

Ann Radcliffe's Sublime: How Clarity-of-Mind Equates Eastern Modes of Transcendence in *A Sicilian Romance*

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Ann Radcliffe was canonized at her passing in 1823. Her genius was recognized in her lifetime; she was made a legacy by her death. In *Ann Radcliffe: Romanticism and the Gothic* Townshend and Wright assert she was “one of the British nation’s most creative voices” (3). Her blend of Gothic and Romanticism made her the “originator of a literary school” that continues today (3). The unifying theme Radcliffe identified in Gothic and Romantic fiction is embedded in the sublime experience. Alison Milbank explains that argument continues about whether Radcliffe was simply skillfully employing the existing tropes of the sublime, or whether she was originating something with her use of it. The most original factor concerning the sublime experience in *A Sicilian Romance* is its developmental faculty; the most spiritually accomplished, angelic characters undergo extraordinarily high and prolonged degrees of sublimity. This portrays a subsequent addition to the existing tropes of the sublime. This effect can be explained by Eastern modes of transcendence—namely meditation—explaining how clarity of mind, or the effect of the sublime experience, promotes acuity and wellbeing through cognitive development.

Milbank explains two contradictory interpretations of Radcliffe’s work: one understands her creations having “originating power” and maintains she is “as uncanny as her own literary productions”; the other understands Radcliffe as simply employing a list of tropes associated with existing theories of the sublime (ix). The first class describes her as nothing less than an “inspired prophetess” (ix). The second class, according to Milbank, would have to ignore Radcliffe’s “*response* to the nexus of ideas

on psychology” to defend their position (x, my emphasis). The *psychological response* to the sublime will be the focus of this paper.

Robert Doran’s *Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant* sharply engages a comprehensive theoretical history of the sublime (2015). His work presents the concept of sublimity as “the most enduring and consequential aesthetics of modern thought” (27). He focuses on “defining a secular concept of transcendence” by turning to Longinus, Burke, Kant and others—exploring the development of theoretical sublimity (27). Doran likens Longinus’ “transcendence” to a “mystical religious experience” (41). Whereas Burke grounds his sublimity in human terror, Longinus affirms the sublime involves “being at once *overwhelmed* and *elevated*” (41). Burke agrees wholeheartedly that the effect overwhelms the mind. Being “overwhelmed” involves being “overpowered” by the source (*OED*). This is a key element to my argument. One facet which all the theories of sublimity agree upon is that sublime experience suspends mental faculties; one aspect where all meditation practices meet is the suspension of thought.

In *Critique of Judgement* Kant calls the sublime a negative experience, explaining that *lack of experience* is what makes the state freeing. This is a state of ultimate receptivity, explained in Eastern traditions, is being in touch with the infinite and eternal. Kant’s definition proposes that as long as reason is not satisfied, it is sublime. This is where the parallel to meditation is found. Meditation, throughout its many methods and uses, primarily transcends thought. Radcliffe herself discusses this state, and uses the word “confounding” to describe the sublime affective force “in which the mind can find nothing” (*Supernatural* 67). Kant explains, “the imagination” enjoying a sublime state “feels itself to be unbounded precisely because of [the]

elimination of the limits of sensibility” as it perceives a “presentation of the infinite” which “expands the soul” (5:274). Expansion may suggest development, but no graduating effect is considered by Kant or the classic theorists.

The Marquis’ daughters are said to be “thus lovely and thus veiled in obscurity” at the onset of the narrative. They are “happy for they *knew not enough* of the world to seriously regret it.” Although the girls are naturally inclined towards good character, we are told that “an *expansion of mind* and refinement of thought” was required of them “which is the result of high cultivation” (7, my emphases). The young nobles have the very best education. What could Radcliffe want cultivated beyond this? The count Vereza, the veritable knight in shining armour, is more developed than Julia and her sister at the onset. He is described as “graceful yet manly,” and “his countenance” is said to “[express] a happy *union* of spirit, dignity, and benevolence” accountable to his possessing a “sublimity of thought” (11, my emphasis). He has a quality of sublimity, or clarity, of *thought*; a *union* of spirit, which is to say a free-flowing, intuitive, and open state.

All of the characters in *A Sicilian Romance* who endure the sublime and grow heightened from it share one common trait: they remain in control of themselves, receptive, whilst enduring. There is a complex irony at play within the response to the sublime. Although submission is required to attain the elevation of mind-spirit that the sublime offers, so is maintaining control. The sublime is differentiated from obscurity. Meditation is controlled improvement. *This* is the cultivation—the sublimity of mind, unity of spirit—which Radcliffe prescribes for her characters. Radcliffe’s sublime differs from that of the traditional theorists in that there is a permanence of virtues attained by embracing this state; it harkens to Eastern traditions. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of*

Philosophy, through the example of Zen Buddhism, explains Eastern transcendence as “a perfection of personhood” attained through transcending thought—methodically by meditation or a shocking, sublime, instant enlightenment (i).

Doran explains that when one is mentally overpowered one gains the sense of divinity, “*ekstasis*” (41). To the Dalai Lama, this state of divinity is “Buddah Nature,” (n.p.). The eventual outcome of the sublime experience to Longinus is “*kairos*” or the climactic moment of peak experience. Doran explicitly states that to interpret “*kairos*” as a kind of fulfillment, would clearly contradict “the momentary meaning of the word” (44). The difference between Longinus’ transcendence and the Eastern outlook is the possibility of cognitive evolution.

The Dalai Lama explains that “through practice, a human being” can perfect oneself through a “purification of one’s own mental state” (n.p.). Using meditation, “destructive things can be removed from the mind” and “the *highest* enlightened mental state” can be achieved (n.p., my emphasis). The effect of transcendence to Longinus is the corresponding state of “*hypsos*” it imparts. “*Hypsos*” is translated by Doran as metaphorically surpassing “one’s mental capacity or state of mind, going beyond normal human limits” to be closer to a “divine” state (39). He says that to Longinus “*hypsos*” and the Latin “*sublime*” “are virtually identical.” Both can be related figuratively to “an elevated thought or an elevated mind” (39). The act of experiencing the sublime is elevating—godly—by Doran’s explanation, and a source of divinity. Being in clarity is explained in the same terms by the Dalai Lama: “to elevate.” Both meditation and sublimity produce this *heightened* mental state. This state does not necessitate immediate fulfillment, yet we seek it out; Eastern philosophy would argue it is developmental.

Berkeley's Professor of Buddhist Studies Robert Sharf describes the state of “*samadhi*” as the ultimate path in meditation, synonymous with equivalent end goals in other belief systems (935). *Samadhi* is “the highest state of meditation, in which the distinctions between subject and object disappear and unity with creation is attained” (*OED*). There are two major bodies of meditative exercise: one promotes total receptivity, a state of no-mind, and is observation without reflection; the other is total concentration disregarding distraction. Most practitioners use both, often together.

A mind full of activity is the opposite of clarity, and divided allegiances of spirit obfuscate unity. When the Duke and his men are seeking refuge in the woods they are described as “*bewildered* in the wilds,” and this is when they hear the bell of a monastery—a divine symbol of sanctity. They receive *clarity* in bewilderment. Coming out of receptivity and surmising the idea to discern, divide, and direct towards— “the way they *judged* led to the monastery” —they lose their way (Radcliffe 89, my emphases). Reason does not help—it hinders them. Divisions of mind and spirit undo characters in this novel. When the Duke is wounded “the effect of his wound [is] heightened by the agitation of his mind,” which proves a detriment to his health (95).

In the dungeon, Ferdinand “seem[s] to acquire the valour of despair,” loaning him a high virtue in a time of sublime submission (99). In the woods, Madame is “*insensibly* led on” through the sublime landscape which “*elevated* the mind of the beholder” (104, my emphasis). When she hears Julia, the sound “awaken[s] *all* her attention,” putting the sublime state to use, allowing her “captivated ... heart” to be led towards that which called her like an “enchantment” (104-5, my emphasis). Madame Menon “seemed *without interest* and *without motive* for exertion” to find Julia (103, my emphasis).

Milbank claims these occurrences depict “weakness” being “transformed into power,” but the text explicitly demonstrates that it is more accurately receptivity and trust—intuition—which delivers Madame (xix). The Duke, with his firm, heady intentions, cannot find his way through the sublime landscape (93-94). Milbank explains that the “Duke’s refusal to accept a position of vulnerability makes him unable to benefit” (xviii). I would clarify this statement by pointing out that the vulnerability the Duke lacks is receptivity. As Radcliffe demonstrates, the causality of being receptive, if done properly—with agency— brings attainment.

Edmund Burke recognizes “certain powers and properties” of the sublime “that *work a change* in the mind” but he struggles to explain further (209, my emphasis). He explains how “pain and terror” that are not “carried to violence” or threaten “destruction” produce “emotions [which] *clear the parts*” and “are capable of producing delight ... tinged with terror,” precisely because the mind enjoys being in clarity (217, my emphasis). The “highest degree” of sublimity is “*astonishment*” (217, Burke’s emphasis): “that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended,” a description identical to meditation (130). Burke’s definition requires a *forced* mental pause. Seated meditation, however, can engage a state of sublimity *willfully* (Sharf 935).

The astonishment Burke describes (where the mind is so entirely full of one object that it cannot comprehend another) is akin to a focus oriented meditation. Burke defines “greatness of dimension” or “vastness” as “a powerful cause of the sublime” (147). Sharf uses methods where concentration on the “four immeasurable states” obliterate the mind’s ability to perceive any measure and bewilder the practitioner into sublimity (941). “Another source of the sublime” to Burke “is *infinity*,” which can be mimicked by repetition: if “we repeat any idea frequently,” just as in a “succession of

noises,” their echoes “beat” and “roar in the imagination long after the first sounds have ceased to affect it,” robbing the mind of its faculties by filling it with something meaningless (148-9). This is identical to Sharf’s description of “recitation” practices where focus is given to repeating mantras over and over or “breathing” meditations where you watch the breath ad-infinitum until there is no thought left.

Stephanie Lou, following a study of Richard Davidson, explains how “meditative practice can physically change brain functioning” in progressive ways (a). Davidson’s study focused on measuring gamma waves—the “most important electrical brain waves”—of practitioners (2). Conducted on Tibetan monks recommended by the Dalai Lama, the study was controlled by students without meditation experience: “The meditation novices showed only a slight increase in gamma wave activity while meditating, while some of the monks produced gamma wave activity *more powerful and of higher amplitude than any previously reported* in a healthy person in the neuroscience literature” (2, my emphasis). In the neuroscience paper “Buddha’s Brain,” Davidson admits that “over the course of meditating for tens of thousands of hours, the long-term practitioners had actually altered the structure and function of their brains” (i). The progressive element in the novel is accurate according to neuroscience; Radcliffe is a prophet.

Julia arguably benefits most in the book. She is presented as someone who willfully indulges in the sublime experience. She seeks “solitude in the woods” when she is longing for Vereza (42). She takes her lute to her “favorite spot” to enter the focused meditation which playing music requires, a “favorite” spot implying she does so on a regular basis (42). Julia struggles, but inevitably follows her intuition—she challenges her father and her betrothed. The other women in the book all allow their agency to

escape them at critical points. Julia is not only a victim to sublimity, but also has agency, and develops fully due to the active way she engages; she employs the paradoxical combination of receptivity and control that Eastern transcendence requires.

The developmental effects of exposure to sublimity, or clarity, continue to work regardless. When Hippolitus' sister eventually perishes, after enduring what she calls an unusual amount of terror, Julia tells us that her "countenance seemed to characterize the beauty of an inspired saint" (123). When the Marchioness, after years of torture, thinks Julia and her mother would not escape the cell she, "with a *placid resignation* which seemed to *exalt her above humanity*," prays (182, my emphasis). The *response* to the sublime is, as Milbank notes, the primary differentiating principle marking Radcliffe as a prophet. Everyone who endures sublimity is happy. However, Julia and Hippolitus—those shown to express the virtues attained by, and the willingness to focus and grow from, sublime clarity—are the only characters to earn a fairytale ending. Through embracing the ironic state of active receptivity, willing openness, focus on clarity, and practice—one may achieve what Radcliffe calls "moral retribution" where we are guaranteed "the surest claim to the protection of heaven," on earth (199).

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