

Metal, Sex, Comics, and Poetry: A Look at Contemporary Sublime Terror

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Abstract

“Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort of terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion; because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure.” (Burke, 36, “Of the Sublime”)

Intro: Sublime Terror and Poetry

My main experience with the sublime has been to see it as something that exists before reasoning, understanding, or an application of cohesive language can be exercised. It exists in the space of experience without comprehension, without being able to consciously compare something to another based on previously existing context, and does not necessarily have anything to do with beauty or pleasure, as I had originally imagined. Within my recent understanding of the sublime, the key facet I have latched onto the most in terms of my own personal revelations about its significance to my work as a poet, have been its aspects surrounding terror.

Poetry exists in a space of uncertainty, untethered to comprehension, and rooted in the exchange of energy between the poem and everything outside of the poem (most often through the reader). The poem speaks on levels in which it does not initially appear to speak. It is always suggesting something beyond itself and yet contains itself as a monadic object.

To me, there is something inherently terrifying in a strong poem, whether or not the subject matter of the poem has any typically fear-inducing elements. A proficiently crafted poem both suggests and leads to something outside of it - without necessitating any sleight, trickery, or glib obscurity - while still leading back to the poem, as it exists. It remains unraveled and still raveled tightly as it was before the energy was exchanged. There is something sublime, and within it terrifying, about this unseen, largely unknowable, often ineffable, and unarticulable realm that poetry attempts to bring us toward through the use of an inescapably systematic and comprehension-dependent device: language.

Sublime and the Terror of the Incomprehensible

In this paper, I am going to discuss the ways in which even the most systematic aspects of our living experience are used to access the terror of the system-less, the incomprehensible, the larger, grander space outside of our existence, with a nod in the direction toward the possibility mixed with the incomprehensibility that this space is actually nothingness. Nothingness becomes potentially the most terrifying possibility, as it is one thing we cannot truly fathom.

We can only make attempts to understand nothingness, as we try to understand and compartmentalize every other aspect of being, especially those that are terrifying.

It is only through being and an attention to something-ness that we can attempt to understand non-being and nothingness. For instance, even when acknowledging and attempting to comprehend death, the ceasing of being as one once was, we must form our conception of death through objects and concepts which exist to the realm of the living and of the being. It is hard to imagine death as absolute absence, without physical and ideological signifiers we use to shape our “understanding” of death.

The final page of Susan Howe's *Souls of the Labadie Tract* presents us with a nearly blank page, save for a single horizontally placed snippet of text, which is about the thickness of a sewing needle. Somehow, it is through trying to decipher what the line says and realizing it is not possible to do so, that a reader can understand the connotation present of nothingness, as well as our inability to understand it entirely.

It may go without saying that concepts surrounding death are not far away from the concept of the sublime, and specifically of sublime terror. I've come to understand terror itself, in the space I can see it operating in poetry, as well as in other forms of aesthetic and in experience, as a more reliable source of delivering us to a sublime moment than any other state of being we have discussed. The sublime moment can push us back from understanding, and terror does this without fail to varying degrees depending on the closeness to the experience. True terror is a direct experience un-muddled by understanding, intellectualization, and compartmentalization. That said, there perhaps must also be a firstness in the sublime encounter, even if it is only a firstness in the perception of the occurrence.

At the very least, experiences, works of art, poems, etc. which instill in us a sense of sublime terror also indicate ideas of infinitude - which by default suggest finitude (it's difficult to determine which is a greater source of terror) - an incomprehensible vastness, impermanence, and areas within and outside of the self as well as within and outside of the work, which exist in a liminal plane between being and non-being.

Contemporary Sublime Terror

Here, I also want to explore places in which death and terror are incorporated into even the most mundane and unexpected areas of contemporary life, such as through consumerism, pornography, and music subcultures. I want to examine the ways in which commercialized representations of the sublime are perhaps replacing previously existing notions of the sublime, which surrounded a seemingly more absolute mystery (often enforced by religion and spirituality) unassisted by the "information age" in which "clarification" is more readily available, and compartmentalization is a default response to experience.

In addition, I also want to consider humor as a seemingly rising element within our daily experiences and exposures to pop culture. I want to look at humor as both a response to horror, which removes us from the horror, as well as the humor, which shapes the experience of receiving something terrible into something emotionally and physically pleasurable.

Although we consider humor to be a "light" aspect of experience, perhaps our responses to comedy (either intended or unintended to be comedic) can also deliver us to a sublime experience in which we are removed from understanding and are brought to a place of neither pleasure nor pain, but somewhere else. The self, when responding to humor can seem to be coming apart at the same time as it is returning to and responding to its core experience (the expression, "splitting at the seams" comes to mind in reference to laughter).

Inversely, I want to consider how humor may remove us from a sublime experience, as it may surface as a culturally enforced behavior to laugh when something is incomprehensible, horrible, perplexing or overly complex.

Finally, I want to explore the ways in which we are no farther away from the sublime in these contemporary enactments, representations, and even yearnings. These are demonstrated not only in art, but also in contemporary society. In addition, such representations of the sublime (or of *a* sublime) are often demonstrated within art speaking of the elements which the artist now has available by living in our contemporary culture. For instance, Slayer is notorious for having excessively morbid lyrics which feel to be attempting to carry out a sublime representation, while Lady Gaga creates her own feminine sublime and BDSM pornography and sexual subcultures carry out a blurring of the senses Burke probably wishes he could have been here to analyze and/or scorn.

On top of this, today's artists and poets are presented with these representations of various contemporary sublimines, and they often surface in their works. This inclusion of pop culture is especially prevalent in books such as *Prairie Style* by C.S. Giscombe, *Poems of the Black Object*, by Ronaldo Wilson, and *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson. All of these poets use contemporary aspects of life, sublime or not, as entirely necessary components to reach toward the sublime within their works. In this paper, I will be examining specifically how these notions of contemporary sublime terror are surfacing into contemporary poetry, including my own.

Subculture Sublime

The encounter with sublime terror can be characterized as particularly bold, as with the forces of might in nature discussed by Immanuel Kant in *The Critique of Judgment*. Sublime terror can also be subtle and merely suggestive of impermanence, non-being, nothingness (yet still evokes true terror), as when staring at pure white space, or as when considering the black light in Ronaldo Wilson's *Poems of the Black Object*, whose inverse is white, which suggests the unbound space that exists between the perception of color.

Sublime terror can also reach us through a place of simply not knowing, but responding physically or emotionally regardless. Sublime terror can be manifested into the every day, being rerouted through unexpected mediums to reach our senses in any given place, regardless of how seemingly mundane.

One of the most startling moments of recognition I had of sublime terror in a contemporary medium is in the comic book (or "graphic novel") by Daniel Clowes, *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron*. The comic follows Clay Loudermilk through an incoherent, paranoid, conspiracy-driven plot-less plot beginning in a scene of utmost abjection as Clay visits an adult movie theatre and sees his own wife (who later dies in the book without Clay noticing) as a main character in a BDSM film.

Clay seems to drift through the novel almost aimlessly, meeting a cult leader named Godfrey (infer: "God"), and a mutilated half-fish woman named Tina who watches soap operas daily, works at a diner, and falls in love with Clay. She is the only character who seems to be entirely, or nearly entirely, kind. Tina eventually tries to seduce Clay by laying eggs in his bed. (This does not work).

Admittedly, I laughed at this point in the novel, yet it is difficult to understand why. Upon my first time encountering this scene, the laughter seemed to come from a place entirely not myself, and yet obviously rooted from deep within. The scene is in itself pitiful and terrifying in its concoction of the familiar with the unfamiliar. The familiar: a woman trying to seduce a man and failing. The unfamiliar: half-dolphin woman with one "leg," senselessly drunk, eyes half-mast, dripping with sweat saying, "'I'm ready! – *pant* – Oh God, it's so hot! Do it! I'm ready! Go on...I'm ready! I'm ready for you to do it!" (Clowes, 51) before leaving behind a pile of orbicular eggs in Clay's bed.

The novel is full of highly uncomfortable abjections, an inherent disorientation of characters and plot, terror, violence, brutality, and sadistic sexuality, along with an endlessness of details and hidden horrors in both the images and in the text. Each page consists of heavy black and white illustrations, all grossly detailed and grotesque, accompanied by complex disjointed narratives, both with stunning layers of detail and intricacies. With a graphic novel containing all of these elements, as well as a human poignancy, it was impossible to not have a bewildering and disconcerting experience while reading it. It was especially impossible due to the unexpectedness of the disorientation I experienced. I went into reading this book as a comic book/graphic novel, perhaps expecting violence and sexuality, but not such boldly represented abjections.

Like a Velvet Glove Cast In Iron made me curious to explore the ways in which the experience of sublime terror is surfacing in other unexpected, common, and even "low-brow" mediums, and how these mediums have naturally permeated the realms of contemporary poetry and art.

Contemporary Subjectivity and Terror

"Specters of doom await the moment
The mallet is sure and precise
Cover the crypts of all mankind
With cloven hooves be gone

Convulsions take the world in hand
Paralysis destroys
Nobody's out there to save us
Brutal seizure now we die." (Slayer, "Hardening of the Arteries")

"The swamp of feces
That is the world
Flatuates a whirlwind storm
in which you swirl." (Ghost B.C. "Idolotrine")

Sublime-seeking horror seems to be around every corner in contemporary society, including beneath the unwashed curtain of adolescents' long hair in high school listening to Iron Maiden. It is pervasive in film, music, visual art, television, and even in books of contemporary poetry. Varying expressions of pain, torment, and dissatisfaction with (yet with an adherence to) materiality surface in our daily lives constantly. Some do so overtly and melodramatically, as with many heavy metal lyrics. Others do so sans melodrama, such as C.S. Giscombe, who speaks his terror quietly.

I was particularly drawn to metal lyrics in considering Selah Saterstrom's novel, *The Meat and Spirit Plan*, in my ongoing internal analysis of sublime terror in contemporary society. The book is graphic and excruciating, yet stunning in its honesty and intricate crafting of language. The narrator in the book is a young girl raised in the south, reaching sexual and personal awakenings amidst enduring devastating abuse and neglect. There is little mention of heavy metal in the bulk of the novel, except for the titles of most of the chapters, which are comprised of metal lyrics. This has the effect of giving the reader a soundtrack to latch onto to create a layer of mood within the main character, which perhaps could not be explained within the chapters' bodies of text. The book itself is so exquisitely crafted, and the insights throughout are so mature and lyrical, that the metal lyrics seem to maybe only work in this complementary way to at least let us know that this narrator is also harboring the lyrics as she treads through paths of desolation, mysticism, and personal growth.

I thought also of Wilson utilizing perceivably common and assumedly non-mysterious content to serve his narrative of the sublime terror in being the "black object." He uses clips of Steve Irwin's death by stingray, a viral internet decoy video of a screaming female ghoul, mentions of bulimia and other eating disorders and body image issues, formulaically commercialized black figures (such as Aunt Jemima), the movie *Pearl Harbor*, as well as scenes involving an invented porn star, Herman the German. Wilson takes the mundane, commercial aspects of daily life and makes them painful and startling to experience by representing the ideas to fit the mold of his perception and to deliver us to a place of compelling sublime pain along with the speaker of the poems. For instance,

"Do you remember the scene in *Pearl Harbor*, where Ben Affleck is about to crash into the ocean and black oil spits on his face? ...He died. He did not swim to shore. That was the pilot's selfish ghost you and the audience were forced to watch... You wish he didn't sink to the bottom of the sea.

Dead,
Herman the German" (Wilson, 82)

Wilson transforms a familiar image of *Pearl Harbor*, a markedly fabricated, culturally pompous film (and Ben Affleck in the film, a white, handsome, virile character who prevails with ideal American triumph) into a scene of abject and unexpected sexuality, defeat, and death, not to mention a subversion of the white masculine role as being splattered in the face with black oil.

Wilson also incorporates BDSM sexuality into his poems. Rather than conjuring scenes and concepts which are purely alarming, Wilson uses the self as the object, in the sexual sense, to demonstrate an unraveling and a de-compartmentalization of the self. This is similar to the sense one can obtain from Anne Carson's *Decreation*, in which unraveling the self, also allows for a return to the self.

"Something crawled
up in me and died...

who's gonna suck
ram it, fork

tongue, my
back fat smacks...

figure excised
in the chest

of drawers, hole
in my head

as I rope,
asphyx to zero." (Wilson, 10)

BDSM sexuality lends itself somewhat easily to ideas of the sublime, and especially of sublime terror. Within this sub-genre of sexuality is a heavy mixture of pleasure and pain, varying suggestions of death intermixed with eroticism, which are inherently suggestive of continuity and discontinuity, as well as a mixture of disorientation and incomprehension as to what makes the experience of objectifying/being objectified or causing/experiencing physical pain so erotically compelling.

Wilson takes the sublime elements of BDSM further by incorporating a simultaneous awareness of the self with an absence of understanding of the depths into which that self is unraveling. We enter a terrifying space with Wilson of both knowing and not knowing, of both sex and maybe love, as well as fear, despair, pity, and abjection. Within this space are echoes of an unrelenting modern-day contemporary, consumerism-driven reality in which the self is being devoured and spit back out (most explicitly in poems mentioning bulimia).

Sublime Humor

In *Poems of the Black Object*, I found myself again thinking of humor and how it's working in the poems in ways in which are genuinely humorous, or ways in which are *speaking to* contemporary humor. Wilson's descriptions of his own mother deliver humor through his poems directly to us as readers, such as in "Vergelioian Space V: Caliban X":

"She said that she was intentionally late because she thought she should arrive in style, which for her means NOT HUNGRY. She stopped into some coffee shop and bought apound of truffles or something and ate half and was sugar rushed.

She said: 'Ronaldo, I felt sensual.'" (Wilson, 48)

This sense of humor differs from the other instances of humor in the poems, which are often meant as thoughtful commentary on the ways in which we value and choose to receive humor and entertainment. For instance, in "Dream in a Fair":

"Should [Steve] Irwin's final moments be shown?

Yes he'd want it: 64%

No, too morbid: 36%" (Wilson, 30)

In this moment, I stopped to consider the acceptance of morbidity of that 64%**, as well as how quickly Steve Irwin's death became a source of deeply irreverent humor, accepted by many of us, however nervously or initially reluctantly.

It then seemed important to consider what makes anything "funny." What makes our bodies jolt, our eyes water, and the giggles start to flood through some of us in certain instances, but not in others in other instances.

This may seem extraneous, but it jolted my thinking toward acknowledging the various constructions of emotions we have within us which are perpetuated by our surrounding shifting cultural values. It pushed me to question where the sublime fits within or without this construction, and to ask: where do our perceptions of humor and of the sublime experience meet, specifically within sublime terror?

It seems that sometimes humor or laughter is a knee-jerk response to a potentially sublime experience. It is understandable to consider laughing at irreverent horror when no other response can surface (but a response *is* mandatory). It is also easy to notice the ways in which laughter can take an instance of pain, humiliation, weakness, or confoundedness immediately into a realm of bodily and emotional pleasure, as well as of community. In addition, it is not difficult to imagine an individual laughing hysterically upon having a near-death experience, such as being directly *next* to the tree, which is hit by lightning.

This moment of an uncontrollable bodily response to a stimulus brings to mind thoughts of therapy. It is almost like when an individual is confronted with the most crucial element of the treatment (the "crucial element of the treatment" being a surrogate in this example for the sublime), they shut down and find they are uncomfortable exploring their ideas further. This is often the exact breaking point in treatment, or one of many, depending on the individual. The response to avoid the actualities of a point closer to the core of a perplexing issue is common, if not a default. This "breakthrough" can be a moment of both returning to and recoiling from the self, much like what the sublime experience can induce.

It can be in a moment of laughter in which a portion of the self is deeply realized and embraced as well as perhaps shunned on a more cognizant moral level.

Humor and laughter has the added potency of connecting us not only back to ourselves, but to each other on deeper levels than we can understand through other means of actively attempting to understand one another. It seems that people who find similar things humorous, have more in common at their cores (if there is such a location). They can share in a moment of not only being deeply human within the experience of laughing, but also of connecting in a sense of being of a similar experiential and innate composition. The experience of humor, whether one laughs or not (be it in response to the sublime experience, in rejection of the sublime experience or en route toward the sublime experience) delivers those affected into the core not just of the individual, but into a central locus of human connectivity.

Thinking about the reception of humor's role in connection to others, to the self, and even to the geography of a place, I couldn't help but think of C.S. Giscombe's use of the "Voodoo Dick" (Giscombe, 27) joke in *Prairie Style*. While it is clear that the joke in particular is crude with sexually derisive overtones, Giscombe speaks to jokes and humor throughout *Prairie Style* with a deeper connotation. The jokes seem to take the place of realization and fact placement, and emphasize the sense of displacement of the self in a desolate area. In the book, facts become slippery, the terror of the self becomes amplified, and language acts as a train track, crossing between points again and again, conducting movement and creating destinations. Within the book, humor adds to the terrifying disorientation of the self in a barren geography with a largely unseen or unacknowledged ghostly murderous history.

Sublime Terror and Eroticism

"Who does not end up
a female impersonator?
Drink all the sex there is.

Still die." (Carson, 72)

"Then under a bridge kid gloves made of pig. Mattress springs, pieces of airplane wreckage. Your ash, your head helmet wig of what was to come. So that many years later, a ritual, nocturne: Remove the straps. Be naked. Paintings of devils, then devils themselves." (Saterstrom, 9)

Perhaps more so than with death, it is difficult to consider all facets of the sublime, even of sublime terror, without also considering sexuality. Some of this terror is abstract and internalized, bringing to light the terror of the impermanence of self, as well as other depths of the self, reached only through sexuality. Yet, some of this terror is tangible, such as in cases of rape and sexual violence, BDSM, and sexual diseases. Sex itself, though usually considered an act of closeness with another person, can be an isolating return into the self and a severing from conscious reality when struck by "le petit mort" ("orgasm," literally: "little death" in French). Sex also provides the terrifying aspects of going "too far," and with risk, be it with the orgasm itself, or be it in a multitude of other ways, such as the risk of disease transmission, or the risks inherent and sought after in alternative practices of sexuality, like the BDSM in Wilson's *Black Object*.

Eduardo C. Corral speaks explicitly of AIDS as a source of terror in *Slow Lightning*, specifically in the poem, "Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome." The terror of the disease and of losing someone to it becomes all the more incomprehensible and chilling when presented with a sexualized image of nature along with a sense of impermanence, disorientation, and a lack of control in a delicate physical world.

"The deer passes me.
I lower my head,
stick out my tongue
to taste
the honey smeared
on its hind leg.

In the field's center
I crouch near
a boulder engraved
with a number
and stare at a gazelle's
blue ghost,
the rain falling through it." (Corral, 5)

The AIDS epidemic in this poem, and in this book, exists as a source of sublime terror, albeit one that does not bring pleasure, but one that arose out of acts of pleasure.

When considering less immediately apparent and ineffable sources of sexual terror, one must perhaps consider more deeply BDSM (Bondage-Discipline-Dominance-Submission-Sadism-Masochism) in looking toward an intentional seeking of sublime terror in contemporary life.

Visually, BDSM is bewildering and terrifying. Through the use of animal masks, dog collars, “torture” devices, chains, straps, leather, and often imagery suggestive of death, BDSM takes us to that place the Slayer song couldn’t, by placing our bodies in a place of direct risk. But a risk of what? Of pain? Of subjugation and humiliation? Of cruelty? I feel as though the answer lies somewhere in the realm of the return back into the self, while also experiencing the physicality and psychological elements of such “play” wholly, untethered by one’s identity. The idea of role playing allows for the self to be safely suspended and to “[get] the self out of the way” as Simone Weil prescribed. In *Decreation*, Anne Carson writes that Weil was “a person who wanted to get herself out of the way so as to arrive at God” (Carson, 167), God here being a stand-in for the sublime. I feel like the initially (and maybe perpetually) shocking world of BDSM with its role playing, bondage, and suspension of the self possibly allows for an experience of the sublime in its participants more readily than other contemporary mediums.

Subculture, Subjectivity, Humor, Terror, and Sex in My Contemporary White Girl Poems

“Now try again

from the

part where you tried
to scream over the valley
and your voice became
a drain.”

- from some unfinished project, Fall 2013

This past fall, I took on a writing project that had to do with being a white female body, and feeling guilty while privileged, subjugated yet free, and muted while voiced. I attempted to explore whiteness as an arbitrary yet perpetuated symbol, to speak to being a woman as both an object and not, and to see within myself a voice as both vocal and capable, and yet also hushed due to being still consigned to a category of non-voice (it is difficult to write this even now and not hear the voices of others stepping on the voice of the white female, which is where my voice happens to reside). The white female body can still be seen as both a source of power and terror in its whiteness, yet also of servitude in its femininity, even if that servitude is demonstrated through contemporary and seemingly self driven methods.

In looking back at these poems, I am seeing ways in which terror is manifested through consumerism (repeated mentions of “Ross” as in “Ross: Dress for Less”), ideas of money, value, and worth, the body as a commodity, and the voice with even its emotions as constructions. There is a definite unraveling in these poems, and an urgent return to the raveled self as a safer alternative to the unraveled. In these poems, I can now see a sublimely motivated reaching toward something greater than constructed genders, cautious sexuality, and the anthropological myth of “race” turned into a socially prominent concept.

“I’m waiting in a line to be owned
a line
made of fish nipping their scales as a tick
I promise I won’t eat them that I’m just here
to be lit
 stroked
 owned
 and cleaned.”

-same unfinished Fall 2013 project

In the poems are instances of self as animal, and skin as something other than skin: as a wet oil coating, as scales, as a manmade texture to be removed and replaced.

The poems deal with the terrors inherent in contemporary consumer culture from a white feminine perspective of being all at once an inducer of terror while simultaneously a receptacle for ongoing terror. Within all of this, at the poems' cores (at least in the poems which succeed on a higher level than other poems from the project), there is a yearning, a questioning, a sense of disorientation and incomprehension, and a displacement of self within so many wheels within wheels of a systematized being. The poems call for a place outside of the systematized being, yet not necessarily for a place of no pain or terror. They call for something outside of themselves, yet contained within themselves (I hope), and they often use contemporary means of illuminating the experience of sublime terror to try and reach a point beyond themselves.

It has been through reading multiple books by contemporary writers whose poems are also calling for something outside of themselves, and in re-investigating my own that I can see more prominently the ways in which even the most seemingly commonplace aspects of contemporary society are assisting the poems and their speakers to reach sublimity.

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