether there might be a hierarchy of emotions and feelings which would organize a certain hierarchy of memories. In any case, there has certainly been a hierarchy of the senses, as if what could be seen and heard had been more important or meaningful than what could be touched, tasted, and smelled, simply because the "lower" senses of touch, taste, and smell have been, in Western history, "dedicated to manual labor and the basic feeding and care of the body" (Howes and Classen 67).

While I was standing in front of the scene, I also became aware of the unavoidable contrast between tourists and the so-called overpowering nature. But one needs to be there to *feel* it. Landscape photography tends to exclude humans from the scene, contributing to the imaginary of the natural sublime. What could be termed the 'realistic sublime' exists at the intersection of what is perceptibly experienced by means of all our senses, not just sight and hearing, and of what is imagined. I choose to remember the rivers, forests, and mountains, but one may 'choose' (or is compelled to choose?) to remember the cars, crowds, and signs. In Sequoia National Park, one sign in particular said "the world John Muir knew is no longer," and visitors now have to deal with the humming noises of engines and the invisible plumes formed by their gas. This technological intrusion echoes Leo Marx's notion of the "interrupted idyll," a pastoral moment that can no longer exist because of the constant disturbing "noise" of humans and technology (260, 16). Yet, while contemporary activism points fingers, people want to see and live the American sublime.

At the end of my trip, I spent a few days in Los Angeles, which displayed a different sunset than what I saw in west coast national parks. The conflation of the toxic smog with sunlight creates a spectacle that leaves no one indifferent. While Muir speaks of nature's "Range of Light" (130) as a metaphor for the Sierra Nevada's varied and overwhelming beauty, Los Angeles' artificial "blood-red" (Solnit 86) sunset causes a scene to which ekphrasis does no justice. Such spectacle is deeply artificial or 'unnatural,' and yet, as Rebecca Solnit probably unwillingly acknowledges, they draw attention in the same way Williams' category of 'terrible beauty' does. This event reminds me that, probably like many people, I used to be tempted to disregard some landscapes, knowing so little about ecosystem stability. Like so many people, I tended to view wastelands and abandoned shipping containers as dumps, knowing so little about the power of transformation. Revising the sublime connects the dots, gathers the emotions that have marked unviable dichotomies between nature and culture, humans and non-humans, and humans and technology. Where Burke experienced "delightful horror" (67) when contemplating nature, others have more recently felt awed and/or overwhelmed when crossing the Golden Gate Bridge. While Kant urged readers to behold the sublime visually, from a safe distance, climbers put their heart and muscles to work to touch on a haptic sublime, an embodied experience reminiscent of Stacy Alaimo's concept of 'trans-corporeality' inasmuch as it fosters *contact* and "material *interconnections*" with landscapes and the non-human (Alaimo 2, emphasis mine). Such concepts of 'terrible beauty' or 'trans-corporeality' appeal, like the sublime, to both science and imagination. They exemplify one of the "principle[s] of the sublime," namely the "exercisable *potential* for change," which theoretical chemist Roald Hoffman also identifies in chemistry and science (153, emphasis original). "How easy is true change for matter," Hoffman writes, "[h]ow difficult it is for us," "which is why people will always be ambivalent about chemistry" since "[i]n our mind, change is viewed more ambiguously than it is in the laboratory" (153). 'Terrible beauty,' 'trans-corporeality,' and the sublime are projects that will probably require collaboration between science, art and, to a certain degree, spirituality.

The sublime, more precisely, represents the limits of our rational or cognitive understanding. In his analysis of "The Aesthetics of the Sublime in David Bohm's Philosophy of Physics," Ian Greig argues that "any experience of reality in which the human is to be regarded as a part of the whole can only be mounted in mystical terms, or what Einstein referred to as 'cosmic religious feeling' – or, in other words, the feeling of the sublime" (122). This "transcendent order of being" (124) is somehow part of our reality too, inasmuch as it symbolizes the limits of our knowledge. Art historian James Elkins, in his provocative essay "Against the Sublime," further stokes this debate by claiming that "the sublime cannot be fully excavated from its crypto-religious contexts" and is therefore a "poor," "weak," and "irresponsible" concept in critical thought (86-87). But what if the sublime did not have to, or could not be completely separated from its history, be it religious or somehow spiritual? Contrary to Elkins's assertions, Onians, Hoffman, and Greig suggest the possibility for science, art, and religion to co-exist, if not to depend on each other. Neuro-

scientist Jaak Panksepp brilliantly summarizes this relationship in his essay “Affective Foundations of Creativity, Language, Music, and Mental Life”:

Our desire to know the world drives science. The search for beauty energizes the arts. Both are fertilized by the ancient affective energies that motivate human creativity. The pain and sadness of life, joy also, drive poets, musicians, all artists, to become much more than the physical organisms that they are. . . . In arts as in life, affects motivate cognitive richness like torches illuminate the darkness. Consciousness is colored and integrated by the ancient emotional systems of our brains. (21-22)

While the potential of art and science for producing positive sublime affects, emotions, and feelings is underlined in this extract, Panksepp also acknowledges and accepts the existence of the soul: “I believe that among those ancient reaches of the brain we will eventually find the human soul” and it “should not be all that different from the souls of kindred animals” because humans share with them “seeking systems” that give them access to new knowledge (36-40). According to Panksepp, the religious notion of the “soul” is “fundamentally affective” (40), and accessible through science and art. The sublime may provide information about current environmental crises insofar as it conveys scientific data through artistic media that rely on a different form from strictly scientific output. In addition, Panksepp’s idea of the soul, which verges on religious traditions, fosters equality between humans and non-humans because of commonalities that exist between our sensory and cognitive processes. Understanding the affects, emotions, and feelings of the sublime will require “entangled epistemologies” combining studies in, for example, neuroscience and cognitive science with others in the Environmental Humanities and arts, and thus exploring beyond the dominant trend of “positivist epistemology” (Houser, *Infowhelm* 2-5, emphasis original). However, such an approach will probably have to welcome what French musician and composer Karol Beffa, who is not particularly religious, has come to call “a sense of the sacred” (Beffa and Villani 136) – which is reminiscent of the sublime – to refer to the unknown and mysterious powers of music that keeps it so intriguing and enlightening. There might never be any satisfying or universal response to the question ‘how does the sublime really feel?’, but bringing together all the ontological and epistemological ‘clans’ – science, the humanities, arts, and religion – will help get there.

From Going to Church to Going to *the* Church

For quite some time, I have considered scientists to be the only ones with access to some form of ‘truth.’ I also feel like I have been ping-ponging between faith and scientific knowledge, or between what one could refer to as the ineffable and the explainable for quite a while. I attended Catholic elementary school as an occasional altar boy but was never quite the angel. Later on, in Catholic high school, I became fascinated by biology and physics, but was never quite successful. Like a majority of people, I suppose, this contrast between science and religion has been at the back

of my mind for a while. The opposition always reminds me of Thomas the Apostle – Doubting Thomas – who, so I was told at school, only believed in what he could see with his human eyes. There is, however, so little that can meet the human eye. Again, Thoreau comes to mind, as he wrote about so much more than what he experienced through his senses. Writing is such a powerful way of turning empirical data into some form of access to the unknown, to the doors that the “high priests of progress,” to quote from Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (107), have so far left unlocked.

A phrase I remember from high school exemplifies such an attitude, which does not directly reject any of the above-mentioned ‘clans,’ including religion. I remember when my English teacher explained the grammatical rules of using the definite article, and more specifically the difference between saying that when people ‘go to hospital’ it means that they are patients while ‘going to *the* hospital’ means that they are just visitors. The same rule applies to the church; as she claimed, ‘going to church’ implies going to the institution to attend a service, and thus possibly to pray. ‘Going to *the* church,’ on the other hand, means going to the building, probably to visit, and a certain interest in what this building emblemizes without necessarily being Christian or any kind of believer. In ‘going to *the* church,’ I see an approach that does not inevitably shun forms of spirituality, or a willingness to lend people who have a relationship with faith an ear and to respect their choices. As a researcher or scientist, if ‘I go to *the* church,’ I suggest that religion, spirituality, or faith may not be the evil twin of science, and may have something interesting to bring to the table after all. ‘Going to *the* church’ may be acknowledging a certain “sense of the sacred” (Beffa and Villani 136) in Karol Beffa’s understanding of the term.

While Elkins does have a point when he affirms that religious meaning is still embedded in the sublime, I would like to argue that this religious or spiritual meaning needs to be accounted for and understood. Practically speaking, sublime moments that are described as overly spiritual may not serve the new materialist project of entanglement between humans and non-humans theorized by scholars such as Jane Bennett or Stacy Alaimo. Although he does not explicitly refer to the notion of the sublime, David Abram, for example, explains that the Jewish and Christian systems of beliefs in an “otherworldly God” have been nurturing an “intellectual distance from the nonhuman environment,” from the sensuous and visible entities of our physical environment (63-64). However, he distinguishes “ancient Hebraic culture” from Jewish and Christian traditions, arguing that “ancient Hebraic religiosity was far more corporeal, and far more responsive to the sensuous earth, than we commonly assume” (144). Hebrews were concerned with both the “invisible” (e.g., the soul, “wind,” and “breath”) and “visible” (e.g., the “moon,” animals) aspects and entities of the natural world, thus not presenting any transcendent being as fundamentally superior to humans or non-humans (144). Abram’s approach is one example among many that illustrates what the approach of ‘going to *the* church’ has to offer. What is more, Abram’s interest in a wide variety of religious traditions as well as in magic and in Indigenous spiritualities, highlights

that spirituality should not be interpreted as referring solely to Western traditions, but also to other practices and beliefs such as animism and shamanism.

From the international online symposium *Climate | Changes | Global Perspectives*, I retain that there should be “a spirit of experimentation” (Bergthaller et al. 273) in the Environmental Humanities in order to respond to the challenges brought about by the Anthropocene and environmental disruption. Hannes Bergthaller, one of the symposium’s discussion group leaders, provided a convincing personal example of this practice: he explained that Taiwanese people rely on Western medicine to deal with certain health issues and on traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) for other diseases and conditions against which the former had proven ineffective. The ‘spirit of experimentation’ echoes the approach of ‘going to *the church*.’ What is more, ‘experimentation’ suggests collaboration with different scientific fields and areas, but also artistic or creative explorations. To conclude my own short creative engagement with this thought-provoking symposium, I will not be as radical as Thoreau by asserting that “[t]he wind that blows / Is all that any body knows” but will, rather, call for rediscoveries or redefinitions of what humans have claimed to know or fully understand. Any attempt to find satisfying responses to the current crises of representation will probably require the investigation of all of the epistemological and ontological ‘clans.’ The sublime is everywhere, one needs to stop just looking *at* and start looking actively *for* it.

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