Laurier Undergraduate Journal of the Arts

Volume 5 Article 8

2018

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"The endless stream of men, and moving things": The Emotional Impact of the Urban Sublime in Book VII of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*

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In the hyper-connected world in which we live, we are flooded with an unending stream of impressions. Mobile technologies provide constant distraction from the world around us and can prevent us from being able to connect with the present moment. Though this kind of sensory overload may seem a distinctly modern problem, William Wordsworth (1770–1850) tackles a similar dilemma in his case study of the urban sublime in "Residence in London," Book VII of his autobiographical magnum opus, *The Prelude*. While encounters with the sublime—a feeling of awe mingled with fear—feature most predominantly in literature set in the natural world, in "Residence in London," Wordsworth offers a case study of the "urban sublime": an all-encompassing emotional experience sparked by the hustle and bustle of London's constantly moving cityscape. Rather than inspiring the delightful terror that Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant—two of the major European aesthetic theorists of the eighteenth century—argued was the defining feature of the sublime, the urban sublime experienced by Wordsworth's speaker in Book VII sparks an altogether different kind of "astonishment": the total overwhelming of the senses (Burke 40). While Wordsworth's urban sublime shares elements with Burkian and Kantian conceptions—such as Kant's idea of the mathematical sublime and Burke's ideas of vastness, infinity, and obscurity—it also contrasts these theories, as the constant flow of impressions of the city around him numbs Wordsworth's speaker to his surroundings rather than engaging his emotions.

While some critics, such as Lawrence Kramer, have interpreted this problem as the imagination's struggle for survival in the urban landscape, I argue that Book VII is more concerned with the survival of sympathy (620). It is only in consciously focusing on singular impressions, such as that of the blind beggar, that Wordsworth's speaker is able to break free of the emotional desensitization of the urban sublime and restore his empathetic abilities.

In this essay, I use Burke's and Kant's theories of the sublime as a framework to examine the characteristics of the urban sublime presented by Wordsworth in Book VII to offer insight into the speaker's experience of emotional overstim-

ulation and the strategies used to overcome it. First, I contextualize my argument within core aesthetic theories by offering background on Edmund Burke's and Immanuel Kant's conceptions of the sublime. Next, I discuss the primary difference between Wordsworth's urban sublime and those of Burke and Kant—a lack of aesthetic distance—to demonstrate the distinct affect, or emotional sensation, of the urban sublime. Then, using examples from Book VII, I illustrate the way in which this lack of aesthetic distance works over time to erode the speaker's emotional engagement with his environment, whether in the form of fear or delight, leaving an emotional numbness in its place. With these passages as a reference point, I analyze the ways in which Wordsworth's urban sublime borrows and refashions the aesthetic qualities of Burke's and Kant's conceptions for the purpose of achieving his own aesthetic goals. Finally, using the encounter with the blind beggar as a case study, I examine how Wordsworth's speaker overcomes his emotional overstimulation and restores a meaningful emotional engagement with his surroundings.

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke describes the sublime — a kind of delight mingled with terror — as "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (39–40). For Burke, the sublime is primarily an internal reaction to outward stimuli; he calls this emotional sensation "astonishment"—"that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (Shaw 49; Burke 57). What distinguishes Burke from other theorists, such as Kant, is that he argues that the external world produces astonishment rather than the imagination. He contends that astonishment can be elicited by anything that "excite[s] the idea of pain, and danger" or in any way gives the impression of terror; however, the danger or pain must not "press too nearly" else they are "incapable of giving any delight and are simply terrible" (39, 40). This kind of "danger from a distance" can take the form of anything from physical phenomena, like the vastness of the ocean, to more abstract ideas, like verbal descriptions or instrumental music (58, 60). Though a wide range of impressions can generate feelings of astonishment, Burke highlights a few qualities in particular, including characteristics such as obscurity, power, privation, vastness, infinity, and difficulty (60, 64, 71–73, 77). In Burke's conception, all of these sublime characteristics exist in the outside world, which in turn produce emotional reactions in the people who encounter them.

While Burke suggests that certain external qualities can provoke internal sublime responses, Kant argues in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) that powers should not be considered sublime in their own right because it is the workings of

the imagination and an "attitude of mind that introduces sublimity into the representation of nature" (76). According to his definition, the sublime is a subjective, aesthetic judgment, applied both to physical objects and abstract concepts "in comparison with which all else is small" (81, 80). Kant divides his conception of the sublime into two main types: the mathematically sublime and the dynamically sublime (78). While he writes that the mathematically sublime refers to greatness of magnitude that expands past and frustrates the imagination's ability to comprehend it, he describes the dynamically sublime as fear mixed with the knowledge that the sublime object "has no dominion over us" (Kant 82, 90; Ginsborg). This second definition is closely aligned with Burke's idea of "delightful terror"; in fact, Kant writes that "it is impossible to take delight in terror that is seriously entertained"—that is to say, pure terror—but that "the agreeableness arising from the cessation of an uneasiness is a state of joy" (91). Although Burke and Kant disagree about exactly how the sensation of the sublime is produced—whether it is sparked by specific qualities or functions purely as a subjective aesthetic judgment—both characterizations share the communal idea of an internal emotional response produced as a reaction to danger experienced at a safe distance.

The first, and perhaps most important distinguishing feature, of Wordsworth's urban sublime from the Burkian or Kantian conceptualizations is the lack of separation from the sublime object. Wordsworth's poetic persona is not able to offer his aesthetic judgments from a safe distance; he must instead "[go] forward with the Crowd," processing his impressions from up close (VII.596). In contrast to most encounters with the sublime in Romantic literature, which typically take place in a spacious natural setting, Wordsworth's persona in London's bustling city streets is thrust right into the middle of the action. This reality of the urban landscape therefore complicates the Burkian and Kantian understanding of the sublime: at close proximity, Burke argue—and Kant agrees—that terror is "simply terrible" (Burke 40; Kant 91). Though at no time in Book VII is the speaker put in actual physical danger, he is nevertheless overwhelmed with the feeling of being threatened from all sides: "Meanwhile the roar continues, till at length, / Escaped as from an enemy, we turn / Abruptly into some sequestered nook" (VII.184–186). The frantic motion of the crowd gives him the impression of being pursued by an enemy and changes his perception from something that could be considered sublime in a Burkian or Kantian sense to an experience of pure terror. The overloading of his emotions in this way leads to an eventual emotional numbness, which becomes increasingly evident as the passage progresses.

The overwhelming number of impressions of London city life works even-

tually to erode terror, and put in its place a very different state of astonishment for the speaker: a numbness to the stimulation that London offers. At this time London was already a lively metropolis, home to a range of social classes and offering myriad entertainments. Whether due to his adaptation to London's hustle and bustle, or because he simply cannot sustain such a heightened emotional state for long, Wordsworth's speaker becomes desensitized to the terror he once felt. In its place, he feels a "blank confusion" in response to "what the mighty city is itself," which he characterizes as:

> … the same perpetual flow
> Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
> To one identity, by differences
> That have no law, no meaning, and no end (VII.696, 697, 702-705)

Whatever the cause, the city no longer terrifies Wordsworth's speaker. In fact, this passage suggests a kind of boredom, bordering on despair, brought about by the constant sameness and triviality of London city life. As Kramer suggests, the city, once so captivating, is "tainted, paralyzed, [and] poisoned," instilling the urban sublime with a deadness that no longer excites (621). Rather than suspending the motion of the soul, as Burke argues, with a kind of sublime horror and fascination, this new form of astonishment freezes the emotions, making it difficult to engage meaningfully with the multitude of impressions passing before the speaker's eyes (Burke 57).

Instead of a mingling of fear and terror, the speaker's emotional state in response to the urban sublime might better be characterized as pure sensory overload. In addition to the previously discussed terror, the speaker at first takes real delight in "the quick dance / Of colours, lights and forms, the Babel din / The endless stream of men, and moving things," saying that he "look[s] upon the real scene, / Familiarly peruse[s] it day by day / With keen and lively pleasure" (VII.156–158, 139–141). However, much in the way that his terror transforms into numbness, his delight and awe soon turn to confusion. Unable to process or feel any emotional connection to the faces in the crowd, he watches them "until the shapes before [his] eyes be[come] / A second sight procession, such as glides / Over still mountains, or appears in dreams" (VII.601–603). Completely overwhelmed with images, he seems to let his eyes go unfocused until he sees nothing but a blurry, even ghostly, haze of moving figures. The speaker's mind is "all too capable of quicksilver slippages from object to object, image to image, sign to sign," unable to focus on any

one point (Kramer 621). This state of mind is reflected even in the form of the poem, with lines that frequently enjamb: the poem itself, like the speaker's mind, is in a constant state of motion, flowing from image to image. Though this state of astonishment shares characteristics with the affect of the sublime as theorized by Burke and Kant, it is fundamentally different in that it does not depend on delight combined with "some degree of horror" to achieve its emotional effect (Burke 57). The result of the urban sublime is a dulling of Wordsworth's speaker's senses—a passivity that allows images to simply flow over him—rather than their stimulation.

The poetic speaker's state of passive astonishment acts to refashion and repurpose the elements of the Burkian and Kantian sublime into an emotional reaction more suited to the urban landscape. Wordsworth's speaker's experience is related both to Kant's idea of the mathematical sublime and Burke's ideas of vastness, infinity, and obscurity, but uses these aesthetic principles to create an altogether different emotional effect. For instance, the impressions the speaker receives while moving through London are of an "endless stream of men," the progression of "face after face; the string of dazzling Wares, / Shop after shop" (VII.158, 173–174). These seemingly endless impressions overwhelm his comprehension. From the speaker's subjective perspective, the faces and storefronts of London do seem infinite. While this experience is tied to Kant's idea of the mathematical sublime and Burke's ideas of the roles of vastness and infinity in creating the sublime, the emotional effect achieved is not one of delight mingled with terror, but one of sensory overload.

Moreover, while describing the importance of obscurity in making the sublime object "affecting to the imagination," Burke uses a "noble picture" of Satan presented through Restoration-era writer John Milton's work Paradise Lost (1667) as an example (60, 62). Burke writes that "the mind is hurried out of itself by a crowd of great and confused images; which affect because they are crowded and confused" (62). We see a similar principle at work in Wordsworth's Book VII, but with a very different result: instead of "affecting," the "crowded and confused" images that flash before the speaker lose their emotional impact through repeated exposure. By using these same sorts of stimuli to create a different kind of affect, Wordsworth repurposes the sublime to his own ends. In doing so, he demonstrates that the emotional high of the sublime is fleeting and loses its impact over time, leaving in its wake a numbness to impressions that might otherwise provoke an emotional response.

Wordsworth, however, offers a remedy for this emotional numbness left

in the wake of the urban sublime: a concentrated focus on single impressions. His speaker stumbles across this cure nearly by accident; while awash in the "second sight procession" of impressions flashing before his eyes, he is "abruptly… smitten with the view / Of a blind Beggar" (VII.602, 610–611). As Romantic scholar Geraldine Friedman writes in "History in the Background of Wordsworth's 'Blind Beggar,'" "the single and singular blind beggar looms against the plurality of the crowd," capturing the speaker's attention (127). It is in this moment, after being lost in the flood of images, that his "mind … at this spectacle turn[s] round / As with the might of waters," and he begins to emotionally engage with the scene (VII.616–617). This "turning" of his mind signifies an internal shift in which he can no longer remain an emotionally distant, "indifferent spectator" (Burke 44). Instead, the speaker engages himself in a deep, if fleeting, moment of focus on the beggar and his plight. No longer numb to the scene around him, the speaker is able to recover his emotional sensitivity. This profound emotional experience plays out most powerfully in the last few lines of the encounter, in which the speaker looks "as if admonished from another world" on the "shape of the unmoving man, / His fixèd face and sightless eyes" (VII.623, 621–622). Through this moment of connection, Wordsworth's speaker is able to reclaim his emotional engagement with his environment as well as his sense of sympathy for the plight of his fellow man.

Thus, Wordsworth presents a vision of the urban sublime in which the senses are overwhelmed—not in a state of Burkian or Kantian astonishment, but in a state of pure sensory overload. While Wordsworth's urban sublime borrows from the aesthetic qualities of Burke and Kant in its sense of infinity, vastness, and obscurity, the effect is entirely different: an erosion of emotional engagement with one's surroundings rather than a state of sublime awe. This erosion mutes the speaker's sensitivity to both terrifying and delightful stimulation, leaving him emotionally numb to the flood of sensory information pouring through him on the London streets. However, in focusing on singular impressions rather than the whole, the speaker is able to repair his damaged emotional sensitivity and restore his sense of sympathy. In the speaker's emotional journey, we can discern guidance for the modern reader, struggling with the exhaustion and sensory overload of a technological "urban sublime": to focus on one impression at a time.

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