

## SOME THOUGHTS ON A (CARIBBEAN) SUBLIME

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Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (Kenneth Burke, "The Philosophy of Literary Form," 110-111)

The West has confused itself unnecessarily. Its education has until modern times been in the hands of rhetoricians, but the historians of education have been philosophers. So too in literary history. The poets have been rhetoricians, the critics serious philosophers. . . . Perhaps literature has always gravitated to the center of such a curriculum because it enshrines with greatest intensity and clarity the polemic Western self. (Richard Lanham, The Motives of Eloquence)

I have been thinking a lot in recent years about matters of intellectual and literary history and the transmission of ideas in general, that is, about the way in which theory may be said to 'travel' (according to Edward Said) from one social and historical context to another. I have also been thinking in particular about the nature of the so-called 'post-colonial' or 'non-Western' response to what Gramsci and company might term the continuing 'hegemony' of most things 'colonial' or 'Western.' It is no big news, I suppose, to point out that the shadow of Europe still looms large in the Caribbean and that much intellectual energy in the region continues to be devoted to dealing with Europe's immense cultural legacy, for good and for bad. Stuart Hall, for example, points out that what he calls, with a tip of the hat to Derrida and company, the 'Présence Européenne' is an ineluctable but troubling one, especially for Caribbean persons of African descent, to confront: "[f]or many of us this is a matter not of too little but of *too much*" (my emphasis; 399). In such discussions, the emphasis is often on the sheer magnitude and overpowering nature of this legacy as well as, consequently, the imperative of what might be termed 'resistance.' The crucial question, for Hall, is accordingly: can we ever "recognise its *irreversible* influence, whilst *resisting* its imperialising eye?" (my emphases; 400). Of course, this response has historically not always taken the prescribed course of rejection. This is borne out by the fact that one of the most common strategies by which to belittle one's opponents in the region has been to accuse them of precisely the opposite, that is, of being too willing to genuflect to and embrace things European in provenance, and, accordingly, insufficiently Afri-centric (or, as the case may be, Indo-centric). Hence, for example, the frequent accusations of Eurocentrism directed at writers like Derek Walcott and attempts to explain his alleged Eurocentrism by reference to his so-called racial 'dividedness.'

### Discourses of the Sublime

Recently, with such thoughts in mind, I have also been (re-)reading the debates on the difference between the 'beautiful' and the 'sublime' which took place in Western Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (the period synonymous with the Age of Sensibility and, later, Romanticism).<sup>1</sup> I have been struck by the possibilities which they hold

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<sup>1</sup>The term 'sublime' (from the Latin *sublimis*, [looking up from] under the lintel, high, lofty, elevated, exalted) is often used to suggest a quality of greatness or magnitude, whether physical, moral, intellectual, metaphysical, aesthetic, spiritual or artistic in nature, with which nothing else can be compared and which is beyond all possibility of calculation, measurement or imitation. A term first associated with certain kinds of literature thought capable of 'transporting' the reader, it has often also been applied, since at least the

for a rethinking of some of the broader issues to which I have briefly alluded above and more specifically of a Caribbean *literary* theory per se. The term 'sublime' is one often found in tourism-related discourses (e.g. advertisements) designed to lure tourists to the Caribbean and used in roughly synonymous ways with the term 'beautiful' to describe various aspects of the natural landscape (not least the region's beaches) or even the strokeplay of a gifted batsman in cricket (though, interestingly, not a bowler). The 'sublime,' however, is a term with a loaded history in the course of which it has often in fact been differentiated from the 'beautiful.' It was somewhere around 1650, you might recall, that an important turning-point occurred in the historical development of philosophical aesthetics in general and literary theory in particular: an anonymous treatise entitled "Peri Hypsous" in Greek (most often translated into English as "On the Sublime") and thought to have been composed sometime during the first century CE, was alleged to have been rediscovered. It was attributed, given its rather longwinded nature, to someone henceforth christened, appropriately enough, 'Longinus.'

It is worth lingering a while over Longinus' argument because of its immense influence on the subsequent development of the discourse of the sublime. He defines "sublimity" (76) as a "certain distinction and excellence in expression" (76) or "elevated language" (76) which, "flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt" (76) and thereby "displays the power of the orator in its plenitude" (76). In other words, the sublime is a feature of specific places within, rather than an effect of the text as a whole, a given text; it has an overwhelming impact upon those exposed to it, and is indicative of the author's oratorical prowess. The sublime, he argues, is identified by its impact which is not the rhetorical one of (intellectual) "persuasion" (76) but one, rather, of (emotional) "transport" (76). He argues that sublime discourse enchants, rather than induces intellectual assent to its propositions: "imposing speech, with the *spell* it throws over us, prevails over that which aims at persuasion and gratification" (my emphasis; 76). Where it is possible to reject attempts to win our intellectual assent, the sublime per se is irresistible, Longinus argues: our "persuasions we can usually control, but the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over the hearer" (76).

Longinus delves further into the precise nature of the sublime and its impact on us. The sublime is linked, he argues, to our sense of whatever is majestic and superlative in the world. This is derived from the fact, he contends, that nature "from the first breathed into our hearts an unconquerable passion for whatever is great and more divine than ourselves" (153). It is for this reason that our "powers of contemplation and thought" (154) yearn for the "extraordinary, the great, the beautiful" (154) things in life. Sublime discourses accordingly have a beneficial spiritual impact upon the reader, its effect being to "dispose the soul to *high* thoughts" (my emphasis; 78) and to "leave in the mind more food for reflection than the words seem to convey" (79). He argues that our "soul is *uplifted* by the true sublime" (my emphasis; 78), it "takes proud *flight*, and is filled with joy and vaunting, as though it had itself produced what it has heard" (my emphasis; 78). The sublime is evidently to be distinguished from the merely utilitarian conceptions of poetry advanced by Plato and later Horace (with whom the notion of 'utile et dulce' is practically synonymous): Longinus stresses that "what

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eighteenth century, to aspects of the natural landscape (e.g. a mountain range) which are thought to evoke a response of awe and wonder on the part of the perceiving subject who is forced to realise how puny s/he is by contrast.

is useful and indeed necessary is cheap enough" (154) but "it is always the unusual which wins our wonder" (154).

Longinus identifies at least five sources of the sublime, one of the most important being the poet's "power of forming great conceptions" (79) – in other words, his intellectual prowess. Sublimity, he famously writes, is the "echo of a great soul" (79) for which reason a "bare idea, by itself and without a spoken word, sometimes excites admiration just because of the greatness of soul implied" (79). (Writing two thousand-odd years before the advent of what Richard Rorty would famously christen the 'linguistic turn,' Longinus seemingly has little problem believing that ideas can exist and be apprehended apart from their medium of expression.) If one source of the sublime is cognitive in nature, the other main source of the sublime is affective: to be precise, the poet's "vehement and inspired passion" (79). Longinus contends, seemingly gesturing towards Plato's *Ion*, that "there is no tone so lofty as that of genuine passion, in its right place, when it bursts out in a mad enthusiasm and as it were fills the speaker's words with frenzy" (79). Poets are either born with these two qualities – a great intellect and the capacity to be very emotional – or they are not. These inherent qualities are augmented by at least three other *learned* skills (concerning the use of appropriate figurative language and the like) acquired principally by familiarising oneself with the work of great predecessors, but nurture is no substitute for the two primary qualities which nature has bequeathed to the poet. The possession of these two qualities leads Longinus to conclude, in a way that would prove very influential upon nineteenth century and much subsequent critical thought, that sublime poets are not merely creatures "of no mean or ignoble quality" (153) but "demigods" (153) whose intrinsic nature sets them apart from ordinary folk. Longinus admits that such "writers of genius" (154) may commit the occasional error of judgement or be prone to some other human failing, but they most often redeem these more mundane failings with flashes of genius which separate them from the common mass of humanity and make them verge on god-like status. Sublimity of expression is the clue to the possession of these extraordinary gifts. As Longinus puts it,

[o]ther qualities prove their possessors men, sublimity lifts them near the mighty mind of God. Correctness escapes censure: greatness earns admiration as well. . . . [E]ach of these great men again and again redeems all his mistakes by a single touch of sublimity and true excellence. (154)

In short, a capacious intellect and the capacity for great passion are innate, a given, a quality of our immortal souls that elevates some of us above our peers. You are either born with it or not. A little learning and a lot of effort may improve your writing immeasurably but unless you are born with certain cognitive and emotive predispositions, you will never enter the ranks of that select coterie of truly sublime writers who are few and far between and for good reason.

While these two components of the sublime are "for the most part innate" (79) and thus found within the poet/orator, Longinus contends that the other three sources of the sublime are at least "partly the product of art" (79), that is, they are learned by the poet in the course of his education and exposure to other sublime writing (nurture), and accordingly derive from without. These include the "due formation of figures" (79) – these being of two kinds, figures of "thought" (79) and those of "expression" (79), the use of "noble diction which in turn comprises choice of words, and use of metaphors, and elaboration of language" (79), and the use of "dignified and elevated composition" (79) which is the "fitting conclusion of all that have preceded it" (79).

M. H. Abrams has argued persuasively in his seminal *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) that critical sensibility from the Classical era right up to the aptly named 'Neoclassical' period (usually thought to stretch from about the late seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth century) was dominated by the 'mimetic' and 'pragmatic' poles, that is, a preoccupation with measuring the accuracy of the image of the world represented by the text and/or calculating its impact on the reader (these two emphases often went hand in hand). The notion that literature is principally a medium of self-expression, for which reason literature ought to be read primarily with an eye to *who wrote* it rather than what it is about or its impact on the reader, gradually attained hegemonic status in literary circles, culminating in the rise to ascendancy of the so-called Romantics whose heyday, at least in England, occurred from about 1780 to about 1830. Longinus' new found favour was symptomatic of what some have termed the 'expressive turn' so characteristic of late eighteenth / early nineteenth century literary theory and aesthetics in particular and philosophical reflection more broadly. This 'paradigm shift' was especially indebted to the concept of the transcendental subject articulated by Immanuel Kant in his magnum opus *The Critique of Pure Reason* of 1784 (albeit in ways arguably not foreseen by Kant himself) and the German Idealists who followed in his wake, not least G. W. F. Hegel in his equally celebrated *The Phenomenology of Spirit* of 1807. This transition is famously described by Abrams in terms of a segue from one dominant trope (responsible for what Stephen Pepper would call a particular 'world hypothesis'), the 'mirror,' to another, the 'lamp.' Abrams argues in a now classic account that the tendency which had predominated since at least Plato to conceptualise things, including the arts, as *reflections* of other things (see also Richard McKeon's thoughts on this score) gradually gave way to the propensity to understand things in terms of their generative source or origin (Aristotle's so-called 'efficient cause'). In the Platonic schema, for example, the physical world was often viewed as an imperfect imitation of the world of ideal forms while literature was thought of as a mirror held up to nature. In its place, there arose a new emphasis on understanding things as the external concrete manifestation of an internal abstract essence (an outlook on which subsequent thinkers like Isaiah Berlin and Gilles Deleuze have bestowed labels such as 'expressionism' and Charles Taylor 'expressivism'). From this point of view, for example, in much the same way that light irradiates outward from within a lamp and thereby illuminates the surrounding environment or breath is exhaled from within the body, the particulars of the physical world came to be thought of as the manifestation of a universal Geist in the process of coming to know itself (I am obviously alluding to Hegel's view here) and the literary work as an expression of the writer's inner being (such a view is a cardinal element of Coleridge's poetics, for example).

The warm welcome extended to Longinus' theory of the sublime was, in short, an integral part of an emerging preoccupation with the nature of the relationship linking the uniqueness of a literary work to its author's individuality (the so-called 'expressive' pole of criticism) that not only displaced the previous emphasis on that which obtained between the work and the world (the 'mimetic') or between the work and the reader, but is also still very much with us and outside the parameters of which many find it difficult to think about the arts even today. This turn toward the author was supplemented, perhaps for the first time, by a subtle but important shift of critical emphasis that sought to focus less on the impact had by the literary work on the reader (the so-called 'pragmatic' pole) with an exploration of the reader's impact on the literary work. This arguably inaugurated what would eventually come to be called 'reader-response criticism' in the twentieth century. Theorists like Alexander Pope and David Hume debated the possibility of arriving at an objective and universal standard of 'taste' or judgement by which to criticise works of art in general and literary works in particular. Others

like Edmund Burke (in A Philosophical Enquiry into Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful of 1757) and Kant (this time in The Critique of Judgment of 1790), drawing parallels between the response of the audience to an art work and that of the perceiving subject to nature (the so-called 'natural sublime'), strove to theorise the precise nature of the affective and cognitive responses evoked. In so doing, they were largely responsible for initiating at this time an extensive and tremendously influential debate concerning the precise differences separating the 'sublime' from the 'beautiful,' whether in the world of human artefacts or in the natural world. This was a far cry, of course, from the apparent equation of the sublime and the beautiful by Longinus in the Classical period.

Offering a psychological theory of the sublime shaped by the Locke- and Condillac-inspired associationist model of the mind first proposed by David Hartley's Observations on Man, his Frame, his Duty, and his Expectations (1749), Burke argues that the sublime and the beautiful are "ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure" (306). He offers a series of binary opposites to differentiate the sublime from the beautiful:

For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small: beauty should be smooth and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line, and when it deviates it often makes a strong deviation: beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy: beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. (306)

In other words, Burke identifies sublimity with the terror and horror produced by our confrontation with immense and obscure phenomena such as massive, gloomy mountain ranges. Sublime objects, precisely because their immense size dwarfs humans, force us to recognise our own contrastingly puny status even as they also, because their outlines appear vague, murky and difficult to grasp, breed uncertainty and confusion in our minds. Burke links beauty, by contrast, to the pleasure provoked by clearly delineated objects of manageable proportions that can be easily apprehended and assimilated by the human psyche without the sensation of being overwhelmed. In short, a *cognitive* response of a particular sort, that is, complex ideas of a particular kind (in this case, those that fall under the rubric 'sublime' as opposed to those that fall under the rubric 'beautiful'), is derived from the precise *emotional* complexes (those associated with 'terror' as opposed to those with 'joy') linked to the specific *sensations* (those that provoke pain rather than pleasure) produced by an encounter with particular aspects of reality (a massive mountain, perhaps, by contrast to a beautiful beach).

Kant's theory of the sublime builds in turn on, even as it differs in significant ways from, the Burkean model. I can barely skim the surface of and, thus, hardly do justice to Kant's complex thoughts on the sublime which, like most of his work, are notoriously oblique, arcane and even slippery in a way that makes one wonder what all the fuss concerning the difficulty of understanding contemporary theoretical jargon (and so-called 'postmodernism' in particular) is about. Arguing famously that "concepts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind," Kant differentiates between three mental faculties each engaged in different versions of what he termed 'synthesis': the 'sensitivity' (concerned with the 'synthesis' or turning into 'intuitions' of the raw perceptual data furnished by the senses, 'space' and 'time' constituting the fundamental framework through which 'things' are 'apprehended' by us, rather than properties inherent in the universe of things); the 'understanding' (responsible for the 'synthesis' or turning of mere intuitions into knowledge

in the form of 'judgements' by means of certain characteristic conceptual manoeuvres or what he called 'logical functions' – Kant lists at least twelve such functions, including quantity, quality, relation, modality, and so on – through which 'things' are 'recognised' by us, that is, turned into something familiar and thus recognisable by virtue of being slotted into certain well-known conceptual grooves); and the 'imagination' (concerned with the 'synthesis' of or moving back and forth between intuitions and concepts and through which the 'things' of this world may be 'reproduced' by us in artistic, literary and other forms).

Kant's thesis in the Critique of Judgement is that the sublime is a complex admixture of the intuitive, the affective (the concomitant emotional responses inspired by these intuitions) and the cognitive (in the form of the concepts through which these intuitions are fashioned into judgments). The sublime, he argues, oscillates between the experience of certain unpleasurable feelings stemming from our intuitions of certain threatening aspects of the physical world (e.g. a massive tree which towers over a puny person) and more pleasurable feelings that derive from our subsequent recourse, via the imagination, to the understanding which restores our rational mastery over reality by turning initially unpleasant intuitions into more comforting concepts (e.g. the thought that even the smallest axe can cut down the largest tree). The sublime is something of an oxymoronic experience in which initially painful feelings of awe, horror and terror are succeeded by pleasurable ones of joy, elation and wonder derived from the reassertion in the final analysis of the supremacy of the reason. To put this another way, the eclipse of the sensibility is the prerequisite of the triumph of the understanding, albeit via the deployment of the imagination, which serves ultimately to confirm the sovereignty of that transcendental subjectivity theorised in his earlier Critique of Pure Reason.

Kant differentiates in this respect between two kinds of sublime: the *mathematically* sublime (the sensation produced by an apparently infinite *series* or objects of immense *size* like mountain ranges that overwhelm us by their seeming endlessness or sheer magnitude) – Kant's emphasis here is on *space* – and the *dynamically* sublime (that produced by natural *forces* like a hurricane or an earthquake that threaten, by their sheer *force*, to obliterate us and in the teeth of which any will to resistance, in the words of the Borg on Star Trek, is possibly futile) – Kant's very choice of terminology underscores the element of *time*. In the case of the mathematically sublime, elation accompanies the realisation that, however endless the series or huge the object in question, the very capacity to rationally *conceive* of infinity or totality, concepts which cannot be derived from the sense-impressions produced by nature per se (because, after all, one could never actually *apprehend* by means of the senses either infinity or totality), represents a triumph of *reason* over intuition (Kant evidently gestures in this regard to his Critique of Pure Reason [my italics]). In the case of the dynamically sublime, elation accompanies the realisation that no matter how forcefully the winds may blast or the ground shake, we possess not only the reason to conceive of steps which we might take to circumvent the mightiest of nature's forces and ensure self-preservation but also the cunning and the will to implement them. This evidently represents the triumph of the *will* and practical agency over nature (Kant gestures here to his aptly named Critique of Practical Reason [my italics again] of 1788 as well as the earlier Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals [1785]).

It should be noted that, in Kant's schema, sublimity is stimulated by, but is not a property of, the object per se. Though provoked by the external phenomenon in question, the sublime is, rather, a mental state (or rapid succession of states) internal to the observer: the horror

elicited initially by the intuition of some aspect of the external world is superseded subsequently by that elation that accompanies the acknowledgment of the triumphant power of reason as it intervenes to fill the void left thereby. It should also be noted that, as Steven Knapp and Barbara Freeman have pointed out, the experience of sublimity culminates in the proclamation of a rational core within and the practical capabilities of the subject that render it potentially superior to everything without that threatens to overwhelm it. In other words, a transcendental self is affirmed in the very throes of the paradoxical experience that is the sublime.

The sublime quickly became, in the wake of Burke's and Kant's seminal writings on the subject, one of the hottest topics of discussion within aesthetic circles during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and served as one of the main impetuses in the development of Romanticism. A variety of thinkers, including such seminal names as Friedrich Schiller and G. W. F. Hegel, intervened to offer their own two cents' worth on the matter.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the debate on the sublime passed beyond the boundaries of philosophy proper, spilling over into both the creative writings and theoretical musings of poets-critics-theorists first in Germany and later in England, such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge especially. Though open debate on the sublime largely petered out after its high-point during the heyday of Romanticism, it has in recent times experienced a bit of a resurgence in the form, for example, of the psychoanalytically-inflected models advanced by Neil Hertz and Thomas Weiskel or the so-called 'postmodernist' perspective of Jean-François Lyotard.

### **The Sublime versus the Ridiculous; Philosophy versus Rhetoric**

It is beyond the limitations of this paper to trace the history of this debate on the sublime in all its various manifestations or in the detailed way demanded by its complexity. There is, though, one relatively recent, though perhaps not so well-known, intervention which, to my mind at least, offers a fertile perspective from which to (re)think our understanding of the specificity of a Caribbean *literary* history and its relation to the European canon. I am thinking, in this regard, of Kenneth Burke's *rhetorically*-oriented take on the sublime advanced in his (perhaps misleadingly named) "The Philosophy of Literary Form" (1941). Burke begins by advancing the claim central to his work that both "[c]ritical and imaginative works are answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose" (3). They are, moreover, "not merely answers, they are *strategic* answers, *stylised* answers" (3). Any "work of critical or imaginative cast" (3) consists, he argues famously, in the "adopting of various strategies for the encompassing of situations. These strategies size up the situations, name their structure and outstanding ingredients, and name them in a way that contains an attitude towards them" (3). He contends, from this perspective, that

*threat* is the basis of beauty. Some vastness of magnitude, power, or distance, disproportionate to ourselves, is 'sublime.' We recognise it with awe. We find it dangerous in its fascination. And we equip ourselves to confront it by piety, by stylistic medicine, and by structural assertion (form, a public matter that symbolically enrolls us with allies who will share the burdens with us). (52)

Unlike Kant or his early modern namesake, Burke associates the sublime with the beautiful.

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<sup>2</sup>Useful accounts of this debate and its legacy for subsequent theorists are provided by Peter de Bolla, Steven Knapp, and S. H. Monk.

Like Kant, however, Burke suggests that the sublime/beautiful, which he believes inspires feelings of 'awe' and which he finds 'dangerous' in the 'fascination' which it holds for us, derives from the 'threat' posed to us by phenomena of great magnitude and/or power. He contends that one possible way of 'confronting' this threat is with what he calls 'piety,' synonyms for which include 'stylistic medicine' and 'structural assertion.' In other words, we confront the sublime by means of the deployment of 'form,' 'style' and 'structure' which he sees as something that transcends the individual, a communal strategy shared with others. Note, in this regard, the explicit stress on shared 'burdens,' forged 'alliances,' solidarity, cooperation, commonality, similarity, and resemblance. Artistic and literary form is, in the final analysis then, a way of mastering and overcoming the dangers synonymous with the sublime.

Implicit, too, in Burke's stress on the deployment of form or structure in an effort to manage these threats is more than a hint of the ahistorical, the timeless, the static and the simultaneous – the exhortation of space, in short, at the expense of time, what Kant would call the 'mathematical' as opposed to the 'dynamical' sublime, the deployment of *pure* as opposed to *practical* reason and, by extension, the elevation of *theory* over *practice*. Walter Ong explains this distinction, in "World as View and World as Event," in terms of two contrasting tendencies: on the one hand, a tendency to conceive the world in largely visual terms, for which reason the spatial dimensions of the physical world are stressed (world qua view), as opposed, on the other hand, to a propensity to conceive the world in largely auditory terms together with a corresponding emphasis on the temporal dimensions of the physical world (world qua event).<sup>3</sup> The lesson, in short, which I draw from both Burke and Ong in this regard is that the emphasis in modern Western culture on the visual and the spatial, to the exclusion of the oral/aural and the temporal, has led to a turning of the threat in question into an *object* and a concomitant narrowing of attention on the precise arrangement and distribution of its component elements, that is, a preoccupation, in short, with (artistic and literary) *form* and *structure* (this, in a nutshell, is Kant's *mathematical* sublime).

Burke also suggests, however, that another, more marginal perhaps because more irreverent, impious and temporally-oriented response to the threats identified earlier is also possible. His label for this response is the "ridiculous" (52), which "equips us by impiety, as we refuse to allow the threat its authority: we rebel, and courageously play pranks" (52). Note, in this regard, the contrasting emphasis on rebellion, rejection, irreverence, playfulness and, ultimately, difference. There is more than a hint here too of the temporal and the practical: in lieu of turning the threat into an *object* that can then be mastered *theoretically*, it is conceived as an *event*, something which occurs over time and which one counters in some *practical* way (Kant's *dynamical* sublime).

All "manifestations of symbolic action" (52), Burke concludes, are merely "*attenuated variants* of pious awe (the sublime) or impious rebellion (the ridiculous)" (52).<sup>4</sup> He sets up a series of

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<sup>3</sup>There is a certain unacknowledged ambivalence to the term 'theory,' as I argue elsewhere, which may capture both these tendencies, the visual and the auditory, the spatial and the temporal.

<sup>4</sup>'Symbolic action' is a key concept in the Burkean lexicon. He distinguishes between mere 'motion' (e.g. that of a branch in the wind or the reflex of the knee when

binary opposites, contrasting alternatives between which 'symbolic actors' must choose (or at least oscillate): the sublime/beautiful versus the ridiculous; pious awe versus impious disrespect; seriousness versus jocularity; the grave versus the ludic; similitude versus difference; the theoretical versus the practical; spatiality versus temporality; the static versus the dynamic; simultaneity versus historicity; formal mimicry versus formal transgression; 'reading with' as opposed to 'reading against the grain'; and, to use a pair of terms made famous by Nietzsche, the Apollonian versus the Dionysian.

The distinction posited by Burke between the sublime and the ridiculous is fleshed out, I would argue, in that proposed by Richard Lanham in The Motives of Eloquence between 'homo seriosus' and 'homo rhetoricus' and, ultimately, between the philosophical and the rhetorical "views of life" whose "business" it is to "contend for supremacy" with one another.<sup>5</sup> Lanham quotes Werner Jaeger's Paideia in this regard:

There are two contrasting types of life, two *bioi*. One of them is built upon the flattering quasi-arts – really not arts at all but copies of arts. We may call it, after one of its main species of flattery, *the rhetorical ideal of life*. Its purpose is to create pleasure and win approval. The other, its opponent, is the *philosophical life*. It is based on knowledge of human nature and of what is best for it: so it is a real techné, and it really cares for man, for the body as well as the soul. (Lanham's emphases)

Philosophy and rhetoric have for as long as anyone can remember, Lanham stresses, been caught up in what he describes as a "profound and fruitful collision."

Corresponding to these two 'ideals of life,' the philosophical and the rhetorical, are what Lanham terms "two poetics" that correlate to Burke's distinction between the sublime and the ridiculous. The 'philosophical' or 'sublime' model of literature and literary criticism is epitomised by (though not exclusively) the views of Anglo-American Modernists and New Critics such as T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, John Crowe Ransom, and Cleanth Brooks. Their outlook is influenced in turn by the mixed climate of positivism and moralism which shaped the work of Victorians such as Matthew Arnold which is in turn traceable, in spite of what Eliot, in "The Metaphysical Poets," saw as the unfortunate detour of Romanticism, to the Neoclassicism which came to predominate during the late seventeenth and early to mid-eighteenth centuries – I am thinking here especially of theorists such as Joseph Addison, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson and Edward Young.

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struck by the doctor's hammer) and 'action,' that is, the various *intentional* activities expressly undertaken by humans and accordingly invested with symbolic significance. The latter would include such disparate activities as literature, art, philosophising, and even fashion, a particular style of walking, and so on. In short, 'motion' is the consequence of purely physical factors, while 'action' indicates *motivated* motion, as it were. The term 'motive' is also clearly a crucial one for Burke, as is reflected in the titles of some of his most important works, A Rhetoric of Motives and A Grammar of Motives.

<sup>5</sup>I am drawing here on the version of chapter one which Professor Lanham has made available online (<http://www.rhetoricainc.com/motives1.html>) and for which no pagination is provided. I will discuss Lanham's distinction in greater detail in an article on rhetoric which I am working on for the Encyclopaedia of Theory.

This is not the place, of course, for an extended treatment of all aspects of the Modernist/Neoclassical philosophy of literature, but a sense of the main features of this model can be gained from a quick glance at Eliot's seminal "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Eliot's goal here is to underscore the "importance of the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors" (762). To this end, he utilises an organic metaphor, to wit, that poetry is a "*living* whole of all the poetry that has ever been written" (my emphasis; 762). Eliot argues that critics have long tended to "insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else" (761). In other words, we "pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man" (761) by dwelling upon the poet's "*difference* from his predecessors" (my emphasis; 761). Eliot's famous view is, however, that "not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously" (761). The greatest writers, in Eliot's view, accordingly write with a "historical sense" (761) in their bones, to wit, the "perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (761). This sense compels a "man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (761). Eliot conceives of history in terms of continuity and similitude, a perspective quite different, to say the least, from the regular understanding of history as synonymous with change and difference. Hence, the emphasis on 'simultaneity' and the paradoxical 'presence' of the 'past.' Indeed, Eliot's notion of the literary 'tradition' is not only an alternative to what, since at least the advent of Romanticism, has often been called literary 'history,' but it would seem to be an early version of what would later come to be termed 'intertextuality,' his emphasis being on synchrony to the exclusion of diachrony altogether.

It is as a result of this that no poet, in Eliot's view, "has his complete meaning alone" (761), his "significance" (761) consisting in the "appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" (761). Hence, his advice to critics that "you must set him, for comparison and contrast, among the dead" (761). Eliot's point is that the literary works of an artist should not be considered in isolation but in relation to other classic works. In this schema, it is not so much a question of one writer aspiring to emulate another, but of all great works meeting certain universal, self-evident criteria of greatness (what Arnold termed 'touchstones'). For each such work, conformity to certain norms – what Eliot calls "fitting in" (762) – is a "test of its value" (762). However, even as it perpetuates the tradition in this way, it also adds something fresh to it: the "existing monuments" (761), he intones famously,

form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted. (761-762)

In short, rejecting a linear, unidirectional conception of history, Eliot contends that the past is "altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (762). There is at the very least a paradox at work here, if not a downright contradiction: the tradition is 'complete' prior to the arrival of the new work on the scene but the 'whole existing order,' to be precise, the 'relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole,' what Saussureans might term the 'synchronic system' formed by literature as a whole in which each component work is defined relative to each other and to the system as a whole, is in turn 'altered' by the emergence of the new work.

Eliot argues that the poet must be *conscious*, therefore, of the "main current" (762) of which he is part but he must be so in a way that is also in fact, paradoxically, *unconscious*. This is because too "much learning deadens or perverts poetic sensibility" (762). Eliot puts it this way: the "conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show" (762). The poet must, in short surrender himself to something infinitely more valuable than himself, the tradition, the "progress of the artist" (762) being dependent upon a "continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (762).

Offering an early version of what would come more recently to be called, thanks to Roland Barthes, the 'death of the author,' Eliot attempts to clarify in Part II of the essay this "process of depersonalisation and its relation to the sense of tradition"(762) by means of a scientific metaphor for the process of poetic creation. Here, he advances what he describes as an "impersonal theory of poetry" (762) that specifically targets the expressivist theories of 'Longinus' and his heirs in the nineteenth century such as the Romantics. He proposes in this regard a novel view of the "relation of the poem to its author" (762) that reflects, in the chemical metaphor which he uses to describe the creative process, the pervasive admiration for the sciences of the era in which he lived. Eliot is not a great believer (at least at this stage of his career) in the existence of a pre-given or 'essential self': the point of view which he is "struggling to attack" (763), he writes, is one "related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul" (763). It is from this point of view that he suggests that the poet "has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways" (763). Poetry does not express the personal feelings and, by extension, the personality of the poet in the way that the Romantics would have it, it is "not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion, it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (764). In fact, he contends, the "more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (763).

Using an analogy drawn from the chemical sciences, Eliot suggests that the "poet's mind" (763) is a "receptacle for storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together" (763). Its function is akin to that of a "catalyst" (763) in an experiment: Eliot compares the poet's mind to a "filament of platinum" (763) under the influence of which the "elements" (763), consisting of the "emotions and feelings" (763) (these two are compared to the gases oxygen and sulfur dioxide), combine to produce an emotional response in the reader (this is by analogy, the sulfurous acid produced by the chemical action). All this occurs at an unconscious level: there is no question of, in Wordsworth's famous formula, 'emotion *recollected* in tranquillity.' It is a process, moreover, over which the poet does not have (complete) control. All Longinian criteria of "sublimity" (9), thus, fall short of their mark: for "it is not the 'greatness', the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts" (9). For Eliot, in short, the "emotion of art is impersonal" (764) and the best poetry expresses "emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet" (764). Consequently, according to Eliot, to "divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim" (764) because what he characterises as "[h]onest criticism and sensitive appreciation" (762) are "directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" (762).

Opposed to the tendencies represented by this essay, I would argue, is a *rhetorical* paradigm

of literature that originates with the Sophists and in the expressivism of the Longinian model of literature which I discussed at the very start of this essay, reaches its apogee in the Romantic period in the work of theorists ranging from William Wordsworth to Hyppolite Taine, and is epitomised by the work of late nineteenth and early twentieth century thinkers located in the German hermeneutical-historicist tradition, such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Leo Spitzer, as well as some members of the American Pragmatist tradition who trace their inspiration to John Dewey and William James, rather than C. S. Peirce.<sup>6</sup> I am thinking in the latter regard of theorists like Louise Rosenblatt and Wayne C. Booth. In the rhetorical schema, broadly speaking, literature is an act of communication in which the literary work is produced by someone and intended for someone else whose duty it is to decipher the message-work for insights into and in the light of the person responsible for it.

Ong offers a useful overview, in "A Dialectic of Aural and Objective Correlatives," of the expressivism which is at the very heart of the rhetorical model of literature. He contends that there has been a tendency in some critical quarters (he refers specifically to the Modernists and New Critics who held sway around this time) to "draw an analogy between a poem and an object" (498). Such a view of literature reflects, he avers, a "state of mind fixed on a world of spaces and surfaces" (499) and, thus, a "tactile and visualist bias" (499). Such theorists, "preoccupied with objects, structures, skeletons, and stratified systems" (499), have relied heavily on "spatial analogies" (499). This has had the effect of ignoring the "radically *acoustic* quality of the *dialogue* between man and man in which all verbal expression has its being" (my emphases; 498): to

consider the work of literature in its primary oral and aural existence, we must enter more profoundly into this world of sound as such, the I-thou world where, through the mysterious interior resonance which sound best of all provides, persons commune with persons, reaching one another's interiors in a way in which one can never reach the interior of an 'object.' Here, instead of reducing words to objects, . . . we take them simply as what they are even more basically, as utterances, that is to say, as cries. All verbalisation, including all literature, is radically a cry, a sound emitted from the interior of a person. . . . The cry which strikes our ear, even the animal cry, is consequently a sign of an interior condition, indeed of that special interior focus of pitch of being which we call life, an invasion of all the atmosphere which surrounds a being by that being's interior state, and in the case of man, it is an invasion of his own interior self-consciousness. (499-500)

The cry, Ong emphasises, "advertises to all that is outside and around it that this *interior* is here, and . . . manifesting itself" (500).

Ong's basic claim is, accordingly, that we must understand literature and, indeed, "all expression" (504) in relation to the "existential implications of dialogue" (504), that is, "viewed for what it basically is, an exchange between an 'I' and a 'thou'" (504). There are a number of implications to this communicational or dialogical view of literature. First, Ong believes, it forces us to question the precise "'boundaries' of a literary work" (505) and to turn away from an exclusive focus on the "interior organisation of the work" (505), its form or structure. We would do well to remember, rather, that each literary work is a "moment in an

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<sup>6</sup>T. E. Hulme's "Romanticism and Classicism" sums up the differences between these two contrasting positions, albeit from the vantage-point of the latter.

age-old conversation in which what goes on within the artist's psyche and registers in his work" (505) is merely a "moment in an age-old exchange of talk" (505). Second, it forces us to reconsider the nature of the relationship between literature and criticism: since literature is not simply an object, but also something that someone (a historical person, speaking in a certain place at a certain historical time and after certain historical literary events) utters after and because others have uttered something else, and since the work of the critics is also something that someone utters after and because others have uttered something else (this something else being both the work of art and its antecedents, as well as other criticism), the lines of criticism and literature are necessarily interwoven, each belonging to a certain moment in the totality of activity emanating from human life in history. Seen this way, literary criticism is perhaps somewhat less the poor relation of literature than it is sometimes made out to be. It is part of the total dialogue in which all literature exists. (506)

In thinking of the literary work as an object, by contrast, the critic uses words to "process, understand, and assimilate spatial conceptions" (506) but, in so doing, s/he abstracts the work from the "flow of conversation and understanding in which human life moves" (506). It is the critic's task to return the work to "this flow, . . . that is to say, to what concrete, existent persons are actually saying and thinking" (506).

Last but not least, Ong argues, the communicational model of literature changes our understanding of literary *history*. World views which "consider all human knowledge, wittingly or unwittingly, by analogy with sight-knowledge (abetted more or less by tactile perception of spatial relations) to the exclusion of sound-knowledge, have no place for history, are helpless to deal with evolution, cosmic, organic, or intellectual" (507). No way of "philosophising about history has arisen to compete with that which sees the movements of history as analogous to those of dialogue – to what happens when one inviolable interiority or human person sets about communicating with another" (508). Ong contends that if literary history is to be more than a sheer enumeration of before and afters, more than . . . a surface treatment proceeding by likening works of art to discrete objects apprehended by sight rather than . . . to persons themselves (for voice is an intensification of person), it will have to avail itself of this notion of dialogue more explicitly. (508)

For Ong, in short, literature consists in an echo and amplification of snatches of conversation salvaged from all over this world's history – snatches . . . of what registered in the interiors of men and women since these interiors began that communication with one other within which we still live our conscious lives. (508)

### **Towards a Theory of a Specifically Caribbean Sublime**

You may wonder about the reason for this long (and, hopefully, not too rambling) disquisition on the dialectic of the sublime and the ridiculous, philosophy and rhetoric, the Modernist and the Pragmatist, the Neoclassical and the Romantic, positivist and historicist, universalist and cultural nationalist (as Homi Bhabha suggests), and so on, which seemingly shapes so completely our symbolic actions. My thinking is simply this: I find it suggestive for an understanding not only of Caribbean and, on a larger scale, so-called Post-colonial literature, but also broader questions of intellectual history, not least those that focus on the nature of the relation which binds the colonial and the post-colonial. I can here merely outline the bare

skeleton of such a view. I believe that, faced with the overwhelming magnitude and irresistible might of the European literary and, by extension, intellectual canon, the postcolonial Caribbean thinker initially experiences emotions of terror and awe that are subsequently, however, transmuted into the elation, wonder and awe that accompanies either a mathematical embrace (and mastery) of this tradition and a concomitant affirmation of an essential self that transcends the specificities of time, place, race and so on (this tendency is represented by the Walcotts and Ramchands in our midst, I would suggest), or a dynamic questioning and/or rejection of this 'grand' tradition in the name of a 'little' or 'folk' tradition, that is, on behalf of a culturally-specific conception of the self (this pole is arguably represented by the Brathwaites, Wynters and Rohlehrs among us). Currently, though this may change in the future, it is the latter paradigm which has become dominant, something attested to by the way in which it has become part and parcel not just of this or that critic's armoury but of government policy in most of the nation-states of the Caribbean.

Space does not permit me to flesh out my thoughts in either of these directions. I have already, in more than one location, discussed the work of Brathwaite as exemplary of the *rhetorical* tradition. There is much, in turn, that I will have to say about Walcott's *philosophical* bearings in a follow-up essay to this. My feeling is that, by situating Walcott in relation to the Modernist/New Critical/Neoclassical tradition, we might get a better handle on the reasons why some, usually of the opposite persuasion, tend to denounce his 'divided' heritage, lament his alleged Eurocentrism, and seemingly question his 'authenticity' as a Caribbean person. It is in this way that we may develop profounder insights into that 'Brathwaite versus Walcott' dialectic which, some like Patricia Ismond suggest, would seem to be at the very heart of West Indian literature and culture.

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